



The
Quiet
Within

olley white

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

THE QUIET WITHIN

By Olley White

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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Photo Description

A manga image shows two young adults. The blond, shaggy haired man, is sitting on a stool having his hand bandaged by the other. The other man, whose hair is slightly darker, is taking care of his companion, placing a kiss on the wounded hand as he tends to it. The image is simple but very caring.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Learning to depend on each other wasn't easy, but it has saved their lives more times than they can count. They didn't choose this life, but are making the best of necessity. The danger is always there, chasing just on their heels. It's these tender moments that make it all worthwhile. The moments when the love shows through.

Sincerely,

Amanda

No cheating, please.

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: mage, guardian, friends to lovers, quest, slow burn

Word Count: 44,311

Author's Note

I would like to thank Amanda for a beautiful prompt. I fell in love with the picture and the tenderness I saw in it, and Eoin and Kailean came to life for me immediately. I hope you enjoy their journey as much as I have.

As ever, I owe thanks to my family for letting me be absent (in mind if not in body) while I let these two tell me their story.

For the beautiful cover, I owe Natasha Snow more than thanks. I swear she knows what I'm thinking before I do and is the easiest person to work with in the world.

Huge thanks to Nico Jaye and Suki Fleet for their wonderful beta skills. They made sense of my ramblings and made them so much better. Also to Natasha, Nico, SheReadsALot and my unicorns for their continued support. Their witty comments, love and general support were what made this story actually end. Especially when I was writing deep into the night and craving my bed. Thank you all.

And of course thank you to the MM group and the DRitC moderators, editors, proofreaders, and formatters, who work so hard to make this amazing event happen. A special thanks to Raevyn, who took on my commas and tamed them. You have been amazing.

THE QUIET WITHIN

By Olley White

Prologue

Thirty years before...

The demon was quiet, lulled by a siren song that had cost the mage more than he had. More money. More dignity. Even some of his humanity. It was worth it though, every risk he had taken, every deal he had sealed, every moment he had waited and every bit of blood spilled because of him. To gain everything you had to lose something along the way.

Whilst the demon slumbered, he slipped into the lair and—in a move that was far, far easier than anything he had imagined—he took the three stones. They really were quite extraordinary to look at. One green, one red and one blue. Legend had talked of these stones, but not one of the tales he'd heard came close to describing the beauty of them.

He looked again before tucking them into the leather bag he carried. Extraordinary. And yet, in a funny way, they were also perfectly ordinary to look at. It was the power, the mage knew, the power that thrummed beneath the surface, longing to burst to life that made them stand out—and only a few were gifted with the intelligence to understand that power.

As the siren song twisted and faded into the air, the mage knew time was running short. Note after note worked its ghostly magic, and the mage slipped carefully away from the demon and out into the night.

Stars shone overhead, each twinkling its personal praise to the mage for being so clever. Each recognising the powerful being that he was soon to become. His patience had paid off.

Chapter 1

Now...

Sweat trickled a slow path down Eoin's back, and he paused to wipe his brow. The sun blazed above, slowly heading westwards as the hours of the day passed. Turning back to his work, he checked his list before harvesting some of the rampaging mint plant. The herb was in great demand at this time of year, cool peppermint tea was blissful to drink after a day toiling in the heat, the healers used it to aid ailments of the stomach and parents used it to flavour sweet treats for their children. Wrapping it carefully, he laid it beside the other aromatics he had already harvested, when the rhythmic sound of footsteps came from the road beside him.

Without even looking Eoin knew it would be Kailean on his daily training run. Many moons ago Kailean had been his greatest confidante, his best friend, but time... time had changed that. Their lives had taken different paths, and as much as it pained Eoin when he saw Kailean, when he remembered the adventures they'd had as boys, he knew it was for the best. "Oil and water don't mix," his grandfather had been fond of saying, and Eoin knew this was the truth. He was twenty years of age now and useless longings for his childhood friend were nothing but a waste of time.

He risked a glance and saw the same determined look on Kailean's face that had been there for the past five years since... since the moment they had cracked apart. Since their friendship had fallen foul of adults and politics. Shoving aside the familiar ache that emerged at the sight of the other man, Eoin turned intently back to his list. He knew already he had picked everything required of him today, but it gave him something to focus on other than the long lean limbs of Kailean. There was just time to weed the herb beds before delivering his harvest, and he set to it with determination, hoping the physical ache of hard work would outweigh the hollow feeling inside.

The first inkling Eoin had that something was wrong was the eerie quietness of the village when he returned. Usually, in the early evening on a hot summer day, there were children splashing in the shallow stream to cool themselves down. Laughter and gossip filtered from the benches in and out of the alehouse, where weary workers congregated after long days. Neighbours would be sharing meals in the warm evening air, and mothers watching babies would

generally be chatting together, thankful as the heat of the day faded slightly and the infants became less fretful.

Normally all these things greeted Eoin as he came back to the village, yet today there was only silence. With his pulse starting to race and a sudden dryness in his mouth, that had nothing to do with the sun, Eoin raced down the street. With each step, his instinct to turn and flee grew, but he knew better than that. Did he go home? Home, to where his mother should be serving his tea, where his father should be washing away the sweat of a day's hard work and his sisters should be playing. Or did he carry on to the healer's house where he was due to take the herbs?

The desire to see his family was strong, but the voice of his father echoed in his head. The voice that told him to respect hard work. To finish a job. To honour what he had started. The voice that made him step towards the healer's house, feet and heart both leaden for reasons he did not know.

The grey stone building was one of the most humble in the village, a sharp contrast to the fact the dweller was perhaps the most revered. When you are the sole source of maintaining a village's health and well-being, reverence is the price you pay. Born with the gift of magic, Jaeger was one of the few mages accepted without fear in this quiet, suspicious backwoods of a village.

The heavy oak door, plain and unadorned save for a small notice proclaiming *Jaeger Patrice, healer*, was shut. A solid barrier between Jaeger and the rest of the world. The nervousness that had been plaguing Eoin since he entered the village grew intensely at the sign of that shut door. Jaeger never shut his door before nightfall; he welcomed all villagers who needed him. Through summer and winter alike, the door was hooked open, ready to receive those who sought his help. Raising his fist Eoin knocked tentatively at first, then louder when there was no response.

When no answer came, Eoin abandoned his barrow of herbs and made his way round the side of the dwelling. His heart was thumping loudly, and bile was rising in his stomach. Fear was crowding his brain, fear of what he didn't know, but it was sharp and acrid and burning. The cellar entrance was really a wooden trapdoor hidden beneath a tub of herbs. Eoin was possibly the only person outside of Jaeger and his wife, Betty, who knew of its existence. The words came to him in a jumble of thoughts, and he stuttered them out, praying to the deities that this once the spell would work.

"Mere illusion, trick of light, go right now, remove from sight." He whispered the words, keeping calm though every fibre of his being was telling

him to panic. The pot of herbs shimmered slightly and Eoin repeated the phrase until the pot showed itself to be all it was—an illusion. Now he could see it was just trickery the magic would no longer work, he could walk through it and open the cellar door.

Lifting the trapdoor as quietly as he could, Eoin slipped onto the first step. Damp and musky with a light undertone of lavender, the cellar smelt as it always did. It felt familiar... but no longer secure. Swallowing hard, he tripped lightly down the stairs, thanking the deities for his slight frame and nimble legs. The cellar was his classroom, the place where Jaeger was hoping to pass on his knowledge of spells. It was a place as well known to him as his own home. The place he felt most comfortable in all of Legracioa. It was a place he knew blindfolded, and this helped him slip through the dark room avoiding the shelves and trays and big wooden table set up in the centre.

He paused at the bottom of the steps that led into the Jaeger household and strained his ears, listening for anything, any sign of Jaeger and his wife, but the silence was eerie. The silence was so wrong. It built around him, like steam in an iron kettle, and he let his knees give way as he struggled to breathe. Fear had finally caught up with him, and he remembered who he was, son of a miner, weak and fearful. The good boy, the hard worker, polite and somewhat intelligent but never brave. If fight or flight were the options available, he invariably chose flight.

Except... Jaeger believed in him. Jaeger had seen more than anyone else had, had seen beneath the meek. Jaeger was training him to find his inner dragon. Breathing deeply Eoin found that dragon, the spark inside him that was the source of his whole being and harnessed it until it resembled courage, then he stood and slowly climbed the steps, listening intently all the while.

At the top, he focused his mind, tried to find that place Jaeger was teaching him to find. In that place, the part of the brain most had forgotten how to use, Eoin could do magic. Of course it wasn't really quite that simple, but that's what it boiled down to, and Eoin concentrated with all his might, determined to face whatever lay behind that door with everything he had.

He listened carefully but could hear nothing, so he pressed his hands gently against the smooth pine door and pushed. The door was latched by magic and shielded by illusion, and again Eoin was one of the few who knew it existed. It silently swung open, and in front of Eoin was... just Jaeger's house. It smelt exactly as it always did, that homely mix of herbs, spices and baking. It was

darker than normal, but that was because the heavy oak door was shut, blocking the sunlight that most often streamed into this hall.

But something was off; Eoin just couldn't put his fingers on what.

He strained his ears, listening for any sound, but there was nothing... just nothing.

Nothing. Eoin shuddered at the realisation, no sound at all could be heard—not Jaeger and not Betty. Even without the bustle of the villagers' in and out, he should be able to hear at least Betty. Betty who had not left the house in thirty years. Betty, who the village loved with its collective heart, who nursed and tended the ill, sent packages to those who were having a poor time of it. Betty, in more ways than one, was Jaeger's soul. They were bound together by a force so strong, Eoin knew that if one died the other one would follow not long after.

Betty might never leave the house, but Betty was never quiet. She sang, or hummed, or talked to herself if there was nobody else to talk to. Jaeger had whispered once to Eoin how Betty feared the silence and the memories it left her with, so she never let there be any. Yet now, the silence was so loud it was deafening.

Blood rushed to fill the silence in his ears. Eoin stepped into the hallway, footsteps light on the cold tiled floor, tiptoeing to the mat in the middle. There was no sign of anyone, or anything, amiss or otherwise, but all the hairs were standing up on the back of his neck. The mat muffled any sound from his feet, and he started to walk quicker, keeping his brain focused in case he needed to work a spell.

A quick glance round the kitchen showed him it was empty, the main room was the same. That just left the upper floor of the house where Jaeger and Betty slept. Wooden stairs were bound to creak, and Eoin wished heartily that he had mastered the silencing spell, as it was he relied on nimble feet and luck. It got him to the top. The door to the sleeping room was open and from where Eoin stood he could see nobody there, feeling bold he stepped forward.

The blast hit full in the centre of his chest as he entered the room, knocking him onto his back before he could even think of summoning a spell. His back slammed into the floor, his head snapping back, causing a sharp pain in his neck. Stunned, he laid there, chest compressing as if a thousand heavy books were on top of him. He felt dizzy, so dizzy. His neck ached, and he needed to breathe. Just get in a bit of air, but the pressure on his chest was too great. Blood rushed through his ears sounding like waves rushing onto the shore. Louder and louder and he... needed... to... breathe.

Then he could.

The world came back through a veil of sharp pain and wobbly images, floating in a sea of black. He took another breath, and this one was sweeter than the one before. The third was sweeter still. Through the rushing noise in his ears, he could faintly make out his name being called.

“Eoin, Eoin... are you alright, Eoin?”

He opened his eyes, and swimming in and out of focus in front of him was Jaeger. The old man was leaning awkwardly over him, apologies rushing from his lips among other words, sentences that Eoin had to concentrate on to understand. Then a cool hand touched his head and quieter words were mumbled, and the pressure and pain eased completely. It felt like suddenly surfacing after lying submerged in water a small length of time. Colour and light and the strong aroma of lavender all flooded his senses.

“Eoin?”

Eoin sat up and moaned.

“What happened, Jaeger?” He tentatively rolled his neck, but nothing hurt, he just felt a little... disorientated.

“I thought you were them, back, it was the only defence I could manage without any ingredients handy.”

“Thought I was who coming back?” Eoin pulled himself up and frowned, Jaeger was sitting on the floor in front of him. He reached out his hand to pull his mentor up, but the old man shook his head. It was then that Eoin noticed Betty lying prone on the floor, her face as pale as moonlit lilies, and Jaeger’s hand on her chest over the place of her heart.

Eoin felt faint again at the sight of her and forced himself to take a deep breath. “What is happening, Jaeger, what is wrong with Betty, where is everybody?”

“The past, young Eoin. The past has come knocking at our door and is demanding payment.” Jaeger looked down at his wife, and the tears that threatened to spill frightened Eoin more than anything else had today. “The price is always higher than one expects though, young Eoin, and that is a lesson I am learning the hard way.”

“I don’t understand, Jaeger, what is wrong with Betty?”

“She’s dying, lad.” Jaeger swallowed hard, and Eoin’s throat constricted and tightened. He shook his head. “No, Jaeger, she can’t be. You can save her; I’ll help—tell me what I need?”

“It’s too late. Too late by about thirty years Eoin. Thirty years we shouldn’t have had. The price in many ways is worth it. Then in some ways it isn’t because I never wanted to risk you Eoin, but I’m afraid I’m going to have to.”

“Stop talking in riddles, Jaeger, I don’t understand!” Eoin knelt up and tried to make an assessment of Betty. Even to his untrained eye, he could see the life leeching out of her with each exhale. Jaeger too, looked as though he’d aged the thirty years he was talking about. Skin sallow, frame bent, hand determinedly over Betty’s heart.

“Thirty years ago I was an arrogant young man, Eoin. I had the gift of magic, and I thought that made me better than everyone else.”

Eoin shook his head, refusing to believe it. Jaeger was one of the kindest people he knew.

“It’s true lad. Like many before me, I was becoming drunk with my power. I was a big fish in the tiniest of lakes, and when I decided I wanted more, I moved to a bigger lake, all my plans were to be in charge, to take control.” Jaeger shrugged, and Eoin could have sworn he heard the bones creaking with the effort. He looked at his mentor again, and his heart stopped as he realised the man was ageing before his eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but Jaeger just shook his head.

“I need to tell my story lad, and I need you to listen to your role in it.” He gazed at his wife, a tear rolling down his cheek as even more colour faded from her complexion. “The trouble with bigger lakes, Eoin, is they have bigger fish already in them. But I was young and arrogant enough to believe that I could rule them all, make the kind of society I wanted, I just needed to gain a little more power. My time is too short now to tell you the long version, and that I regret, but I stole the three stones of Virium.”

“The what?” Eoin interrupted.

“The three stones of Virium—one for youth, one for riches and one for wisdom. I conned a Virium demon, and I stole them. The price for that was my life, but it didn’t matter because I had the stone of youth. So the price became Betty’s life and that of my son...”

Eoin blinked. “You have a son?”

“We have a son.” Jaeger sighed. “Even then the price was too high, I should have realised, but I was so greedy, so foolish. I loved Betty and my son, whatever my wrongs in life, loving them was not one of them. There is only one place in this land that is safe from the Virium demons, and that is the king’s palace. It is guarded by ancient magic, long since forgotten, and so I went to the palace to seek protection for my family. They offered it for my son only. Everyone knew the Queen was having trouble bearing children, so many years of marriage and not an heir in sight. The deal was simple. They would keep my son safe if he became theirs. It broke my heart, but I couldn’t let him die, an innocent infant.”

Jaeger let out a sob.

“It just about killed Betty, but what could I do? The king said he’d protect and love Pretiosus if we promised to stay away. To forget him. To never make contact.”

“Prince Pretiosus is your son?” The old man just nodded. Eoin gaped at his mentor.

He’d worked alongside him for nearly five years, and he’d known him all his life. How could he have secrets this big?

“It doesn’t explain who did this. What is going on in the village...?” Questions crowded at his brain, and he didn’t know what he wanted to ask first.

Jaeger sighed. “I wish I had more time to explain.” He spared another glance for his wife, and Eoin followed his gaze. His heart jumped, even in the few minutes he’d been talking to Jaeger, Betty had worsened. Each breath was more shallow than the one before. “Our time is nearly done Eoin, but I need you to restore the wrong I did. I need you to right it for me.”

Chapter 2

“I don’t understand, Jaeger. What can I do? I’m no one.”

Jaeger chuckled, a grim sound under the circumstances. “Your only fault, young Eoin, is your ability to completely underestimate yourself. You have more strength and ability than you give yourself credit for.”

Eoin swallowed. He needed to get out of here and find his family. As much as he respected Jaeger, loved him like a grandpa even, he had a mum and dad and family, and he needed to know they were safe.

“I trusted just one person other than Betty with what I had done, and that was my best friend, Edward.” Jaeger swallowed deeply and turned to Betty, mumbling something under his breath to his wife. Tears collected in the corner of his eyes, and Jaeger looked older and more worn than Eoin had ever seen him.

“I need to go, Jaeger, I have to see my family...”

“Don’t you understand boy? The only way to help your family now is to help me.” A tear freed itself and rolled down a cheek that appeared papery thin, wrinkled and sallowed with age.

Looking at his mentor sitting in front of him, full of a remorse Eoin didn’t yet understand, unsettled him. With every fibre of his being he wanted to leave... but he knew he couldn’t. Not when Jaeger needed him.

“What would you have me do?” he asked.

“I need you to undo what I did, young Eoin, but first I need you to understand why I need this.” Jaeger sighed and wiped yet another tear from his face. “Edward was my best friend, we went everywhere together as children and youths. We were as inseparable as you and Kai were as youngsters.”

Eoin snorted. “Not perhaps the best example, Jaeger. Kai and I were inseparable until apparently we weren’t.”

“But that closeness you had, that was exactly how Edward and I were. We were to share the power of the stones; we had so many plans to make the world a better place. Then I realised that I was wrong. Too wrong. Power isn’t what we take, we already have power; it’s how we live, how we treat people...”

Eoin nodded; this was a truth he understood, a truth he believed. The room was darkening as night pressed in, and the heat was fading from the day

quickly, as it was given to do. Burning days and freezing nights made up spring, summer and autumn in Legracia, and winter was just constantly freezing. Eoin shivered, wishing he had his robe with him. Though whether it was fear or the cooling air that caused the goosebumps rising up his arm, he had no knowledge. Rubbing his arms, he forced himself to listen to Jaeger.

“Edward didn’t understand that though. He wanted more—more riches, more power, more life. I saw the monster it started to turn him into, Eoin, and I saw this reflected in the mirror each day.” Jaeger’s voice quivered. “It was then I knew I had to change, had to do something different, so I ran. I took Betty, and we came here. On the way, I hid the other two stones, far away where Edward wouldn’t find them, and vowed to give back to the people of this village everything I had taken in my bid for power.”

There were too many words. Eoin shook his head, trying to make some sense of what Jaeger was saying. “Jaeger. I’m not the person for this. I don’t know what it is you think I can do.”

“Oh, my boy. You have so much more power than you rea...” The old man stopped mid-sentence and turned to his wife. He pressed his hand harder to her chest and then leaned to listen at her mouth. Slowly, another tear slid down his cheek. Eoin tracked its progress down the thin papery skin that was aging before his eyes.

“No, Betty. Please no.” The quiet muttering from his mentor echoed with grief. Pain and fear and regret sounded so loud in the quiet room. Eoin shivered again. He reached forward to his mentor.

“Jaeger?” A sob wracked the man’s aging body, answering Eoin’s unasked question. Grief welled up inside the younger man but he didn’t let it out, now was Jaeger’s time of need. Eoin could mourn for the woman who was like a grandmother to him another time, when he was alone. He bit the inside of his cheek, refusing to let the tears collect and fall.

Sitting in silence, Eoin turned his head away from Jaeger, trying to give him some privacy in his grief. It felt like minutes since he had left the field with his harvest of herbs, but the ever-darkening sky outside showed this to be the lie it was. Anxiety gripped his guts as he thought again of his family, of the villagers, of what Jaeger was trying to tell him. Ideas tumbled round his brain, sparked by the turmoil in his guts and the half story his mentor had shared. Jaeger, who he trusted, who was the most humble man in the village, a thief? A power hungry mage? A father? Shaking his head, he dared a glance at the other man and gasped at how much he had aged in the time since Betty’s passing.

“Jaeger?” He could hear the confusion in his own voice, and it must have been enough to turn Jaeger away from his grieving. “Jaeger, what is happening? What must I do?”

The old man spared one last look at the body lying in the corner of the bedroom and wiped his face. Slowly he pulled himself to a standing position and walked out of the room. Saying his own quiet goodbye, Eoin followed.

The house itself seemed to have aged in the time Eoin had been in the bedroom with Jaeger and a dying Betty. It was as if, with Betty’s passing, the life had been sucked out of the building. The lavender and rosemary that usually scented the house so brightly smelt stale and faded. The bright coloured knick-knacks Betty had been so proud of looked jaded and out of place. It felt as though the vitality of the place was draining away.

Wordlessly he followed Jaeger back into the cellar, into the space that was ostensibly his—his workroom, his training room, his schoolroom. The place where Jaeger had set about showing him how to become a mage, a secret he had kept hidden from everyone, even his own family.

Once the door shut behind them, Jaeger set to business collecting roots and herbs and small vials of liquid. He packed them into a small leather sack then added a knife, a tin cup and a pestle; he seemed to hesitate before adding a small stone mortar too.

“Jaeger...” The name ghosted over Eoin’s lips as he watched his mentor making rapid decisions. “Jaeger...” he tried again. He needed to know what in the name of the deities was going on. The old man paused for a second, and Eoin turned to him. His heart was pounding in his chest as he waited for an answer. Jaeger muttered something quietly, then pulled a small leather bound volume from a dusty shelf.

Eoin gasped as he recognised it. The book contained magic that Jaeger had never let him see. The one time he’d pulled it off the shelf, thinking he was alone and could sneak a peek, Jaeger had found out almost instantly and banished him from the house for nearly fourteen nights. His wrath had been quiet and cold, and Eoin had felt it with every fibre of his being. It was far more scary than his loud-mouthed father whose temper was famously hot but brief. Once he was allowed back into Jaeger’s home and business, Eoin never tried to test him again.

“*Jaeger.*” He couldn’t stop the curtness from entering his voice. An understanding that something bigger than he could fully grasp was happening stole through him. That book was more of a clue than even Betty’s death. “You

need to tell me what is going on. What do I need to do... what I've got to do with it. Why me?"

"I told you, Eoin, you are the only person powerful enough to undo this... this wrong that I've done."

"But I'm not." Striding to the centre of the room, he pulled the bag from Jaeger's grip and pulled free the small, bound volume of spells. "This," he shook it under Jaeger's nose, "this is too powerful for me. Those were the words you yourself told me not eight full moons ago." He ground his teeth together, jaw clicking as he fixed his gaze on his mentor's and refused to let it drop.

"I was wrong." Jaeger spoke so softly, even though right in front of him, Eoin had to strain to listen. "I was wrong, Eoin my lad. I have to be wrong, without you there is no hope."

Frustration gnawed at Eoin. Jaeger was being so vague, he needed specific answers. What the hell did he, Eoin the local herb harvester, have that Jaeger, mage and healer, didn't? Not. A Damn. Thing. His jaw ached as he ground his teeth together harder and harder. It didn't make sense, *and* he needed to see his family.

"Eoin, my lad." Jaeger gripped Eoin's hands tightly and relief flooded through Eoin as he felt the tension he'd harboured slip away. "Eoin, I need you to right my wrong and return the stones to the Virium demons where they belong."

Chapter 3

Five years before...

Eoin skulked up the path to the healer's house, a scowl fixed onto his face. He'd purposely avoided thinking about Kailean for the last week, but there was a hollow ache in his chest that was once the place of his best friend. As much as he wanted to blame the healer, he knew it wasn't really his fault that Eoin was like him and that he was the only one in the village—in the area even—who had skills enough to train him. Of course, *it, magic*, wasn't talked about now, it was meant to be of the past, and Eoin wasn't stupid enough to spread the word he possessed some. It had already cost him enough. As far as everyone was concerned, he was an apprentice to the healer. There to run errands, to tend to the herb gardens and to be a general dogsbody.

"Come in, lad." Jaeger himself stood in the open doorway and greeted Eoin, the smile on his face spreading broadly from ear to ear, the kindness the whole of the village knew him for reflected in his sparkling eyes. "Come away in, and I'll introduce to Betty proper and show you around. Now you work here, things'll look a bit different than they did the time you came with your mother to see me about the purple pox." Eoin just scowled a bit more. It did not seem to worry Jaeger in the slightest though.

Jaeger introduced him to Betty and insisted that he call them Betty and Jaeger, anything else was far too formal for the friends they were going to be. At the time Eoin only scowled harder, but as time went on he began to see the truth of the statement. That first day he followed Jaeger like a lost puppy. Scowl firmly etched on his face, hiding the heartache of losing his best friend, he watched as the healer greeted patients. How he spoke in a calm and respectful voice. He was not yet able to sit in on consultations, but he helped Betty as she prepared the herbs Jaeger would require. He talked (reluctantly) to those waiting to be seen. He washed up stone bowls and heavy grinding pestles. He swept out the dust that blew in the permanently open door. He ate and drank a simple fare of cheese, bread and water and helped Betty clear away.

The day passed. He was busy, but the scowl was etched on his face, and his loss was thick in his heart. And the next day was the same. And the day after that. He was busy, the hours passed, quicker than he thought they would, yet every moment alone was time to mourn his lost friendship.

Eoin was a bright youth though. He realised soon enough that the hours spent at the healer's house were better than the hours spent at home. The time he was busy passed faster, it left no room for heartache, it left no space for errant thoughts of could have beens and should have beens. It required concentration and effort, and so he decided to throw himself into his work. He arrived earlier and left later. He worked harder each day than the day before, and the next day he would work harder still. The jobs were still mundane, but he attacked each one with pride, did each task to the best of his ability, knowing that soon, soon Jaeger would reveal the mysteries of the magic he had thrumming through him.

One day he arrived as the sun was still rising in the sky and entered the healer's place, calling his customary greeting as he did. It was the newest season of the year, still early, but after the winter the sunshine was a relief. Trees slowly unfurled their buds and blossomed in a pallet of colours so beautiful Eoin took to staring as he walked, afraid that the season would change all too quickly and take away the splendour before his eyes.

"Come away in, lad." Jaeger greeted him with his customary smile. "It is time for you to begin your training proper with me today. I have been nothing but pleased with your work since the day you walked through the door, and it is clear to see you are ready." With that, Eoin's heart beat a little faster. He felt some of the ache of loss lift, and he managed a smile. It was in that moment, that acceptance of quiet praise, that he decided to put his all into his training and fill the void with the gift of magic. From then he was able to put away the thoughts and feelings connected to Kailean. At least, that's what he told himself.

"That's it, Eoin, well done my lad." Jaeger let a grin spread across his face, and his praise lit Eoin up from the inside out, he made sure not to let his concentration falter though. He watched as the water inside the small cup before him lifted into mist.

Keeping focused on the task at hand, he let the mantra Jaeger had taught him roll again and again through his head, muttering the words in a barely audible voice.

The mist was thin, but it rose from the cup, swirling in the air and shrouding the cellar in its opaque gloom. Orange candlelight flickered though the thin veil, casting dark shadows here and dancing light there. Eoin's chest was near full to bursting with pride. He'd been apprentice to Jaeger for five years now.

Three of which had been apprentice to the mage and not just the healer, but up until this point all his learning had been study. The study of herbs, of books full of long-winded explanations, difficult to decipher and even more difficult to understand.

He'd given up asking Jaeger when he would start anything practical, other than the herb harvesting of which he was so fond, but the answer had always been an achingly annoying, "When you're ready, lad." Well today he was ready. Today he had not only tried, but he had achieved.

The swirling mist rose higher, sinking into the available gaps in the cellar before fading completely. "What next, Jaeger?" Eoin grinned, he had done it. He had actually performed magic, intentional and successful.

Jaeger just smiled at him. "Patience, lad. You need to try this one again—several times so you can do it confidently. Find the quiet within yourself and believe. A mist is a fine thing, if that is what you wish to produce, but what if you required a rainstorm, or thunder, or snow?"

"I can do that?" He put down the cup and leaned against the table. It had been a long day, and he was abnormally tired. He ached to his core, now that he thought about it. A deep ache that seemed to emanate right from the middle of his bones. "Can I try now?" He clapped a hand over his mouth as a yawn followed his words.

"Have a seat, Eoin, and think about all the studying you have done over the past years. Think about all that knowledge you have accrued." Eoin sat in the wooden chair in the corner, pleased for the chance to take the weight off his feet.

"I don't want to think about the studying, Jaeger. I've thought about the studying for the past three years, now I want to start practising." He stifled another yawn and stretched out his legs, trying to relieve the dull pain that had settled there.

"Let me see if I can make it rain, Jaeger. Please. If I can do this then perhaps I can relieve the dryness that has been haranguing us for the past two weeks."

Jaeger chuckled. "If it were that easy, lad, do you not think I would have done that?"

Eoin yawned. "I suppose so. Why haven't you, Jaeger?" He leaned back, his head resting on the hard wooden back of the chair. "You could make the villagers very happy with a little rain now and then."

“That I could, lad. I could give them some rain now. Maybe some more tomorrow. Then next week when the ground is still parched, I could call up a thunderstorm and the week after that...”

“Why don’t you?” The words tumbled quietly out of Eoin’s mouth. “I know the villagers don’t like to talk about magic, or to think about magic, but they wouldn’t have to know. Let them believe it was a gift from the deities for their wonderful behaviour.” He fought off another yawn, the room blurring as his eyes teared up with the intensity of it.

Jaeger just smiled. “I’m going to leave you here for a little while. Clean away what you’ve used and think about why I might not bring rain every day of the arid season.”

“Certa...” he yawned, “...nly.” Jaeger swept up the stairs to the house, and Eoin looked around at the few bits that needed clearing away. It wasn’t much, he could get to it in a minute. He was just going to close his eyes for a second.

Eoin jerked up at the sound of the door banging, banging his head on the wall behind him and his shoulder on the back of the chair. Where the hell was he? The room was dark, though it smelt familiar. It took just a couple of seconds, and the sound of footsteps on stairs, for him to realise he was still in Jaeger’s cellar.

The glow of an oil lamp lit the room when Jaeger made it to the bottom of the steps, and Eoin stretched, then rubbed his head where he’d hit it.

“You’re awake then, boy. I see you’ve not managed to tidy away like I asked.”

“Jaeger?” Eoin could hear the confusion he was feeling echoed in his voice. “What...”

“The moon is high in the sky, lad, you tell me what. Just think about what I asked.”

Scraping the sleep away from his eyes with the back of his hand, Eoin forced himself to try and make sense of Jaeger’s words. What was he doing sleeping in the cellar when the moon had already risen? He opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again.

The mist. He’d made mist from nothing more than a cup of water. Elation rose inside as he remembered his achievement. He could feel Jaeger’s gaze on

him, and he forced himself to shake away the vestiges of slumber that were still clawing at him. What had his mentor asked? His brain clicked round slowly, remembering the conversation they'd had before he'd drifted off. The rain. That was it, Jaeger could make rain, but he didn't.

He started as the reason came to him as clear as the flame in the oil lamp. His first lesson. Magic has two forms, manipulation and illusion; both though require a transference of energy. Namely the energy of the mage performing the magic. He wracked his brains and remembered the dark ink on the heavy pages. Energy, the essence of everything, a person could strengthen their energy, as a fighter would strengthen muscles, but using magic still meant using the very essence of your being.

“You don't make it rain because it would use too much energy. It would weaken you.”

Jaeger nodded, a smile creasing at the corners of his mouth. “That's right, lad. You have slept through the afternoon and passed sundown just from that small bit of magic you performed. Imagine the energy required to make it rain, day after day, week after week. I would be of no use to anyone as a healer, and if I started giving the village rain through the arid season then stopped, they would not know how to tend the crops they had planted. As I don't, the farmers have found ways to make the most of the ground they have. They have learnt to store away rain from the wet season, they have learnt to live without me manipulating things, and I can assure you, this is a better outcome for everyone.”

The older man placed the oil lamp down on the table and left the room. Tidying away, Eoin knew he had learnt a valuable lesson. Magic takes energy, and the source is not endless. It was a lesson he vowed to remember. Unfortunately, a lesson so strong in your mind at the time of learning has a way of fading over time.

Chapter 4

Night had fallen completely as Eoin stood poised at the bottom of the steps, ready to climb back out of the cellar. Tears stained his face as he said one last goodbye to his mentor and ran up the stairway to the dark night air.

Magic takes energy, boy. It is important that you go now, while Edward's servants are replenishing theirs. I will do my best to keep the village safe, but you must hurry. I am dying and nothing will stop Edward but the knowledge that the stones are back with the Virium demons, beyond his reach once more.

Jaeger's words echoed in his head as he felt the cool night air dry his face. He was not big enough for this task, not strong enough... but he needed to be. Lives literally depended on it. Putting one foot in front of the other, he made his way back round to the front of Jaeger's house. The village was eerily quiet. He wanted to knock on the doors, enter the houses, find the people. Find his family. But Jaeger had told him they were no longer here. That it was too dangerous to linger, and as confused as he was, Eoin knew he trusted his mentor.

Stopping in front of the herbs he'd gathered earlier, he grabbed some handfuls of various ones and stuffed them in his bag. The fragrance of rosemary filled the air, and he took a deep breath, savouring the aromatic scent. Drawing the cloak Jaeger had given him around himself, he stepped into the night, knees shaking beneath the heavy wool layer but heart full of courage.

His footsteps were muffled yet sounded too loud to his own ears as he walked out of the village. The houses beside the dusty road were soon petering out when he turned off, heading across a wild meadow towards the dark forest. The way was familiar, one he'd trodden many times in his childhood and early youth. It was the way that led to Kailean's house.

The image of Kai running past earlier sprung to the forefront of Eoin's mind. Was it really only a few hours ago? That hot late summer's day, full of joy and promise had turned as quickly as the night had crept in, cold and unwelcome. It felt like a lifetime ago. It felt only heartbeats ago. His heart stuttered as he suddenly realised that Kai had probably been vanished too, his house was on the outskirts, but it still counted as village. He contemplated stopping there, checking out his house, out of the way as it was, it offered more protection than those in the village.

...but you must hurry...

Jaeger's words echoed in his mind, the job he'd been tasked with vivid and bright in his mind... he was needed. Only he could do this... yet the draw to Kai's house was almost as strong. The sound of pottery shattering followed by an anguished yell only strengthened his need to find Kai. It may have been years since they had been friends, but he still knew the sound of his friend's voice, adult or not.

Without thought of fear or his own safety, Eoin ran up the path to the house. "Kai?" he called. "Kailean?" Another cry and Eoin tested the front door, finding it open he went straight in. Fumbling in his bag, he pulled free the small knife Jaeger had lent him with which he was to prepare the herbs when required. It wasn't much, but spirit coursed through him drowning fear and sensibilities. Kai was in trouble and needed his help.

"Kailean?" he called again, stepping down the narrow hallway, fearlessly and without caution. A muted cry came from the room in front of him, and Eoin headed there, knife in outstretched hand, brain rapidly skimming through spells that might be useful.

The door to the room was ajar, and he used his foot to push it open. Then he paused. There, in the middle of the room was Kai kneeling in front of a pool of blood, a wet rag in his hand. Shards of pottery lay around him, and tears dripped down his face. Eoin lowered his arm and looked as his old friend tried to scrub at the stains.

"Kai?" his voice was soft, almost a whisper. "Kai, it's Eoin. Let me help." When Kai failed to react, Eoin moved across the floor towards him, speaking softly all the time. Kneeling beside the other man, he took his hand and removed the rag. "Whose blood is it, Kai? Is it yours, are you injured?"

Kai looked up at him dazed, as if surprised to see him, as if he hadn't heard Eoin talking to him. "Kai. I need to know if this is your blood, if you are hurt?" Kai shook his head. "Then can you tell me whose it is Kai... does somebody need to see a healer?"

Kai's gaze slowly landed on Eoin. Green eyes bloodshot and tear filled. "Eoin? What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to help, Kai, but I need to know what happened. I need you to tell me whose blood this is."

"Rosie's." *Rosie. His spaniel.* A fat tear slid down his face even as relief filled Eoin. "She was just here, torn apart like some animal had ripped into her. I've buried her out back."

“Where is everyone else, Kai? Where are your mother and father?” Eoin forced the other man to look at him. He needed to get through to him and quickly, Jaeger’s warning echoing in his head now the overwhelming need to protect had subsided.

“They are away, Father has an important council meeting, and he and Mother have travelled to Southerton. They will be at least four full moons before they return.”

“Then you must come with me, Kai. It is not safe for you here. Evil has visited the village today, and I am the only one who can stop it.”

“You?” For the first time since he’d walked into Kai’s house, Kai looked at him properly. “Evil is here, and I am to expect you to protect me from it?” He didn’t laugh, but Eoin could hear the implication of it in his question. “I am a guardian, Eoin, and you just the boy who cuts the healer’s herbs. Who is able to protect who here?”

It would have been easy to point out the bloodstains and the tear tracks, but Eoin wasn’t cruel. At least he had an understanding of what was happening. At least Jaeger had taken time to explain to him what was needed—all Kai knew was a dead dog, tortured and torn apart.

“You’re right, Kai, you are a guardian, and I have been tasked with something that is so much bigger than I am...” Then, sitting there on the blood-stained floor of Kai’s house, he started to tell tale of what Jaeger had told him. The explanation was as succinct and precise as possible for time was their enemy. He left a few omissions but pushed back the guilt of not being totally honest. Eoin didn’t know what it was Kai saw that had him agreeing to journey with him. If it was the truth, or an adventure, a friend from years past or just the urge to protect as a guardian should, but he thanked the deities that Kai believed enough to agree to travel with him. Whatever the reason behind it.

Chapter 5

“Are we to camp here then, Kai? It doesn’t feel like we have travelled very far. I think we should go a bit further still, we still have light.” Eoin kicked the mulch beneath his feet. It was late summer, and though the days were blisteringly hot, the trees created some shade. Overhead, a canopy of rich green glinted through with sparkles of sunshine. Beneath their feet though, dropped leaves rustled and rotted. The smell was enticing, Eoin thought, he’d always liked the outdoors, though it had been many years since he’d had time to play in the woods.

“Then we would be setting up camp in the dark.” Exasperation and superiority sounded in Kai’s voice. “We need to make a shelter and a fire. It may be warm now but as soon as the sun goes down the cold will settle in.”

Eoin remembered how quickly it had cooled yesterday, how the night had fallen by the time he’d left Jaeger’s house. Kai had taken one look at the supplies Eoin carried with him and laughed. At his insistence they rounded up blankets and tools, a small bag of food and skins filled with water.

“We don’t need to take all this,” Eoin had protested. “We can find water and hunt food on the way. I have some herbs, and we can pick berries, they are plentiful at this time of year, trap a rabbit...”

“And how do you propose to make this rabbit trap of yours?” Kai had asked, one blond eyebrow raised questioningly. When Eoin had stuttered and stumbled over an explanation Kai had not said another word, just continued to pack provisions.

It had been light when they’d set out, only just, the early tendrils of dawn crept with them through the forest until it was mid-morning, then midday, then mid-afternoon. They’d stopped briefly to sip from their skins and nibble some berries they’d collected as they’d walked. Eoin had given Kai a look that said *I told you so*, but Kai had pointedly ignored it.

By late afternoon the packs were chaffing Eoin’s shoulders, his feet were sore from walking, and yet he still didn’t feel they’d travelled far enough. What if Edward was already on their trail? Despite his blisters, he didn’t want to stop yet. What Kai said made sense though, it would be difficult to make camp in the dark, and they’d been travelling for hours already.

That first night was more uncomfortable than Eoin had any idea a night could be—both mentally and physically. The night looked like it would be dry, Kai said, though Eoin didn't know how he could tell this through the thick treetop canopy, so they wouldn't need to build a shelter, just clear a space to lay their blankets down and set up a fire. Kai went to catch something for them to eat, and Eoin set about building a fire. Once he'd made a little pile of twigs with some dry kindling beneath to set light to, he'd found the flint and tried to get it to spark. And tried. And tried.

“Come *on*.” He struck the stones together again, praying to the deities for a spark. He got one, but not enough to catch the tinder alight. Cursing under his breath, he tried once more, this time the stones just rubbed together, making a clacking noise not a hint of a spark in sight. He cursed again and threw the flint onto the blanket he'd laid out before turning to the little bag Jaeger had packed for him. In it he found some fireweed—so called because if the fiery red flowers touched you your skin bubbled in painful blisters, exactly as if it had been brushed with flames.

Jaeger's voice sounded in Eoin's head as he looked at the flowers. *Lesson one, my lad; magic is a mixture of illusion and manipulation.* Illusion was harder by far, it relied on the mage making others believe something to be true. The energy required was phenomenal and the only source was the mage. A practiced mage could make a glamour last with very little effort, a practiced mage knew how to focus his own energy properly and use chants to hold the energy of the spell. Words were a powerful thing when used correctly. Eoin though was a mere apprentice, barely in his first years of training.

Manipulation was far easier. At least that is what Eoin told himself as he pulled the fireweed from the bag. Placing it next to the tinder, he searched for the quiet place within him, the place where energy dwelled. Deep in his core he could feel a familiar buzzing, his energy was taking life, and he used the power of thought to imagine the fireweed becoming the heat it was named after. A manipulation of energy. Making the power source become... not more, but different.

The world is made of energy, Jaeger used to say, we simply have to believe that the energy is in the form we want it to be. The closer to the desired form the energy was, the easier it was to manipulate it. In theory, anything could become anything—but in practise, this wasn't the case. Manipulating the energy of an object still took energy from the manipulator, the practitioner, the mage.

The sounds of the forest disappeared as he focused on the fireweed. The buzzing inside turned to stronger vibrations, an internal pull. In his mind's eye, he saw the weed becoming flames. Again and again he let the image flicker across his brain. *Fireweed—heat—flames. Fireweed—heat—flames.* He let himself hear the crackling, smell the smoke, feel the heat. The fire would burn and blaze. It would cook, it would warm, it would comfort and give light. *Fireweed—heat—flames. Fireweed-heat-flames. Fireweedheatflames...*

A hiss and small crackle. A faint smell of smoke, a tiny bit of heat. Then the flame took, and Eoin opened his eyes. Crackling and spreading through the tinder until the fire was roaring. Eoin smiled and then collapsed backwards, as the world turned black.

Chapter 6

“Eoin, Eoin...” It didn’t sound like his father’s voice or that of Jaeger, and why was his bed so uncomfortable? He shifted, and the mulchy smell of the forest floor filled his nose. In a flash it all came back to him: Jaeger, Betty, the task... Kailean.

“Don’t move, Eoin.” There was a trace of worry in Kai’s voice that Eoin would realise later he rather liked, for now though he just wanted to assure Kai he was okay.

“Stop fussing, Kai. I’m fine.” He sat up, pleased to note the fire crackling nicely beside him as he did. He felt drained, but not hurt. That magic must have been pretty powerful, but he’d done it. He’d started the fire without any guidance.

“What in the deities’ names happened?” Kai put his arm round Eoin and lifted a cup of icy water to his mouth.

After he’d sipped a little at it, Eoin told him, “I started the fire, Kai, I used my gift and started the fire.” Even in his excitement, Eoin could see his words didn’t have the effect he thought they would. Even in the dim light of the forest, it was easy to see the colour drain from Kai’s already ashen face.

“You’re telling me, the reason I come back from trapping us some food to find you lifeless on the ground is because you used magic?”

“It... I... we needed a fire!” Eoin was taken aback by Kai’s anger. After years of knowing he had to hide his abilities, he suddenly needed to defend them. To defend himself. Magic was a part of who he was. “It’s what I do.” The ice in his voice was evident as soon as the words left his mouth.

“Use magic to start a fire that we could easily have started with a flint, then pass out right beside the fire with nobody here to help. If that’s what you *do*, then it is more than evident to me that magic is every bit as bad as people say it is.”

“Magic helps people. Knowing which herbs to use, which properties to enhance, that saves lives.”

“How do we know it’s magic and not just knowledge of the plants and their properties? How do we know... any of this,” Kai waved his arms in the general direction of the pack Jaeger had packed for Eoin, “helps. We only have the word of mages themselves. That’s not proof.”

“And testament of those who’ve been healed or helped. Ask Mary Baker what she thought of magic when baby Piers was burning with fever. Or Tomas Fletcher when he was almost blinded by the hawk he was collecting feathers from. You ask them whether they believe in magic and healing or not.” Eoin paused for breath. He knew he was flushed, and he knew he was being louder than necessary, but he’d lost Kai years ago, back when his father ordered that they no longer be friends. He wasn’t going to make the mistake of thinking they were friends again.

“You could have been burnt alive, Eoin.” Kai nearly whispered the words. “You could have started a fire that destroyed the forest. You say it’s what you do, yet it’s obvious you are far from being in control of it.” His voice faltered as if he’d run out of steam. “You could have been burnt alive.” He repeated the words beneath his breath, and it was this that stopped Eoin’s rage in its track.

If he didn’t know better, he would have sworn on all of the deities that Kai cared.

“I’m sorry,” Eoin said. “You’re right, it was careless of me. I’m not a trained mage, barely even an apprentice. I don’t know what I’m doing, not really.” He wanted to tell Kai *again* that he was not up to this task. That Jaeger had left this in the hands of someone who had not got a clue what he was doing. The only reason he’d survived the day was because Kai did know what he was doing, he did know how to survive.

Kai just breathed out slowly and nodded before using his knife to gut the squirrels he was carrying, and Eoin gathered ferns to lay under the blankets they had for the night. Once the meat was cooked over the fire they sat down and ate, neither man speaking. Despite the sounds of the forest and the crackling of the fire, the silence was pretty deafening and Eoin yearned to break it. But he didn’t know how.

There was one question that had been rattling around in his head since he and Kai had set foot in this forest though. “Why did you believe me so easily?” he asked.

Kai looked up, his green eyes glinting in the flame of the fire. He shrugged, reluctance to answer written all over his face. Eoin just waited, patience, his father had always told him, was a virtue.

“Because I trust you. It was evident that something was amiss, and when you tell me that the best thing we can do is to go on this...”

“Quest?”

“Quest. Then I’m going to believe you. I’ve known you a long time Eoin, and you have never once lied to me in that time.” Kai turned back to his meat, pulling off a chunk and stuffing it into his mouth.

Eoin swallowed back his guilt. He was keeping a secret from Kai, he’d only told him half the story Jaeger had told him. He’d mentioned nothing about the prince being Jaeger’s son or the fact that the third stone was actually located in the grounds of the palace. He didn’t know how he was going to explain that when they got to the capital, but it was many, many days ahead of them yet. They had another stone to find before worrying about the third one. Instinctively his hand went to the first Virium stone, strung as a charm around his neck for safe keeping. The stone of youth.

“You don’t really know me though, do you? Not now. Five years have passed, Kailean, people change. I could be lying through my teeth to you.”

“And are you?”

Eoin shook his head so rapidly it made him dizzy.

“Of course that’s what you would say whether you were or not. I trust my instincts, Eoin, and they say to trust you.”

Eoin didn’t know what to say after that. A warm glow settled inside him at the thought Kai trusted him so easily after all these years. The glow was tinged with guilt and yearning though. Guilt that the trust Kai placed in him was indeed misplaced and yearning for the easy friendship they’d once had. Once Eoin would have done anything for Kai—and Kai would have done anything for Eoin.

As they bunked down for the night on a bed of ferns and blankets, Eoin wondered if it was this residue of childhood trust that Kai was still relying on. For some reason the thought that it might be warmed him through.

Chapter 7

Five years before...

“Your turn,” said Kai, handing Eoin the rod, a wiggling worm already attached to the hook. Eoin smiled at his friend, knowing that his gratefulness would be seen and received. As much as he loved fishing with Kai and his father, he loathed the bait nearly as much as he loathed the live fish flapping around on the end of the rod. Casting out, the hook hit the water with a satisfying plop, and he settled back down on the grassy banks of the lake letting the sun caress his face.

Kai looked in the pail of fish they’d already caught. “Pa will be pleased today. There are at least three big enough to eat.” He glanced down the lakeside to where his father was fishing by himself. A trained guardian, his father had retired due to injury last year and now worked on the council. Fishing was the one time he relaxed, and though Kai loved his father, he’d been starting to resent him a little just lately too.

The air was thick with it. The change that growing up was bringing and neither Eoin or Kai wanted to acknowledge it. Eoin wanted every moment to be like this, he and Kai together.

“Has he been pushing you again?” Eoin noticed the furtive glances Kai was casting. “Have you told him that you aren’t sure about being a guardian?”

“Ssh! I don’t know what you mean.”

Eoin rolled his eyes as Kai glanced towards his father again. “Really, Kai, just tell him that you would like to be a merchant.”

“Just tell him? My father has been preparing me to be a guardian since I was three years old. There is no way I am doing anything else.”

“Except, you don’t want to be a guardian. Looking after people and protecting them is not what you want.” Eoin stared at Kai, daring him to see the truth in his words. They’d been friends for so long he knew the other boy almost as well as he knew himself.

“I’m going to be a guardian, Eoin, and my training starts at the end of the summer, as well you know.”

Disappointment surged through Eoin, the thought of Kai going away for weeks at a time, training, learning... maybe even working for someone from

far, far away. He busied himself with the fishing rod, lifting it up and down with a gentle splash each time, trying to attract the fish. Anything so he didn't have to think about his life without Kai in it.

"I'll still see you, Eoin." Kai was looking at him, eyes wide. "I know you feel like I'm abandoning you, leaving you here in Legracioa, but I need to do this. When we're grown and I'm a trained guardian and you are a miner, we will still be friends. We will see each other nearly every day then, we just need the time now to learn our crafts."

Eoin nodded, eyes focused on the rod in the water lest Kai see the trace of tears in his eyes. It was unfair. Why did Kailean's father have the last say in what he was to do as an adult, it wasn't his life, it was Kai's. The thought of his friend leaving him, even for just a few weeks at a time was painful. An ache deep in the core of him, a place where he knew Kai meant more to him than just a friend. The place he would only acknowledge in the dark of night at a time when dreams were allowed. Resolutely he stared at the lake, concentrating as if his life depended on landing another fish.

Friends who have been part of each other's lives for so long don't always need words to communicate. As focused as Eoin was on the lake, he knew Kai was as equally focused on him. If he could feel the stare of his friend, he was sure it would be like the lazy beams of the sun caressing his neck, warm and comforting. Instead he was just aware of it. Aware of the look that didn't falter. He knew if he turned his head, the way Kai would be looking—gaze intense, lips slightly parted, concern and familiarity etched in his face.

It was a look becoming all the more frequent. It was the look that he saw in his dreams at night.

"We'll still be in touch, Eoin. I can tell you of my wild adventures in becoming a guardian, and you can tell tale of becoming a miner."

It was the forced note of joviality in Kai's voice that broke him—broke everything—Eoin often thought in the later years. The pitch that said he was as unhappy about the way their futures were planned out as Eoin himself was. A single tear slipped down his cheek, and Eoin let go of the rod to wipe it away.

"Don't, Eoin." The plea was unmistakable, even though Kai had spoken so quietly it was hard to hear above the gentle lapping of the lake. "Don't cry. We can't change this."

"Why not, Kai? Why can't we at least try?" Fresh tears slipped down his face, and he hated himself for it, for showing this weakness. Before he could

wipe them away again though, another trembling hand reached up and brushed the moisture from his cheek. "Please, Eoin, I can't..." Kai faltered. "I can't do this if you..."

And then warm arms embraced Eoin and Kai's cheek laid against his. The smell of the earth and salt and a slight tang of the oranges they'd eaten earlier filled Eoin's nose. He turned into the hug, knowing he wanted more but not truly understanding what his feelings meant.

He turned his face to the side, sought Kai's eyes, felt the shallow wisps of breath across his skin. Nothing was there as far as Eoin was aware, nothing other than Kai. He held his breath as his eyes found Kai's intense green gaze. It felt as though the fish flapping in the pail were in his belly as his stomach jumped and flipped.

"Eoin?" Kai said his name as though it was a question and all Eoin could do was nod. Then there was the barest brush of soft, soft lips against his forehead, and Eoin knew that this moment in time stood for change. He knew that nothing would ever be the same again.

How right he was.

"Kailean? Kailean! Eoin!" Kailean's father had, over the years, dropped the coarse Legracioa's accent he had been born with and chose to speak in the refined tones of a guardian to the upper classes. When he called the boys names at that moment in time though there was nothing at all refined about him. Rage shot through Eoin. One moment, one precious moment and Kai's father was taking that away too. He wished the older man was dead.

Time stilled.

Eoin could feel Kai pulling away from him. While he was aware of the sun, of the lake, of the trees, in a detached way, nearly all of his being was concentrated on his slowly distancing friend, the man demanding their attention and the rage pooling in his guts.

I wish he were dead. I wish he were dead. The mantra turned over and over in his head as he looked at Kai's father and willed his friend to return his attention back to Eoin. And then, there was screaming. The piercing scream of an adolescent boy scared out of his wits. Kai moved away from him and ran towards his father, and somehow the screaming burst through Eoin's bubble of rage and he became aware of his surroundings.

The sun was there, intense and warm, the lake softly lapping at its shoreline, and Kai was moving towards a man who flickered between well and standing

upright and fine and a man lying on the shore bruised, battered and no longer breathing.

Eoin ran too, not understanding what he was seeing, how can one person be both dead and alive?

“Kai.” The older man’s voice was brusque with an edge of fear. As Eoin reached his friend, he could see clearly that the man was alive and well; he could also see the panic etched across Kai’s face. Hear the disbelief in his voice as he repeated quietly, “You were dead. You were dead.” He saw how his friend’s hands reached forward and touched his father, brushing across his skin as if unable to believe what he was seeing.

Kai’s father reached for his son, settled his hands on his shoulders and told him to calm down. Then he turned to Eoin and venom dripped from his voice when he asked, “What did you do?”

Eoin took a step back. “Nothing... I did... nothing...”

But he had. He didn’t know what, or how, or truly even why, but he did know it had been him. The sleep tugging at his eyes, pulling at his thoughts wouldn’t let him talk or think or explain.

“You’re nothing but a filthy mage.” Kai’s father’s words cut through the air like a sword through the enemy.

Eoin shook his head. No. That wasn’t true. It couldn’t be true. “I don’t know. Kai, it wasn’t me, I don’t know. I didn’t...” His friend turned to him, and his face was filled with confusion. A confusion so strong that Eoin wanted to hold him and tell him and explain everything. He moved a step closer, but as he did Kai stepped back, and a touch of fear flickered at the edges of his expression. It was that fear that took Eoin’s heart and crushed it in its mighty grip. He’d been right. Nothing would ever be the same after today.

Chapter 8

Now...

Eoin cursed quietly as the flint failed to spark, *again*. He hated asking Kailean to do it for him, knowing his companion already thought him lame, and he daren't try using his gift. Time had passed with each day they spent in the forest slowly making their way north. Eoin had lost count of the days they'd been walking. All he knew was the further north they travelled the quicker winter seemed to approach. He'd learnt to push the thoughts of his family to a place deep inside himself, the same place he hid his worry of those hunting them. All he knew was he longed for the heated days of summer. At least then it didn't matter that he still couldn't get the fire to light.

Swallowing down his annoyance, he tried again, praying to the deities for just one spark, that was all it would take to ignite the dry grass. For once one of the gods was listening, and a small orange flash leapt from the stone to the grass. Some careful blowing and the grass caught, then the kindling and, by the time Kai had returned with a rabbit swinging from his back, the fire was ablaze.

"I hope you didn't cheat to get that alight," Kai said, his features settling into a scowl. "We need your energy for important things, not lighting fires." Used to Kai's gruffness, especially when he was hungry, Eoin just held up the flint as though that were proof enough that he'd used it. Not that he cared whether Kai believed him or not, just because he was a half a year older didn't make him in charge, whatever he thought.

Turning his attention back to the pot he'd set hanging above the fire, Eoin quickly added some roots and nettles, then sat back and watched as Kai deftly skinned and skewered the rabbit before fixing it on a spit. He sat back, obviously pleased with his catch, just turning it every now and then so it cooked evenly.

The heat from the fire was welcomed by Eoin as he rubbed his hands together in its warmth. The night was drawing in and with it the chill of the north. All around them leaves rustled as the wind blew through the trees and he was glad of the protection of the forest. Soon they would have to leave it, and the mountainous terrain they would have to embark on would be harder to navigate.

"Here." Kai tore some rabbit meat and placed it into Eoin's tin bowl. Eoin fished the greens out of the pot and added them to both their meals before

taking the pot off the heat. When the boiling water had cooled a little he would pour it for them to drink.

“We’re going to need to stop and trade at the next village,” Kai said, once he’d downed a mouthful of his dinner. “The mountain pass is not going to be easy, and we’ll need supplies.”

Eoin nodded. They’d had this conversation before. As well as the one about trying to go round the edge of the northland instead of over the top, but neither of them were seamen, and there wasn’t time for failure.

“Have you enough traps set?”

Kai nodded. “Two days and I should have enough to trade. If we sell the skins but dry the meat, that should see us over the top. I don’t know how much there will be up there to catch, it’s pretty raw at this time of year.”

Eoin rubbed his eyes before filling their mugs with the vegetable water. The nutrients in it would do them both good. Quietly he cleaned off the rabbit skin, watching as Kai tamped down the fire and piled up the fern for their bed. When the fire was nothing but a glowing warmth he stretched the rabbit skin beside it, before settling down and pulling his cloak over him. Kai was first watch, and as Eoin drifted off, he could hear the rhythmic sharpening of Kai’s weapons and tools. It had been the same every night for the past moon turn, and the simple, repetitive sound helped Eoin fall asleep.

Eoin’s bag was heavy against his back as he followed Kai through the dense forest. He didn’t complain though, as he knew Kai’s load was heavier still. Twigs crackled underfoot and leaves rustled overhead. Sounds of nature were all around now Eoin had the time to listen. The quiet squeak of a mouse, the shrill call of various birds. At night they often heard the thundering footsteps of deer, and once even a wolf howling in the distance. Eoin was no longer afraid though, not of nature at least. He was plenty afraid of the evil that followed them.

They nibbled at strips of dried meat as they walked, conversation minimal as Kai was always on alert for the hunters after them. Wintery sunlight started to show more frequently through the shade of the trees, and the sharp wind found them more readily when Kai said, “I think we’re nearing the edge of the wood. By my reckoning we’ll reach the village well before sundown.”

“Do you think we might sleep in a proper bed tonight?” Eoin asked quietly, the thought of even a straw mattress under his aching limbs blissful.

“Maybe,” Kai said, offering a small smile. Eoin felt his chest tighten, sometimes it felt as though the years of being apart had never happened. Just a glimpse of a smile on Kai’s face made him feel nine again.

“And maybe a real meal, cooked on a stove and not tasting of smoke. Something other than rabbit and squirrel. Maybe lamb or oxen.” Eoin’s stomach rumbled as he conjured up the image of a laden table. He could practically smell the aromas of a proper meal.

“We’ll see,” said Kai. “It might be the best way to get information about the mountains and how best to pass them.” Eoin took that as a yes and let a grin spread across his face. His cheeks ached at the movement; he couldn’t remember the last time he’d smiled so broadly.

Soon the tree line petered out completely, and they found themselves on the edge of the village Kai had pinpointed on the map. “Are you ready?” Kai asked and Eoin nodded. He chewed the sour tasting plants he’d placed in his mouth, closed his eyes and pictured himself and Kai as young tradesmen making a living selling animal skins. As the herbs turned to slime in his mouth he swallowed them down and concentrated on manipulating the energy surrounding them both, ready for the illusion to work. He’d kept it simple, not too far from the truth of who they were. The hunters didn’t know what they looked like, so disguising their hair colour or nose shape would be pointless. He just needed to give the impression of not having spent the last month sleeping rough in the woods.

They had maybe two hours tops, but hopefully that was enough for Kai to sell the skins and them to find lodgings for the night. Then, good old-fashioned soap and water should make them presentable enough for the rest of the day.

“Skins, rabbit skins for sale!” called Kai as they headed towards the village. Eoin couldn’t believe their luck when the door of the first house opened and a tiny mouse of a woman stuck her head out.

“Rabbi’ skins?” she asked, “’ow much?”

“Three kreslings each or four skins for eleven.” Kai spoke with confidence, and Eoin couldn’t help the flutter in his stomach as his partner spoke.

“Four skins for ten!” the lady bartered, and Kai agreed, it was still more than they had expected to get. All along the row of houses and into the next street they bartered and dealt, until the bag was empty of skins and the small money bag full of kreslings.

Eoin was tiring from maintaining the illusion, he longed for the warmth and cleanliness of a bath and somewhere to rest his head. Before they could book into the inn though, Kai had some purchases to make. Some climbing axes, matches, a warmer blanket and a map with instructions of how to pass over the mountain.

“My advice would be to take the road round,” said the merchant as he parcelled up their purchases. “It might be longer, but it’s by far safer. Even the mountain folk don’t venture far from their hamlets much outside the height of summer, and they’re used to the terrain.” Kai thanked him politely and said he’d take it under consideration. Eoin was thankful the conversation had ended, he was growing weaker by the minute, and the illusion wouldn’t hold much longer. Letting himself lean on Kai’s arm they made their way to the inn.

The inn was, as usual, centre of the small village, and it didn’t take Kai long to hand over enough kreslings to secure them a bed for the night and an evening meal. As soon as they were in their room, Eoin let the illusion drop with a sigh of relief. It was only a small illusion, but it drained more than enough energy from him.

The water that poured into the small bath attached to their room was plenty hot, but Eoin was so tired and itching to get clean that he couldn’t even be too fascinated with how the mechanics of such a system worked. He instead settled on enjoying the results of it and soaping all over. It felt like so long since he had been properly clean, the river was too cold to bathe, so they’d sufficed with quick splashes to the face.

Rising from the water, he drained the tub and filled it again for Kai. Wrapping the towel round himself, he tried not to watch as Kai stripped off his clothes and stepped into the tub. The first time he’d seen Kai undress and dive straight into an icy river, Eoin was sure he had blushed from the tips of his toes to the tops of his ears. The young boy he’d once known was certainly long since gone, and in his place stood a man of beauty. A straight back and broad shoulders, lean muscled legs, and the most perfect arse Eoin had ever seen. Not that Eoin had seen a lot, but it was better than any he’d imagined.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on how you looked at it, the water had been so cold it had taken Kai far too long to warm afterwards, and he’d declared bathing too dangerous. The line of Kai’s proud back and toned body was often at the forefront of Eoin’s dreams though. Thankfully there was nothing like being hunted to take a person’s mind off such things.

The towel was rough on his newly cleaned skin and Eoin took pleasure in the feel of it, the joy of being clean. The clothes he'd removed lay in a filthy heap on the floor, and Eoin knew there was no way he was putting them on without them first being cleaned.

"Kai, can we afford to have the inn's washer woman clean our clothes or should I do them in the tub?"

"It's already taken care of Eoin, they'll take them when they bring our food and bring them back in the morning with breakfast." Eoin listened to Kai splashing gently in the water and tried not to imagine the smooth, clean paths the soap would be making on his friend's skin.

"What if we need them quicker?" The need to have everything to hand burned inside of Eoin, like a candle in a window. Time, Jaeger had said, time was of the essence. He'd also said to keep hidden, to not allow themselves to be distracted and to be wary of those who hunted after them.

"We've seen no sign of them yet. I can't see why they would suddenly catch up with us in a small village at the foot of the mountains." Eoin heard the water surge and drip as Kai stood up. He resolutely turned away from the open door, it was bad enough he would be sharing a bed with Kai tonight, without images of him naked and wet intruding into his dreams.

"All the signs are," Kai continued, "that they don't know we have the Virium charm, far less who we are or where we've gone."

"Is that why you clean and sharpen your weapons each night?" Eoin couldn't help the edge of disbelief that crept into his voice.

"I look after my weapons like any trained guardian would." Kai stretched out on the bed, his towel wrapped tightly round his hips, leaving very little to Eoin's imagination. Eoin averted his eyes, rummaging through his bag for the tiny green charm. Twisting it in his fingers, he thought once again how such an innocuous object could be so powerful. How the fate of an entire village depended on it being returned.

Chapter 9

Eoin groaned softly as his mouthful of venison practically dissolved in his mouth. It was possibly the most delicious food he'd ever eaten, tender meat, perfectly cooked potatoes and carrots in a rich, thick gravy. Each bite was fit for the deities. He swallowed the meat and chased it down with the fruity red wine that accompanied their meal, it burned just enough to warm him to the core.

"Dried rabbit meat and roots are going to be hard to go back to after this." Eoin contemplated trying to fit more into his already stuffed belly, giving up when he realised stomach ache stuck up a mountain would not be fun.

"We'll be thankful of them soon enough," Kai replied, the hand rubbing his stomach belying the fact that he too had eaten more than his fill. A quiet knock on the door had Kai alert in an instant though, hand reaching for the knife that was never far from his person.

"Sirs, I have come to collect your plates." Eoin looked at Kai, the other man crooked his head indicating Eoin should open the door. Standing behind it and pulling it open, Eoin was relieved to see the same girl who'd brought the meal to them.

"We've arranged the washer lady to take our clothes, but we'll need them back before the sun rises." Kai hadn't moved from his chair and he spoke in the kind of authoritative voice that made people agree with him instantly.

"Yes sir," she said, collecting the plates and slipping out the door. "She'll bring robes for you to wear in the meantime." Eoin shivered, not cold but suddenly aware of his bared chest. Now he was aware of it though, now he didn't have dinner to distract him, he found his eyes tracking towards Kai, and the smooth, broad expanse of his chest. It caused another shiver, and he felt his face flush scarlet when he realised that Kai was watching him.

"You've changed a lot." He blurted out the first thing that entered his head. His insides suddenly felt knotted and his tongue tied.

"I should think so, we were children last time we spent any time together Eoin, everyone has to grow up." Kai poured himself another tumbler of wine and held up the bottle. Eoin shook his head, his head was in enough of a muddle as it was, and neither of them could afford that.

“But do you miss it, do you miss those days when everything was... easy?” Eoin was curious because the longer he spent with Kai, the more he wondered how they had just let the friendship they’d had go. How neither of them had been strong enough to fight for it.

Kai looked at him, clear green eyes unreadable. Eoin held his gaze, searching for something, though he wasn’t quite sure what. Kai looked away first, tipping the last of his wine into his mouth. The silence stretched between them, and Eoin thought that Kai wasn’t going to answer his question when he repeated, “Everyone has to grow up.”

“But they don’t have to grow apart,” he said, longing for his friend to understand. Something flickered in Kai’s expression, and Eoin willed him to crumble, to break the wall he’d built, to remember the closeness they’d had. Dark eyes sought his, and Eoin’s heart hitched at the softening he saw there. Maybe it was time for Kai to let him back in. Before Kai could speak though, a sharp rap came to the door, and the guardian mask went straight back on.

“I’m here for your clothes, sirs.” The inn’s washer-woman sounded tired, as if another load of washing was all she needed. Eoin almost rescinded the request, they did after all have a perfectly adequate bath tub, but Kai was up and opening the door this time, knife tucked into the back of his towel.

By the time the dirty clothes had been taken and exchanged for well-worn robes, the moment had passed, and Eoin climbed into bed with a feeling of discontent gnawing at his stomach. It was early, but the lockable door and soft bed meant a decent night’s sleep, and Eoin was not willing to pass that up. He had so much he wanted to ask Kai, so many years to catch up on, but now wasn’t the right time. *Now* they had a task to complete and it was bigger than either of them. It was bigger than the village they’d grown up in. Eoin had promised Jaeger as he was dying, that he would complete this task and end the events that had been set in motion thirty years previously.

Sleep came quickly, it shouldn’t have been a surprise to Eoin but it was. The bed was so comfortable, and Kai was warm at his back when he finally slipped beneath the sheets. The night passed dream-free, and it was with reluctance Eoin woke in the morning. His legs were twisted in Kai’s, and Kai was hugging him tightly. The soft strength of muscled thigh against his, where Kai’s robe had fallen open in the night, sent butterflies swirling in Eoin’s stomach, and he yearned to shift back just a little so there was even more contact between them, but he was scared. Of waking Kai, of seeing the horror on Kai’s face when he realised how they were tangled up together. But mostly of the feelings he was trying to deny.

Lying still, he counted each breath in and out, let himself feel every point of his body that was in contact with Kai's. He wanted to close his eyes and drift back to sleep, to let slumber claim him and enter the land of dreams where Kai was his friend of years past.

Where Kai was more of a friend than in years past.

He didn't dare though. Instead, he forced himself to break the warm contact of Kai and climbed out of bed. He made use of the facilities and checked for their clothes, pleased to find them in a neat pile outside the door, as previously promised. He dressed quickly and efficiently, placing the Virium charm back around his neck. Kai too had risen and was silently getting himself dressed. In unspoken agreement, they packed their few belongings and went to eat a hearty breakfast. Fresh eggs and smoked bacon, thick slices of newly baked bread, all washed down with hot ginger tea.

The meal was eaten in silence. Both men knew that today was perhaps the last decent meal they would have, certainly for a while. They savoured each bite, and Eoin knew he was eking out the moment before they made it back onto the road. Back to the search and the cold and the uncertain. Eoin wavered as doubt started to set in. Maybe Jaeger was wrong, maybe he wasn't good enough for this journey. He was just a boy from an out of the way village, what did he know about ancient magic and charms?

"Stop that." Kai looked at him over the nearly empty plates. "Don't doubt yourself, Eoin, you're stronger than you think. You've always been stronger than you think." Warmth flooded through Eoin. Jaeger had always believed in him, but he'd been one of few, and however many years they'd been apart, Kai's was an opinion he valued and treasured. Not trusting himself to speak, he just nodded and gulped down the last of his tea. With the ginger burning a path down his throat, he waited while Kai settled the bill and then they left.

The northern air was quick to chill after the warmth of the inn, and every breath out swirled in misty puffs. Now they were clean and rested, Kai had decided there was no need for a glamour of any kind. Where two ragamuffin travellers might attract attention, two merchants, selling rabbit pelts and just passing through should soon be forgotten. They'd made sure they were unremarkable in their actions. If the hunters did pass through this village, Kai believed they would not be remembered well enough for any useful information to be passed on about them. Eoin trusted his friend's instincts.

The sun had barely moved in the sky when they reached the foothills of the mountain, and the first incline was more a gentle walk than the back-breaking

climb Eoin had envisioned. Despite the crisp air, Eoin felt warm, the views were spectacular and... he felt almost happy. Kai was walking beside him, mostly in silence, but the odd comments he made were easy and not stilted as they had been previously. As long as he kept the fear for his family hidden, he could almost believe they were just two friends on an adventure.

When the sun was high in the sky, they stopped and had a small meal of some cheese, new bread and apples. The fresh food would soon be stale or gone, but Eoin was determined to enjoy it while he could.

“Where do you hope to get to before we make camp tonight?” Eoin sipped from his water skin, stretching his legs out in front of him and enjoying the meagre warmth of the sun on his face.

“I think that crag up there.” Kai pointed up the mountain. “It is nearing the top, will offer us a free view and should provide some shelter for the night.” It looked sheer to Eoin, but he trusted Kai.

“Looks like a good day’s walk to get there,” he said instead.

Kai nodded his agreement. “Aye, it will be, but I think it is our best bet. Tomorrow morning we should reach the top, and then I can work out which way is the best to go. Maps will only be useful a certain amount, I need to trust my instinct more.” This time it was Eoin’s turn to nod, and he started gathering the remnants of their meal and wrapping things back up.

Cloud soon swirled around them, and the temperature started to drop quickly. Adding to their layers of clothing helped ward off the worst of the chill as they walked. The grassy inclines were full of brambleberry bushes filled to bursting with fruit. They had these back home, but the fruit was a winterberry and wouldn’t be ready to harvest for another month at least there. Here, in the colder climes of the north, the fruit was abundant. Eoin picked handfuls, eating some, sharing some with Kai and wrapping still more for later.

Soon though, the brambleberry bushes petered out, as did the grass underfoot. Now the way was made of rocky slopes. The passing was slower than Kai would have liked, Eoin knew, but the other man did not pressure his companion into speeding up, and for that, Eoin was grateful. The air felt different up here, and while Eoin worked hard daily and was not unfit, he found each breath a little harder to take.

The crag Kai had pointed out still seemed impossibly distant, but Eoin knew it was getting nearer with each unsteady footstep. Stones loosened each time he

stepped forward, and the sound of them rattling down the mountainside was unnerving. Eoin was determined not to let his fear show though. Instead, he concentrated on the task ahead of them. To return the three stones of Virium, to undo the misdeed that Jaeger had set in motion and hopefully save his village.

Subconsciously his hand reached up to where the Virium charm dangled beneath his top. It was warm after being pressed against his body for so long. The charm promised life, it was made from the first of the Trivirium stones, the stone of youth. Before they could take it back to where it belonged, they needed to find the other two stones.

As the sky pinked up, red reflected and gleaming from all around, Eoin tucked the charm away. Each day at a time was all he could think about. If he let himself think about the enormity of what Jaeger had tasked them with, the fear would swallow him whole.

“We need to go faster or it will be too dark to reach the crag safely.” Kai’s words broke through Eoin’s thoughts. The first words the other man had spoken in a while, and to hear another voice in the silence of the mountain was strange.

“Sure.” Eoin pushed aside the weariness that was starting to linger and stepped up his pace a little to match Kai’s. Even though all of his limbs started to ache, he moved forward with purpose. Racing the sun, he watched as the crag drew nearer and the sun sank lower until all there was left was a purple tinge above the top of the mountain, and the dark shadow of the crag was merely footsteps away.

Relief and exhaustion fought inside Eoin, but he knew there was plenty to do before he could sit and rest. The crag was sheer for the most part but a small ledge, about half the size of his front room at home, jutted out beside it. Pulling out a climbing pick for the first time, Kai skimmed up the sheer face to the little platform like a rat scaling a wall. He lowered a rope down, and Eoin grabbed it, holding his breath and listening to the instructions Kai called down to him, carefully placing his feet exactly where Kai said.

Cold, hard stone dug into his fingers, lacing his hands with tiny cuts that would sting like he’d been playing with bees later. His heart pounded as numb fingers sought impossible handholds, and he prayed to the deities that he would make it safely up this sheer slope. Finally his fingers found purchase on the ledge, and he pulled himself over the top.

The formation was such that they were sheltered from the wind on two sides and partially hidden by the rocky formation. Even in the mountains, two travellers resting could be at risk.

“It’s not suitable for a fire,” Kai said, and Eoin imagined he heard a hint of apology in his voice. “I know it’s cold, but we’ll burrow up against this rock here and that will protect us from the wind.” Eoin nodded and started to unfold the deerskin and blanket he had wrapped in his pack. Though the air was chill, there was no denying being sheltered from the wind made a huge difference.

Once they’d both settled down, Eoin shared some food. His stomach grumbled at the memory of the hot breakfast they’d consumed, though the village and inn felt longer than a day’s walk away. If the cloud cover below them wasn’t so thick, he was sure they’d be able to see pinpricks of fire and chimneys bellowing smoke. As it was though, nothing below halfway down the mountain was visible, and it felt as if he and Kai were alone in the whole wide world.

“Here.” He passed Kai a torn off piece of smoked sausage and hunk of bread, then wrapped his blanket tighter round his shoulders and ate his own meal.

The sausage was lightly spiced and flavourful, and Eoin savoured each bite. “Are we going to find the stones?” Eoin asked eventually. “Do you really think it’s possible for us to undo what Jaeger did?”

“We can’t undo it, Eoin. It’s been done thirty years... but we can try to correct it and make the future better.”

“How long do you think until we reach the hamlet with the next charm?” Tidying away, Eoin settled as close to the back of the ledge as he could.

“We’re going to need to share a blanket; sharing body heat will keep us warm.” Kai’s tone suggested nothing but practicality, but heat still flushed Eoin’s face, and he was glad of the cover of darkness. Carefully he shuffled closer to Kai and let the other man settle against him.

“I think we will find the next charm in less than two days and the other a week after, from Jaeger’s instructions. The last leg is going to be harder though, returning them to the Virium demon from whom they were stolen. I’m not liking that bit of the plan.”

Eoin knew he should be worried about it too, but as Kai moved closer and folded an arm over his chest pulling him in to share the warmth, all he could think of was every point of contact between them, and despite all his fears, he suddenly never wanted this quest to end.

Chapter 10

Sleep was fitful, and Eoin jerked awake more than once as he dreamt he was falling from the edge of the mountain. It was better than the dreams he had of being prey though. The fourth time it happened Kai sighed and moved closer, tightening his arms around Eoin. “You need to sleep, we are safe here.” His muttering was soft and barely audible to Eoin above the sound of the drum pounding in his chest.

When the soft light of morning finally caressed them awake, Eoin was once more pressed tightly to Kai. This morning though Kai was awake too and his arms tightened briefly around Eoin before he pulled back. His brain was too fuddled with sleep, and after mere seconds Eoin felt sure he’d imagined it. A stray feeling born of a sleepless night and want.

Pushing all erroneous thoughts from his head, Eoin stood and stretched. This morning the village they had been in yesterday showed at the bottom of the mountain. A tiny toy town fit for a Prince to play with. The Prince, Jaeger’s son. If the words had come from any mouth other than Jaeger’s, Eoin would not have even begun to entertain the idea as truth, but they *had* come from Jaeger’s lips and at a time where he had nothing left to lose. It was a truth he kept deep inside, away even from Kai.

Breakfast was a simple affair, plain but nutritional, and it wasn’t long before they were on their way again. The sun shone brightly, and the view was clear, save for the odd fluffy cloud that drifted underneath them. The trek up the mountain was cold though, and difficult in places.

“If I go up first with the pick, you climb after as you did yesterday,” Kai instructed. “Just remember to follow in my footsteps.”

Eoin nodded and started to slip off his leather hand coverings.

“What are you doing?” Eoin started at the sharpness in Kai’s tone.

“Bare hands are easier to grip with.” He shrugged, trying to act nonchalant in the face of Kai’s irritation.

“Bare hands are the easiest way to frost bite. You won’t be able to climb at all if all your fingers are gone.” Kai’s gloved hand reached for Eoin’s and stretched it out flat. “Were your hands bare when you climbed yesterday evening?”

Eoin nodded, feeling like a chastised schoolboy was bad enough when it was Jaeger, but with Kai, his friend and peer, doing the chastising, it made him highly uncomfortable. He couldn't say if it was because he felt insulted or because Kai was worried. Eoin squirmed as Kai traced the multiple scratches that covered his fingers. "You're very lucky that these were not worse. You must keep your hands covered up here. Everything needs to be covered."

"But my hands slip when they are covered..."

"Then grip harder."

Eoin pulled his hands away. Who was Kai to make him feel like a fool? He was the magic wielder, the one Jaeger had trusted with this task—Kai was just a glorified bodyguard.

"You can't use magic to protect you from things when there is another option. It would be stupid to drain your power that way and leave you defenceless when you need it." How did Kai do that? Alongside the discomfort that flared in him were the echoes of memories. Kai had always known what he was thinking as a child, why did it surprise him that he still had this talent? *Because the years in between your friendship and now have changed you both from children to men.* Ignoring the voice in his head Eoin slipped his gloves back on and glared at Kai's back as he ascended the sheer rock in front of them.

Soon the rope came slithering down towards him, he tied it carefully around himself and gripped on to the wall. Using all his strength, he stretched up and let his fingers grip a crack in the rock. The toe of his boot found purchase easy enough, and he reached out with his arm once more.

"A little to the left Eoin, that's right. Now bring your other hand up to the split two hand spans away..."

Slowly Eoin ascended, listening to Kai's instructions and using his own judgement. Despite the rope around his waist he felt more fearful than the night before, his grip just didn't feel as true with the leather between him and the rock face.

"Take it slowly, but steady. Don't stop, you're doing really well Eoin." Kai sounded so calm, like skimming sheer walls of rock was nothing. Eoin tried to let Kai's calm wash over him and felt for a hold with his hand. Once his fingers felt secure he reached with his leg and pushed up a little, seeking the next place to get a purchase. Slowly and surely, with Kai's gentle encouragement, he climbed higher and higher.

Pausing for a second he craned his neck up, Kai sounded close and the next ledge was within easy sight now. His arms were starting to ache a little but nothing he couldn't deal with, and he was within an arm span when he heard Kai utter profanities under his breath that made Eoin want to blush. Seconds later, though, he was back to encouraging Eoin. As he reached the top of the rock, a strong hand reached and pulled him up to the flat surface. Crawling over, Eoin lay flat and caught his breath.

“No time for that,” Kai said, “company is coming.”

Eoin squinted into the weak sunlight, trying to follow where Kai was pointing. He could see nothing until Kai passed him a small spyglass. Then, with some concentration, he was able to see movement at the bottom of the mountain.

“They're over a day away and there is no guarantee that it is those seeking us, but I'd rather widen the gap if we possibly can. I wish there was more cloud cover again, so we can make it up and over the peak unseen. There are some small settlements in the valley beyond this peak.”

“Let me try something.” Eoin took out his small bag of supplies and tipped a little of his drinking water into the small metal cup. He closed his eyes and waited in the quiet for echoes of Jaeger's instructions to enter his brain.

Magic is illusion and belief and the quiet within, boy. If you believe it, it will be. If you believe it, others will see the illusion and not the trickery. To properly believe though, you need to find the quiet within. The place that is your source of energy. Every single thing in this world has energy, use it, manipulate it, own it. Find the quiet within. Just remember boy, all energy used needs replenishing.

Holding his hand over the cup Eoin found his quiet place, deep in the centre of himself and turned his thoughts to believing the water was vaporising and becoming cloud. Muttered ancient words helped his belief strengthen, and soon wispy puffs of white spilled from the small cup. As they poured down and spread, Eoin closed his eyes and kept imagining more. He let his thoughts grow darker, the chant never quietening on his lips, and the clouds billowed out greyer and angrier. They followed the happy white clouds and soon, beneath them, all that could be seen was a blanket of cloud. Above them, towards the ever-nearing peak, was wintry sunshine.

Eoin stopped the chanting and sagged to the ground. The glamour he'd used to disguise them as they'd enter the foothill village was tiring, but it was only

maintaining an illusion... this was magic on a whole different scale. In his quiet, he'd believed enough that the water was cloud. That the cloud was a shield, there to hide and protect. Such manipulation was draining. He'd transferred his own energy into the magic and needed to replenish this, and he needed to do it fast.

"What do you need, Eoin?" Kai's voice was quiet, much quieter than usual and it troubled Eoin. It was the first time Kai had seen him properly use his gift. Kai, who believed in what he could see and deal with. Who had embraced his life as a guardian because it was everything opposite to illusion—real and solid and firm.

"Food. Water." He jolted as Kai settled a hand round the back of his neck holding him steady and lifted a drink of water to his lips. Eoin was careful to sip and not glug at it too eagerly, but it was still taken away too soon.

"Here, chew." Kai gently pressed a small portion of dried fruit into his mouth, and Eoin obediently chewed at it. The process of water, then fruit was repeated until Eoin could feel some of his energy returning. When he felt he'd had enough, he pushed Kai's hand away and offered him a small smile.

"Thank you, Kai. It... it takes a lot out of me even to perform such a simple manipulation. I don't know what Jaeger was thinking leaving this task to me, I am not fit for it."

"Nonsense!" Kai looked at him, his face less guarded than usual. "That was amazing, Eoin. You made cloud. You made it... from nothing..."

Eoin huffed out a laugh. "It wasn't from nothing, it was from water, and that is basically all clouds are anyway. It just required transference of energy."

"Just? Mages are so very few these days, Eoin. I can't believe you have this gift. I mean I *knew* you had this gift, but I didn't really believe it until just now." Kai started putting the remaining dried fruit away, all the while shooting little glances of awe at Eoin.

"We all have this... ability... in us, Kai, I've just been taught how to use mine."

Kai snorted. "You're telling me that I could do this." He gestured to the cloud cover beneath them. "I don't think so Eoin."

"You could." Eoin thought for a moment. "Think of it like this. If I trained the way you do, I could be a guardian. Probably not as good as you, as you

have a natural aptitude for it, but I could be one nonetheless. It's the same with magic. You have the ability to do it if you trained, it might be harder for you because it doesn't come as naturally." Eoin shrugged. "If everyone possessed the same aptitudes, the same gifts, then we would be a danger to ourselves—we would be able to make healing potions but not protect against the savage beast..."

"But mages can do anything..."

"Magic could do anything, but it all takes energy and energy needs replenishing, if all we had was magic it just wouldn't work. Our differing strengths and weaknesses are what make us whole." He smiled at Kai and stood up. "I think we should go, use the cloud to our advantage."

Grabbing Eoin's bag before Eoin could, Kai nodded and started forward. Now he took a minute to look, Eoin could see they'd already passed the sheerest parts of the mountain and, though the peaks they were headed to were snow covered, it looked pretty straightforward.

Chapter 11

Ten years before...

The healer watched the two boys playing. The game wasn't anything spectacular, but to his trained eye, he could see the talent in the darker-haired child. Not a talent for sport, no the lighter-haired boy with the green eyes was better by far at that, it was a talent for magic he saw in the boy who had barely seen his tenth summer. He'd noted it before of course, but it was hard to be sure in a younger child, now though it was as plain to him as the chair he was sitting in. The way his friend sometimes seemed confused as to what he was seeing so the boy had an advantage. Illusion if ever the healer had seen it.

It was also obvious nobody else knew. Yet.

"Your boy is a far superior player," he said to the woman sat beside him. Her face bore the look of someone who would rather be anywhere else but here, as if watching her only son playing with his friend was beneath her. He also knew that the guardian was back for a spell, and he liked to boast of his wife's natural affinity to motherhood and how she doted on their son. For anecdotal evidence as he tried to climb higher in social circles, she did her duty and watched as the boy and his friend played. "Yet sometimes his friend manages to outmanoeuvre him."

This got the lady's attention and she sat up straight. She may not care too much for the boy, but she was still adamant he was the best.

"Friendship," she explained. "When they have been friends for so long, it is the kind thing to do so one is not always the winner."

The healer nodded. "Of course. It's a good job you are such a good parent to him, my dear, others might have suspected the other boy of using unnatural forces to confound your son, but of course your point makes much more sense. Good day, my dear." He bobbed his head and headed back to his home. His face was as serene as always, but inside he smiled. The seed was planted. A friendless child would be so much easier to manipulate.

Chapter 12

Now...

“Let me look at your hands.” Kai reached forward and pulled Eoin so hard he nearly fell from the stool on which he was perched.

“Careful!” Eoin pretended not to notice the tendrils of joy that curled within him at Kai’s touch.

“What did I tell you, Eoin? Look at this one, it’s taking too long to close.”

“It’s just a scratch Kai. It’ll heal. I’ll make a poultice for it.” Reluctantly Eoin pulled back his hand and reached into his bag. It took him mere minutes to crush some tea tree and lavender together. He savoured the aroma as he started to spread it across his palm. Stupid cut. It had just been a scratch when he’d done it climbing the wall without his hand coverings, but somewhere he’d pulled it, stretched it too much, and it had deepened to a nasty cut that was painful, despite his protestations to Kai.

“Here, let me.” Kai reached for his hand again and gently unfurled Eoin’s fingers. Scooping the paste from the mortar, he dabbed at the cut. Eoin gritted his teeth, forcing back a hiss of pain. Outside it had been so cold that he had barely been aware of it hurting, here in the shelter of the cabin his hands were warming slightly, and he felt every little sting. Carefully Kai wrapped a bandage around Eoin’s hand, holding the poultice in place.

“You need to be more careful than this, Eoin. We are so close to the second stone, I can’t have you injured now.” He held onto Eoin’s hand, after he’d finished wrapping the bandage.

“Do you think we are safe to stay here tonight?”

The cabin where they were sheltering was nothing more than a tiny wooden construction. Four walls and a roof, with a small bed in one corner and a table and stool in another. Shepherds’ hut, Kai had said, for the summer, when the northern people would bring their flocks this high to graze. Outside snow was falling, a light layer now, but Eoin knew that in a matter of weeks it would be thick and never-ending.

“I think it will be as safe as anywhere.” Kai let go of Eoin’s hand, and Eoin reluctantly stood up. “I don’t think we’re being followed anymore. I could see

nothing through the spyglass. I think maybe those that we saw were just locals going about their business. Maybe collecting brambleberries, you remember we passed that thicket of bushes early on.”

Eoin wasn't so sure, but he trusted Kai's judgement—he was a guardian in training after all, soon to be in charge of council members and nobility alike. “Then I propose we have something to eat and try to sleep. It is definitely more inviting in here than it is out there.”

“Still bleedin' cold though,” Kai grumbled.

“That it is, but as I said, it's better than being outside with even less protection from the weather.”

Kai conceded and set about finding enough scraps for them to eat. Eoin stuck a bowl outside and waited for it to fill with snow. He then melted it above a candle and added some ginger. Not perfect, but after the rations they'd been eating it tasted close to something fit for the deities.

The bed was small and narrow but Eoin didn't mind one bit as, after they'd cleared away evidence of their meal, Kai climbed in beside him and pulled him close. His back nestled perfectly into Kai's front and the arm looped over his gripping his chest made him feel as if they were in the safest place in the world.

“This reminds me of that time we camped and you were scared of the night noises so we ended up in one bedroll.”

“I was scared?” Kai huffed quietly, his breath breezing across Eoin's ear causing him to shiver. “You were the one who thought that deer sounded like someone was killing it.”

“How would I know that was what a rutting deer sounded like?” Heat seeped into his face. “You were the one who thought the owl was someone coming to murder us.”

“It sounded like someone saying who... who...”

“That's what owls call. Really, I think you spent too many years listening to Old Betty's tales.” He laughed at the memory of two boys scared of the sounds of the night... then stopped abruptly when he remembered that Betty was dead.

“Oh deities... she's really dead, isn't she Kai?”

The arm holding him snaked round further and pulled him closer. “She is, Eoin.” He said no more, offering no senseless words of comfort. No platitudes.

No reasons. What was done was done, and it was neither the fault of Kai or Eoin. Their job was to do their best to ensure it didn't happen again. Their job was to save the people they could and now was not the time to regret those they couldn't.

"Don't let me go, Kai," Eoin whispered as he closed his eyes and waited for sleep.

It took nearly another day's travelling before they came to the small hamlet that Jaeger had spoken of. In the late afternoon sun, a cluster of sturdy, stone-built houses stood together, bundled into the side of the mountain seeking protection from the quiet giant. Smoke puffed from all the houses but one, a derelict looking building that stood a little back from the others. Eoin eyed it furtively. Here it was cold, but the snow from the peaks had not yet travelled this far.

Farm buildings stood to one side, and a flock of sheep and goats attempted to graze in a mud-churned field. Muffled lowing could be heard from a long wooden structure that Eoin assumed was a cattle-shed. The farmhouse seemed to be the centre of this collection of houses, there was certainly no pub or inn, no shops or stalls. Eoin wondered how they got supplies and concluded that, unlike the more modern towns and villages, this hamlet relied on the old ways of self-provision, and make and mend.

Two strangers this far down the mountain at this time of year was sure to attract attention, no matter how empty the place appeared.

"Hail lads, you're a long way from home I would suggest. How can we be assisting you this fine day?" The man was wrapped in layers of clothing, his ruddy face weathered and lined but friendly.

"We got caught in weather at the top of the mountain... our father's ill... I..." Eoin let a few tears slide down his face to add layers to the lie he and Kai had so carefully constructed. He didn't even need the gift of illusion; the tears were born of weariness and fear. Carefully using his bandaged hand to wipe at them, he let Kai rub slow circles in his back, taking more comfort from the act than perhaps he should.

"Aye lads, come away in, you're not the first, and you won't be the last."

The warmth of the farmhouse hit them the second they walked through the door. A fire blazed away, wood crackling and filling the room with the smoky-

sweet scent of burning pine. A scrubbed wooden table stood in the middle of the room, and it was brimming with all sorts of fare: a ham, some cheese and a tureen of soup. Steaming vegetables, large meat pie and a mound of mashed potatoes. Eoin's eyes widened at the food, especially when he laid eyes on a selection of sweet cakes and pastries.

A well-proportioned lady stood at a big sink, whistling softly to herself as she scrubbed pots and pans. "Come away in lads, we've been expecting you. 'Spect you're hungry after your trek down the mountain."

Kai looked at Eoin, a look of confusion on his face. Eoin shrugged minutely—he had no idea how they were expected. Scenarios ran through his head—was the lady a seer? They were even less heard of than mages these days, Eoin had never met one, nor knew anyone who had. Had word got to them about their quest? Maybe they knew about the stone and were waiting until someone came to remove it.

He edged closer to Kai, ready to take flight if they had to—they had youth on their side and could outrun the farmer and his wife if required. Of course there was no telling who else was in the hamlet. Eoin started prepping himself to pull off an illusion. He wished he was better prepared. That his herbs weren't tucked away in his bag. He'd never used his magic defensively, hell he'd hardly used his magic at all, and suddenly he realised how unprepared he was.

"Don't fret lad. We've been watching you trek down this side of the mountain. There ain't much that comes down this here side that we don't know about." She smiled at them, and her face was warm and comforting and reminded Eoin of Betty. "Here, have some tea." She used a cloth to lift a large blackened kettle off the stove and poured boiling water into two mugs. The sweet fruity aroma of blackcurrant tea wafted into the air, and Eoin stepped forward, hesitating for half a beat before reaching for a cup. The woman smiled again, broad and warm, and with that, all thoughts of seers and magic were forgotten.

"Thank you, ma'am." He raised the mug to his lips and blew softly over the steaming liquid, cooling it a little before he took a sip. It was hot and sweet and exactly what Eoin needed.

"Oo, get away with ya, it's Gracie, not ma'am, and luggins over there is Ralphie." Eoin smiled again and turned to Kai. Kai, who was frowning and looking around with unease and mistrust etched all over his face. Guardians could be so suspicious. Eoin raised his eyebrows and nodded his head towards the mug Gracie was proffering.

“Thank you.” Kai’s words were stiff and formal and much more like the Kai who had started out on this journey with him. Rolling his eyes upwards, Eoin took another sip and turned back to Gracie.

“Now boys, you are to be our guests for tonight, there is plenty of food and beds being warmed for you. As soon as I saw you coming, I said to Ralphie, “Them two boys will be frozen solid by the time they make it down here. It was easy to see with his spyglass just how young you both were. Have you seen a spyglass before? Wondrous things they are, make things appear so near, even when they’re half a day’s travel away. Ralphie’ll show you after we’ve eaten.”

She bustled round the table as she spoke, cutting the pie and ladling soup into bowls. Eoin’s stomach grumbled loudly, and he flushed at the sound of it. Gracie laughed. “Don’t you worry about that, child, it is music to my ears. There is nothing I like more than feeding them that is hungry, and we don’t get many visitors here, especially at this time of year.”

Eoin reached for Kai’s hand and tugged him to the table. Soon a steaming bowl of vegetable soup sat in front of them each, with a hunk of thickly sliced and equally thickly buttered bread beside it. Eoin’s stomach gurgled again, and he spooned some soup quickly into his mouth, not caring that it was steaming hot.

Kai just looked at the bowl in front of him, though Eoin knew he must be as hungry as he was. He elbowed him and glared. It was rude to so blatantly ignore such hospitality.

“Your brother is only being sensible,” Ralphie said quietly. “It’s good to be wary of strangers. Would you like me to eat first, young man? All the soup was served from the same tureen, and as you can see, all the other food is from the same place. It is a sensible attitude, but it’s not necessary here. We only wish to welcome two weary travellers to our home for a while.”

Kai didn’t answer, but he did wait until Ralphie had taken a spoonful of soup before he ate his own. Eoin noticed this wary attitude all through the meal; Kai would only eat if one of their hosts had eaten that food first. Eoin couldn’t bring himself to be suspicious of such welcoming company, strangers or not, but he understood Kai and what made him tick.

“So,” said Gracie as Eoin stuffed the last piece of jam tart into his mouth, “are you boys interested in a bed for the night?”

Stretching, Eoin smiled. His stomach ached it was so full, and the warmth from the fire was making him sleepy already. Stifling a yawn, he looked at Kai,

willing him to agree. They were going to have to stay somewhere, and the thought of camping in the cold and the snow was unbearable when there was a nice warm bed upstairs. He imagined the cosy covers and soft pillow. The shepherds' hut had sheltered them from the wind, but it had still been icily cold.

"There's a lock on the door of one of the rooms, if that makes you feel any safer, my lad." Ralphie spoke to Kai, evidently understanding his hesitation. Impatience surged through Eoin. There was being cautious and there was being cautious. Gracie and Ralphie had no need to be this nice to two strangers who strolled onto their land.

"Come on, Kai, let's stay here please. Gracie and Ralphie are very kind to offer us a bed as well as food; it would be rude to turn down such hospitality."

For a moment, Eoin thought Kai was going to say no, that they needed to keep moving, but then he bowed his head in a dip and said thank you. "We are to share a room though, the one with a lock, my brother sometimes has nightmares and can sleep walk too."

Eoin stared. Three lies in one sentence and they rolled out of his mouth so smoothly. Kai avoided his gaze, keeping his look trained on Ralphie. "Of course, lad, not a problem. It's good of you to look after your younger brother so, not everyone would do the same. I'll get Gracie to pour you a drop of camomile tea before bed though. It does wonders to ease disturbed sleep, doesn't it Gracie."

"Aye, Ralphie, that it does. Now are you going to take these lads and show them the cattle while I tidy up in here?"

At Gracie's protestations that she'd be fine cleaning up after the meal, they bundled into their cloaks and followed Ralphie outside. The air hit them hard after being in the warmth of the house. Ralphie chuckled. "Aye, it takes a bit of getting used to, at least I know I can go back in the warm when I wish too. I wouldn't fancy sleeping in this anytime soon. Where are you boys going anyway? It is not a wise time of year to travel northwards. You mentioned your father..."

"We are to meet our father in Oakton. He was there trading and fell ill, we're to meet him and escort him home."

"Not by the mountains?" Ralphie sounded shocked as he pulled open the door to the low cattle shed. Inside, three men, roughly the same age as Eoin and Kai were cleaning out stalls, another and two lasses sat on low stools milking the cows.

“No, we will hire a horse and carriage to come back by the road. We didn’t have enough money to travel in such a manner in both directions and walking the mountain route is shorter than the road.” Eoin had to stop his mouth dropping open at the falsehoods that seemed to fall so easily from Kai’s lips.

“It is, lad,” Ralpie agreed, seemingly oblivious. “It is. The road is still safer by far, mind.”

Kai shrugged. “Speed was our main concern, not safety.” Ralpie looked at Kai then flicked his gaze to Eoin, shrewd brown eyes assessing them both. Whatever he was looking for though, they seemed to pass as he led them further into the shed and started introducing him to cattle and people alike.

Milking a cow, Eoin discovered, was an acquired skill; all he was fit for was court jester, judging by the way everyone laughed at his attempts. Kai refused to try with a shake of his head, instead passing the time by asking one of the workers all about life in the mountains. It was pleasant and Eoin was able to put thought of Jaeger, Betty and the stones out of his head for a while.

“Come on, Eoin,” Kai said after a good portion of time had passed. “Let’s take a walk before we retire for the night.” He let himself be led from the shed and followed Kai as he wandered through the small collection of houses. Each had a well-kept yard, Eoin noticed, with plenty of herbs and big vegetable beds. He could make himself at home here quite easily, he realised. Fresh air, stunning views and a small collection of friendly souls. The houses were carefully set out, so, while there was only nine in total, in a small space, they each exuded an air of privacy. Tall brambles sheltered this house from that. Or a sturdy stone wall, or a selection of fruit trees, though Eoin had to wonder how much fruit they could possibly bear in these climes.

Each house had spirals of smoke coming out the chimneys and the warm glow of candlelight in windows, as darkness started to fall. All of them, that is, except the one that was set further apart from the others. Tumble down and ruined. The garden was overrun with plants grown wild; twisted brambles and tall weeds.

“Here,” said Kai. “Here is where I think Jaeger left the second stone.”

Chapter 13

“Here?” Eoin looked again at the tumbledown house in front of them. It was old and disused and rotten from the inside out. Just being near it made him feel bleak. An emptiness started to fill him, sadness and misery and a longing for Gracie’s warm farm house, a nice cup of tea and company.

“Kai, it can’t be here. Come on. We’ll look again at the map Jaeger gave us and see if we’ve missed something. Maybe we need to go further to find the place.” He tugged at Kai’s cloak, trying to pull him away from the place. Needing to get away from the emptiness that rolled in waves around him as he stood gazing at the rotting building in front of him.

Kai refused to budge though and unease slunk over Eoin, whispering at him, telling him to move away. The walls were blackened he realised, as if consumed by a fire. How had he not noticed that straightaway? The windows were just dark spaces in a darker facade. Soulless eyes, in a soulless place. It was a monster. Hateful. Horrible. He was so empty inside. Doom squeezed his brain, gloom oozed from every pore.

“Kai, come on!” This time Kai let him pull him back, away from the weeds, to the stone path that led them there, but he stopped Eoin before they went too far.

“How did the house seem to you?” Kai’s expression was serious, his eyes searching for something in Eoin, but Eoin knew not what.

“House? That tumbledown ruin of a place?” Eoin turned, willing Kai to just move back towards the farmhouse.

Kai let himself be moved a little back, then he stopped and turned back towards the building. “Look at it now, Eoin. Does it seem so...”

“Bleak? It’s as if all the evil...” Eoin turned and stopped. He looked at Kai, then back at the house. It was a ruin for sure, broken and needing repair but it didn’t look so... soulless. *Soulless?* Eoin paused. What a strange expression for a building. It wasn’t living, the deities would not have given bricks and mortar a soul. He moved a step forward again, Kai close on his heels. With every step, the same feeling of despair he had when he’d stood there before pervaded him. Loss and cold and empty.

“A glamour?” He asked Kai the question, but he knew the answer as soon as the words passed his lips. A glamour—by someone with a secret they didn’t

want discovered. Someone powerful and full of regret. “Jaeger?” The name left his lips, a puff of wind in the breeze. Of course, Jaeger; he’d done exactly that to disguise the entrance to the cellar.

A glamour that used the energy that thrummed through the earth to feed itself. Only a powerful mage was able to do such a thing. A tumbledown house could be repaired, become a new homestead, but somewhere that felt so bleak... nobody would want to repair it and live there. “A glamour!” he repeated the words to Kai, excited that they were likely in the right place. The second stone of Virium was within his reach.

Without realising his actions, he reached for the green Virium pendant that hung around his neck. It felt strangely warm to his touch, he hadn’t noticed because it lay against the cotton of his undergarment and not against his skin. Pulling it out, his hand became illuminated in a faint green light. A soft glow from the stone—he took a step forward, a pace nearer to the house and the charm’s luminance grew a little brighter. “It is definitely here.” A grin split his face in two. Finally they were here, in the place of the second stone, one step closer to restoring peace in the village and righting Jaeger’s wrong. “Come on, Kai!”

“Slow down, Eoin.” Kai’s hand reached for him, stopping him dead still in his tracks. “Remember the feeling of despair when we entered the grounds before? How do we get past that? How do we know it won’t get worse and worse and worse... imagine that feeling tripled... tenfold. I wanted to curl up there. Will I lose the will to live if I get closer?”

“Not if we know it’s a glamour, Kai. Don’t you see? We saw what Jaeger wanted us to see, but now we know the truth... now we *believe* the truth, it will have no hold over us. It is still there, but we can see through it.” He tugged Kai forward, impatient to find the stone, to have completed a task.

“Are you sure, Eoin?”

“So sure. Remember when we went fishing that summer and the sun burned down so brightly on the lake, all we could see was the reflection of the trees and the clouds in the sky? No matter how much your pa told us there was fish in there we couldn’t see them.” Kai nodded. “Remember how your pa taught us to concentrate on looking beneath the reflection to the fish underneath, and once we’d seen them it was impossible not to see them? A glamour is like that, once you see beneath it, it’s impossible not to.”

Eoin finished his explanation and stepped into the garden once more. It was as he said, the glamour was still there, but it was easy to see beneath it. Easier

than looking at it. Cold wisped against him, feelings of gloom, doom, despair—but they were muted, barely there and easy to push aside.

He pushed through the weeds and to the front door. A wooden door lay in rotting planks on the floor of the stone hallway. Eoin stepped over it and carried on into the dark of the cottage. A flagged stone hallway led to a square open space. The flagged floor here was crumbling and cracked and full of debris, most of which appeared to be the fallen roof. Weeds pushed though, and the night sky was visible when he looked up. A large fireplace took up most of one wall, blackened and charred and overgrown with weeds. Eoin's euphoria drained away. How the hell were they meant to find anything in here?

Eoin turned to Kai and held up his hands in silent question.

"I don't know," Kai said. "What did Jaeger say again?"

Biting his lip Eoin thought, then repeated, "*In the place where man is most comfortable, then to the place where man is alone. Quiet contemplation as nature demands attention. Daily? Nightly? Sometimes more.*"

"*In the place where man is most comfortable.* His home, correct?" said Kai.

Eoin nodded. "I can't think of where else a man might feel more at ease. What does the next bit mean?"

Kai shrugged and mouthed the words over. With a puzzled expression still on his face, he looked at Eoin and started checking the flagstones to see if any were loose. "I have no idea. It's not too big a place though, so there can't be that many hiding places."

Elimination was just as likely to work as wasting time working out Jaeger's clue, Eoin reasoned, and followed Kai's example. Moonlight streamed in through the hole in the roof and lit up the middle of the room. The stones were heavy and filthy. Eoin's fingers were soon scratched and bloody from trying to lift them up. The edges were sharp, cracked and dangerous, but none of them were loose. His already bandaged hand fared no better than the other one and, as he scraped yet more skin off his forefinger, he cursed. The urge to stamp his foot like a child was nearly overwhelming. He was cold, it was too dark to see anything other than the centre of the room, and they had no real idea what they were doing.

"This is ridiculous." He slumped to the ground. "Besides, if we're meant to be spending the night with Gracie and Ralphie, are they not going to start wondering where we are?"

Kai sighed and nodded his head. “I was thinking the same thing. How about we go back and then slip out later with a light at least?”

As frustrating as it was, Eoin agreed. So near and still so far. Jaeger could have been more precise in his directions and then they would be a step closer. A step closer with the prospect of a whole night asleep in a warm bed instead of planning to creep back out in the middle of the night.

“Ooh, Ralphie and I were getting worried about you lads,” Gracie said as they entered the warmth of the kitchen once more. “Ralphie said you’d gone to explore.” She huffed out a laugh. “There’s not exactly a lot to see around here. Oh, you’re bleeding.” She put down the mug she was holding and reached for Eoin’s hand. Her work worn fingers were surprisingly gentle as she examined the cuts and grazes across his knuckles.

“It’s nothing.” Eoin tried to pull his hand back, but Gracie was already fetching a bowl of water and some clean linen strips.

“Please don’t worry,” Kai said. “My brother here is both very curious and very accident prone. It’s a dangerous combination. He couldn’t resist a closer look at the tumbledown cottage at the edge of the dwelling and came a cropper on the loose path.”

At his words Gracie gasped and clenched Eoin’s hand tightly in the water, squeezing his fingers until the bite of pain caused Eoin to call out. Full of apology she released his hand and resumed her attentions to the scrapes—the cheerful, genial look she usually wore though was replaced by pursed lips and a deep frown.

“Gracie,” Eoin asked, “what’s wrong?” She shook her head.

“Don’t mind her. Gracie love, it’s alright, he’s long gone.” Ralphie shifted on his chair. “Last person to live in that cottage was a magic man.” He spat the words out as if they were poison in his mouth. “He fooled a lot of people and hurt many more, we don’t hold with the likes of him round here anymore.”

Eoin’s blood turned cold in his veins, and it was all he could do to keep his expression neutral. Bats flapped in his stomach as he tried to remember if all his herbs were hidden and if he’d said anything at dinner to give away his abilities.

“We don’t trust magic practices either.” Kai’s words cut into the room, the sincerity in his voice striking Eoin right in the heart. Reminding him sharply of

the world of difference between the Eoin and Kai of today, and the Eoin and Kai of yesteryear. The dismissal at fifteen of Eoin from Kai's life. The easy manipulations of Kai's father, so sure that the son of a miner was not a suitable friend for a soon-to-be guardian.

Eoin schooled his features before Gracie looked at him, hiding the dismay that had struck at Kai's words. The thought he would never be good enough for Kai, trusted by Kai, ached worse than any physical pain.

"Don't worry, Eoin, we'll let no harm come to you and your brother while you are here. We'll make sure you're ready to set off and see your pa at first light tomorrow." Gracie dried off his fingers and checked the bandage was secure before bustling over to the kettle and pouring some steaming water into two mugs. Sipping his drink, Eoin faked a yawn every now and then, eager to get to the bedroom to work out with Kai where the next stone could be hidden. Being so close was agonising.

Eventually the yawning paid off and the two guests were sent across the hall to a small, warm room for the night. "Outhouse is down the garden a ways, there is a chamber pot under the bed but if you want privacy then best go now while the house is still alight. Walking down the garden for a bit of time alone with nowt but a candle for company is lonely and cold," Ralphie said as they bid their goodnights. Gracie was admonishing him and apologising at her husband's crassness, as Kai shut the bedroom door, turning the key in the lock and checking the handle. Eoin yawned again and stretched, eyeing the bed eagerly when suddenly the front of his shirt was grabbed by Kai, and he was pulled close.

"...then to the place where man is alone. *Quiet contemplation as nature demands attention. Daily? Nightly? Sometimes more.*" Kai whispered the words, and a shiver went down Eoin's back as soft breath brushed against his ear. "The outhouse, Eoin. That's where Jaeger hid the stone."

"The outhouse?" Eoin could feel a tremble in his voice at Kai's closeness and prayed the other man didn't pick up on it. "Why would he hide it in an outhouse? Who would go looking in there?"

"Exactly. Don't you see, it's perfect?" Kai's fingers gripped tighter into Eoin's shirt and Eoin was sure Kai must be able to feel Eoin's heart as it pounded in his chest. "Nobody would think of the outhouse. We didn't go outside the main house, but I can imagine it tumbledown and overgrown—a ruin. Who *would* go there? Not even someone looking for the stones unless they were clued in, I bet."

Eoin ran the lines through his head again, and a grin broke out on his face as he realised Kai was probably right. Kai grinned back, his face so close that even in the flickering candlelight Eoin could see the subtle green flecks in his eyes.

“Did you mean it?” Eoin asked. “What you said about magic and mages.”

Kai sighed, the air brushing gently across Eoin’s face. “I don’t know, Eoin. I don’t trust magic... but I do trust you.” He let go of Eoin’s shirt and moved away, leaving Eoin strangely bereft. He swallowed and told himself not to be so silly, after all Kai was only a few footsteps away, and they were about to share a bed again.

“Look at all the damage magic does, look at Jaeger and Betty...”

“It does help too though.” Eoin spoke quietly lest Gracie and Ralphie were listening. “It helped on the mountain, and the glamour helped in the town.”

Kai looked at him again, and Eoin could see the confliction etched in his friend’s face. A lifetime of being told magic is bad was a hard schooling to break.

“Maybe it depends on the mage and not the magic itself.”

“It’s everything to do with the mage,” Kai hesitated, “and I trust *you* with my life.” Kai turned away then and undid his boots. Eoin ducked his head and worked on his own laces. His face felt flushed, and he was glad of the dim lighting. Kai trusted him. He trusted him despite his feelings about magic. Tears stung the back of his eyes, but he swallowed hard. In all of this he only had Kai, yet he’d never known how much he had Kai. There had always been a lingering fear that one day he would wake alone, with no one by his side to help him finish the task. Something about Kai’s words, though, made him feel more secure, that they were both here to see this through.

“Thank you, Kai.” Eoin huffed the words out, barely a whisper, yet he wasn’t sure if it was the homeowners or Kai who he was afraid of hearing him. Something felt different. Kai’s words felt fragile between them, as if they were the precipice of... something. Eoin swallowed and waited. For what, he wasn’t sure. For Kai to say something further or for himself to start spilling the secret he was keeping nestled near his heart.

The moment passed though, and Kai climbed under the blanket, rolling onto the edge of the bed and leaving space for Eoin. Following his friend, Eoin lay with his back to Kai and they muttered quietly to each other, planning how to get the stone.

“We need to get out of the house without letting Gracie and Ralphie know—and be back before morning, so they suspect nothing.” Eoin stretched his leg and his foot brushed against Kai’s calf. His friend stilled before moving his legs nearer, entwining their limbs together. Neither of them said a word about it.

“If I stay awake now, I’ll listen and wake you when they’re in bed. I don’t know how heavily they sleep, if they’ll hear us leaving—it will only take a creaking floorboard, and we could be discovered.” Kai sighed, and Eoin fought the urge to turn over and hug him closer.

Muffling a yawn, Eoin said, “Could we not go tomorrow after we’ve left here?”

“And risk discovery? In the daylight we are much too exposed. We don’t know the pattern of people here, and now we know the place is feared by folk in the hamlet...” Kai trailed off.

“It’s too risky?” Eoin asked.

“It’s too risky. We need to have the stone, have breakfast and leave with the story we’ve already prepared. At least under the cover of night, we have some element of secrecy on our side. Now sleep, I’ll wake you when it’s time.”

It seemed mere minutes later that he was being shaken awake, a warm hand clamped firmly over his mouth to stop him from calling out. A loud noise vibrated through the farmhouse, confusing Eoin for a moment.

“Sssh, time to get up. I’ve not heard anything for a while—except loud snoring!” Snoring, of course. Eoin wondered briefly how Gracie put up with it before stretching and slipping out of bed. Kai was already pulling on his boots and had a small pack ready to take with them.

As he swiftly dressed, Eoin said, “I was thinking, I could attempt a muffler spell. Manipulate the air to muffle sounds. It’s just, I’ve never done one before, I’m sure it’s not too hard though.”

“No need,” said Kai. “I propose we leave by the window. We’re closer to the front of the house then. Our bedroom will still be locked, so Gracie and Ralphie won’t know we’re gone, and we have to go nowhere near their bedroom.”

It only took Eoin a second to realise the genius of this plan. Opening the shutters was easy, and they were out, lowering themselves gently to the ground

in a heartbeat. Many houses in this part of the world only had glass panes in the kitchen. Glass was expensive and hard to come by, shutters sufficed for the other rooms. Of course it was dark through the winter months when it was too cold to open them for long, but it worked perfectly in Eoin and Kai's favour. Eoin sent a brief prayer of thanks up to the deities as they stepped out onto the road.

Though the smell of wood smoke lingered in the air, not one house was lit up any longer and only thin trails of smoke wisped out of some chimneys. The hamlet slept. They moved quickly to the tumbledown house. As they neared, the feeling of gloom started to blanket them. "Just remember it's not real," Eoin whispered, and even as he said the words, the feeling settled into the background. There but not obvious, waiting for him to forget it was magic, a cat ready to pounce. But now Eoin knew, he couldn't unknow.

Kai seemed to be remembering that it was an illusion too, and he made his way up the front path and round the side of the house quickly. The backyard was as overgrown as the front, but there, to one side of it, stood a small brick building surprisingly untouched by the passage of time.

"We're really going to dig in the outhouse, huh?" Eoin said, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

Kai rolled his eyes, the whites flashing in the moonlight just enough for Eoin to catch him. "It's been thirty years, Eoin. Nothing is going to be there apart from well-nurtured soil." Eoin had dug rotted horse manure into the ground plenty of times for his herbs to grow, but there was something about digging around in a human privy that was making him feel queasy. He wasn't going to lose face in front of Kai though.

Pulling a thick red candle from his pack, he lit it and held it in the opening of the small building. The doorway wasn't wide, and he and Kai rubbed shoulders, but Eoin only found it reassuring. Shadows flickered over the tiny room as the breeze blew the flame. Cobwebs hung from every corner, making a thick dusty curtain down the far wall. This was all real, not an illusion in sight, and Eoin shivered.

Lowering the candle, he scanned the floor. Nothing but tightly compacted dirt. To one side was a smooth wooden plank with a hole in the centre that Eoin knew was raised above a deep hole in the ground. "Please say we don't have to go down there!" He gagged a little as he thought about it.

Kai shrugged. “Maybe. Probably. Give me that candle first though.” Eoin passed the guttering flame over, and Kai held it high, methodically moving the glowing light across the walls. Eoin had no idea what he was looking for, unless he’d suddenly become fascinated with spiders, so he kept his head down and girded his stomach to the thought of digging under the privy.

“There!” Kai’s voice broke through the silence. “I know where he hid it.” He moved into the room, swiped away a huge sway of web and shone the candle at the brickwork. “See, this brick here, it has no sand-mix packing it in, it’s just lying on top of the brick below. I bet if I pull it there will be a hollow space behind it.” As he spoke, he reached out his fingers and did just that. A fat spider scuttled out of the space but Kai didn’t flinch, just put his hand in the hole he’d made and, grinning, pulled out a leather covered package. Eoin grinned. With relief, or happiness or just sheer thankfulness he didn’t know, but he felt the weight he was carrying drop a little.

Chapter 14

Twenty-nine years before...

The young mage hurried away from the capital as fast as the horse he had hired would take him. It was done. The stone of power was in its new resting place for now. Time and patience was that which was required of him for the next few decades. But what were decades when the stone of youth was yours? Not the gift of everlasting youth, but of life eternal. He would age in ways, be the person people expected to see. Youth or kindly old man. It was one and the same to him now. He had long known that illusion was one of the most powerful magics available. Not as powerful as the gift of forever, but while the stone would help his body go on, it couldn't actually stop it aging. He relied on his own gifts for that.

As the horse thundered on, powerful, magnificent, he smiled to himself. Power added to power.

The road was dusty, more so due to the large amount of horses travelling into the city. Carriages and carts. Merchants and travellers and filthy faced miners. The rich and the poor, mages and healers, families and troops of the kings guard. They all made their way into the city. Smiles and flags and friendly greetings were bantered around. The joy in the air was palpable.

“Have you heard?” They would ask each other as they waited for horses to be freshened or reshod. “Have you heard there is a new prince? The queen has born a boy.”

When the mage was asked, he nodded his head, smiled with the rest of them and affirmed that yes, he had heard the wonderful news. Unfortunately his wife was in poor health and though it ailed him not to be there at the presentation of the new royal, he had to tend to his wife's needs. Then he bid his farewell and hurried on his way.

The pass into the mountains was nearly impossible in winter any other way than by foot. In these warmer summer climes though, it was possible to ride the back of a sure-footed mountain pony. The hamlet that nestled among fields of sheep and cattle was as small and as full of friendly folk as it had been when he and Edward had first found it.

Sure enough, the door to his friend's house was open before he'd even dismounted his ride. “Jaeger, my friend.” Grief was written across the other

man's face, and Jaeger took the time to comfort him. Inside, his own young wife was waiting, and he swept Betty into his arms. The joy at seeing her husband was written in the smile that fell across her pretty face. *She hid her hurt well*, Jaeger thought. He knew she wanted to ask him if he had them, but she also knew they had to care for Edward first. The man had lost much in the past days.

"Come now, friend, I can't pretend to understand, but you know the decision was for the best."

Edward just nodded and forcibly made himself cheer up.

"So, did it go to plan? Do you have the stones?"

"That I do, my friend." He dug into his bag and pulled the two stones, one as green as the spring grass, the other as scarlet as blood.

Both Betty and Edward looked at the stones, delight erasing the sadness momentarily, greed shining through in all its glory.

"What about the third stone?" His wife looked at him, trusting and sweet, and he let his own face fall into a semblance of grief.

"The royals insisted I leave it when I left the baby." His voice cracked on the word. "They would offer no protection if I did not."

For the baby. He could see his wife and friend translating the unsaid words. Understanding showed in their faces, a touch of grief, of loss... of guilt? Jaeger smiled softly. "It is for the best, we all agreed."

Their stay in Edward's mountain home was short. They had their own journey to go on, their own lives to forge while they waited for the time to be right. The goodbyes were sad, tears fell and promises were made, and then they departed, off to the village where Jaeger had been promised work as a healer. A place to wait for the passage of time.

Chapter 15

Now...

The flickering flame of the candle caught the edges of the blood-red stone, sending shimmering red light throughout the outhouse.

“We’ve found it.” Kai’s voice trembled as if he didn’t quite believe it to be true.

“We did!” Holding the candle to the side, Eoin reached for the stone of riches. Red and translucent, it was more beautiful than the finest jewels worn by the ruling classes. It hadn’t been shaped into a charm, as the first Trivirium stone had, but Eoin thought its natural beauty far outshone anything man could craft or shape. Smooth in places and chipped angular in others. Nature was a much better creator than man would ever be.

“One more to go, Eoin, and we can save the village.” Kai reached forward and pulled Eoin closer. Long, strong arms stretching for an embrace. Kai’s chin, rough with stubble, brushed against Eoin’s cheek and Eoin’s heart leapt inside his chest. It took all the willpower Eoin owned to keep his breath steady as he carefully folded his candle free arm around Kai. They’d lain tangled at night, when dreams and sleep overtook consciousness, but this was the first time Kai had willingly touched Eoin beyond the casual touches unavoidable on a journey such as this.

Kai loosened his hold, let out his arms a little, eyes glinting in the wavering candlelight. “We can get your parents, make sure your family is safe.” His hands clasped Eoin’s face. “One more to find and then to return them. We can do it, Eoin, I promise.” He reached forward and wiped Eoin’s cheek.

It was only then that Eoin realised tears were rolling down his face, silently dripping onto his woollen cloak. All these weeks they’d been gone and slowly the what of what they were doing had overtaken the why. Thinking about his family was too hard, he couldn’t let himself linger on them trapped, or hurt. So he focussed on what needed doing. How they were going to do it. The planning and walking, hunting and surviving. The why was too painful, but now they had two stones in their possession and the realisation that what they were doing was possibly going to work, the why had crept once more into his consciousness.

Kai’s hands were still clasped round Eoin’s face, thumbs gently caressing his temples. Eoin’s breath hitched as green eyes sought his. Eyes full of the

unspoken; feelings, promises, doubts, regret. The ache in his heart swelled some more as Eoin understood what Kai truly meant to him. There, in the cold dankness of a disused outhouse, Eoin realised that he was in love. That he'd probably always been in love.

And there, in that same dank, crumbling space he realised that it didn't matter because even as he watched Kai, he saw his friend carefully close off any feelings that had been showing and pack them behind the mask he'd been wearing for years. Eoin shivered. Cold to the bone. Elation and revelation overwhelming and dying within him.

"Let's go back to the farmhouse. Salvage what we can of the night's sleep. We still have a long way to go." And with a leaden heart and leaden feet Eoin turned and led the way out of the tumbledown outhouse. He blew out the candle and tucked the stone up in the small bag he carried. They walked silently down the street to Gracie's house and climbed in through the window. Wordlessly they kicked off their shoes and let heavy woollen cloaks fall to the floor before climbing into the bed. Even with the ache in his heart, Eoin was soon being taken under by the tide of sleep. The dreams lapped at the edge of his awareness, pulling him into their world. *I love you, Eoin*, he heard Kai whisper, and that was where he wanted to be, in the dreams where Kai could love him back. Where Kai *would* love him back.

"Well I never. There's more strangers trekking down this side of the mountain, Gracie my love. The deities are blessing you with hungry stomachs to feed." Ralphie turned from the window and pressed a kiss to his wife's reddening cheek. "Here lads, do you want to have a look? These here looking glasses are a miracle, how a bit of glass in a tube can make those that are a mountainside away appear close I don't know. If I hadn't been assured there was no magic involved I'd have bet my best sheep there was." Gracie frowned at the word magic, and Eoin reached for the spyglass.

He trained it out the window, locating the movement on the mountain. Even with the spyglass it was difficult to see them properly, but his stomach clenched. He knew, just knew it was those who were after the stone. Ralphie was chatting away about the marvels of the spyglass, and Eoin agreed without really paying attention. They didn't let on they had their own, the less Gracie and Ralphie knew about them the better for all concerned.

Turning he handed the glass to Kai and hoped he conveyed in his look what he couldn't in words. "We need to be on the way, Kai," Eoin said. "We need to

try and reach Father as soon as possible.” Their bags were already packed, the stone carefully wrapped and nestled in the bottom of Eoin’s. The Virium charm was hanging in its usual place around his neck, it was a comfort in a strange way. A reminder of what he was doing.

“We should be going,” Kai agreed, returning the glass to Ralphie. “We can’t thank you enough for your hospitality, I will thank the deities daily for your kindness.” Gracie grabbed Kai into a hug and then Eoin. Goodbyes were not as fast as Eoin wanted them to be, but before long they were on the way once more, sandwiches, pastries and fruit bundled into all available spaces in their bags by Gracie.

“It’s them, isn’t it?” Eoin asked as soon as they were out of earshot.

Kai shivered. “There’s no way to tell for sure, but I think so. There can’t be many people walking around the mountain at this time of year that Ralphie wouldn’t know.” As if the deities were listening, a light snow began to fall. Blowing in the soft wind, it soon blanketed everything with a thin layer of white.

Jaeger’s old cottage, when they passed it, seemed nothing more than a ruined building today. Nothing scary, sinister, or vile about it. It could have been the snow that softened it, but Eoin was pretty sure it was because, not only had they seen through the magic, they’d taken that which the magic was shielding. He wondered briefly if everyone would see it this way now, if it might be restored into a habitable building. There was something beautiful about this quiet hamlet in the middle of a mountain pass that Eoin found ideal.

As they left the buildings behind, Eoin stopped still. “Gracie! Gracie and Ralphie, Kai. We can’t just leave them.”

“It’s exactly what we have to do if we’re to keep them safe. If we were there, Edward would have some leverage over us until we gave him what he wanted, and then he’d probably kill all of us anyway.”

“But...” Eoin stopped. He took a breath. “How can we just not try?”

“Because it’s the safest thing for the hamlet. I promise you, Eoin.” Kai reached forward and gripped Eoin’s hands. “I’m so sorry, this was not a fight we asked to be in, and we’re doing our best to stop it, but staying here would only be foolish. I’m sorry, Eoin, but it would be.”

Eoin knew his friend was right, but the pain inside at the thought of the kindly couple getting hurt because of them didn't diminish. "Well if you say they'll be alright then I guess I'll just bow to your superior knowledge, oh great guardian. After all I'm just a lowly herb gatherer." He picked up his pace and strode from the hamlet as fast as he could in the snow. He lifted his hand and used the back of it to wipe the dampness from his cheeks. They weren't tears sliding down his face, it was just wet where the snow was falling against him.

The way down the mountain was easier in many ways than the way up. Several small hamlets, like the one they'd just left, existed in these passes, and they obviously traded with each other given the well-worn tracks. Rope handrails helped during steeper passes and as they got further down the snow petered out, making the trails easier to follow.

Yet, in countless ways, it was harder. Barely a word had passed between Eoin and Kai since they'd left the hamlet. Kai was full of purpose. He had his spyglass in his hand and turned every now and then to see if they were still being followed. He shook his head to Eoin each time he looked, but it didn't really tell Eoin much.

Eoin couldn't speak. His gut was full of worry for Gracie and Ralphie. His heart was heavy with need—the need to do something other than just run away. The need to speak to Kai, but he didn't know what words to use. The need to finish the task, to undo what Jaeger had done, conflicting with the need to abandon the task and go back to the hamlet. Even if they died there, it felt like it was the right thing to do. He'd already left his own village, his own family.

He wanted to scream at Jaeger. To scream at Kai because he was close, then in less than a heartbeat, he mourned for the loss of his mentor and was filled with yearning to pull Kai close and kiss him. To tell him he loved him. To not be afraid of his feelings. To take action before he lost Kai too. Then, buh-boom, another heartbeat and he knew if he *did* do that he would chase Kai away faster than if he'd turned on him with a weapon.

He walked without thinking about where they were going. His head was filled, too busy with thoughts of where they'd been, what they'd done, what they still needed to do. Instead he just followed Kai, trusted the guardian and trudged onwards in the cold northern air. They didn't stop for food and pulled sips of drink from their flasks as they trekked along. They passed over large rocks, grassy pastures, through mud. Scatterings of trees came and went. The snow stayed away, but cold rain fell at times and the wind blew its icy chill all around them.

It took Eoin quite a while to realise they weren't headed for any of the other hamlets that littered the mountainside. He looked longingly towards the wisps of smoke he saw here and there, remembering the warmth of the farmhouse, but he didn't question Kai's direction. His friend knew what he was doing, that was one thing of which Eoin was sure. Soon the ground levelled out, and the intermittent pine trees they'd passed became thicker. The odd tree here and there became a copse, which soon became a wood. Not as large as the forest they'd been in during the weeks prior, but plenty big enough to set up camp and try to lose a trail.

"We'll stop here." Kai's words filled the air, sounding loud and unnatural after a day of silence. Eoin didn't know what to say. He was exhausted, and he could see the same fatigue written all over Kai's face. It was etched into the bloodshot eyes and cracked lips, worry and tension and just plain old tiredness.

"I'll take first watch," Eoin said as he started to collect wood for a small fire. Smoke rising above the tree line might give them away, but frankly he was too cold to care. Kai looked at the gathered twigs, started to say something, but Eoin interrupted him. "It could be anyone, Kai. We can't live on 'ifs'. *If* they are the hunters. *If* they have followed us. *If* they do spot the smoke. If, if, if..." He sighed. "We've checked the whole of the way, and there has been no sign of them. They would be a good day behind us if it is them. We need to be warm, we need to eat and we need to rest." Kai shrugged wordlessly and dug in his bag for the flint before effortlessly lighting the fire. It might not be outright agreement, but it worked for Eoin.

Good. It was good. Kai was listening to him. Rummaging through their bags, Eoin pulled out the bits and pieces Gracie had packed. They ate more than normal, as no food had passed their lips since breakfast and the day had been long; Eoin knew they needed it. The darkness of night had fallen by the time they'd both eaten their fill, and Eoin tidied away, laying out blankets for Kai to wrap himself in. He knew Kai was tired when he didn't argue about Eoin taking first watch. He'd not had much sleep the night before, Eoin remembered, just the little they got once they'd returned from finding the stone.

Kai fell asleep quickly, the weariness leaving his face as he succumbed to slumber. Eoin found it hard to drag his eyes away from his friend and instead gazed at the face that had once been so familiar to him. Lit red in the embers of the fire, Kai's normally blond locks were matted and dirty. So was his face. Though they'd washed in a bowl of warm water at the farmhouse, they'd not been properly clean since the bath at the inn. With the creases of worry and

burden erased by sleep, Kai looked younger again. Not quite the boy that Eoin had known, but certainly that boy was evident in the man he was staring at.

How life changes. It was overwhelming. Ask Eoin ten years ago and he would have said that Kai and Eoin would have been friends forever. Ask him five years ago and he would have said that they would have no place in each other's lives again. Ask him now... ask him now and he would not know how to answer. He wanted Kai to always be in his life, but dreams like that were for the young and the foolish. Sighing, he pushed all thoughts of Kai out of his head and instead searched the forest for any signs of unwanted company. Other than the sounds of the night, there was nothing.

The moon was barely visible through the treetops, but it showed just enough that Eoin knew when the night was half passed, and he leaned forward to gently wake Kai. Then he let himself slide into sleep.

Chapter 16

The forest dwindled out, mountains were no more than a day's journey east, south and west, but the road they had found their way to was taking them north. North towards the capital. Once they were out of the forest, away from the villages at the foothills of the mountains, the road became busier. Merchants travelled with their wares, carriages with curtained windows took the wealthy and upper classes into the capital. A troop of soldiers cantered past on horseback, as did several groups of guardians, dressed in the official red and black garb of those in an assigned position.

Eoin and Kai were just two more merchants travelling to the capital for the chance to sell their wares; they didn't really earn more than a second glance from any of the passing travellers. Everyone was caught up in their own journeys, and Eoin was happy to keep as out of the way as possible. In all the weeks that had passed, Eoin realised they had never discussed exactly how they were going to get the third Virium stone.

Maybe they'd never really believed they'd stood a chance to get the second one, maybe they didn't want to risk the mischief deities. Or maybe it was because Eoin had yet to tell Kai the exact details about the third stone. Where it was. The significance of it being in the grounds of the palace. About Prince Pretiosus.

"There's got to be a better way to do this," sighed Kai, as another horse and carriage passed them. They'd been walking for weeks, and their feet were toughened, but the idea of a horse doing the hard work was bliss for both of them. "If only I had my guardian's uniform, we could hire a horse and pretend I was your guardian."

Eoin laughed and threw the core of the apple he was munching on at his friend. "And I remember the days when you were longing to be a merchant and not a guardian."

Kai smiled at him. "Me too, my friend. Me too." They ambled along together, passing the odd comment but generally happy in their silence. A comfortable silence. It was nice, Eoin thought briefly before his brain resumed its planning. When Kai had spoken of being his guardian it had sent cogs whirring inside his brain and a half formed idea was starting to take root. The city was visible in the distance, spires and walls and the first glimpse of the

palace, but they still had at least a day and half's travel yet. Time for a plan to form, they often did better if left alone instead of forced, Eoin found.

The night air was chill, a fact for which Eoin was glad when he felt Kai roll closer under the blanket they shared. They were only trying to catch a little sleep to ward off the worst of the exhaustion and then make a determined effort to reach the capital the next day.

When Kai woke him, ready to shut his own eyes for a nap, he made Eoin promise to wake him before the sun started its journey back into the sky. As Kai drifted off, Eoin snuggled closer, awake and alert to any intruders but enjoying the warmth of his bedmate. By the time he decided to stir Kai, his inkling of an idea had fully formed in the dark hours.

He passed Kai an apple and some cheese and said, "If we entered the city as a guardian and his employer we would pass much more easily into the places we need to get." He took a bite of his own fruit, enjoying the sweet sharpness of it on his tongue.

"It is a grand idea, Eoin, but pray tell where would we get a guardians outfit and horses?" Eoin finished his food and stood, rolling up the blanket they had used and putting it away.

"I thought about that. The horses we could do without if we carry on into the city as merchants. When we are there though we can buy a guardian's outfit from a back street seller."

Kai laughed. "Backstreet sellers don't have guardian's outfits. It's too risky, besides guardians keep their uniforms until they are beyond repair, and then they are sent to cloth merchants."

"Maybe we could buy one from a cloth merchant?" Eoin was frustrated, this had seemed so doable in the middle of the night.

"A cloth merchant wouldn't sell us one. The ones who have been chosen to deal with guardians uniforms are prideful. They can charge much for using the bits of cloth elsewhere. Guardian garb can be quite sought after." Stretching Kai swung the pack over his back, and Eoin used this as his cue to chuck away the apple core and rise, ready for the journey.

"What about a wash house. We could appropriate one. We can leave kreslings in its place."

“I don’t know what to say Eoin, I never figured you to be one to suggest appropriating something.” There was a trace of laughter in Kai’s tone.

“Yes, well, I remember all too well how good you are at it. Jonathon Baker knew well enough to do an extra roll each summer’s day because light fingers were often around.”

At that, Kai did break out laughing. “The things you remember, Eoin. And you, too scared to try in case you got caught.” His expression sobered a little. “I suppose I’ll be the one in charge of the appropriating then?”

“Well it would hardly do for a member of the nobility to be caught with light fingers now, would it?” His toes scuffed along the hard dirt road and his heart was happy. As he bantered back and forth with Kai, the enormity of what they were meant to be doing faded from his mind. For a while, they were just two old friends enjoying each other’s company.

Of course the deities can be relied upon to upset the best of days.

The gates to the city were open, despite the slowly darkening sky, as Eoin and Kai made their way to them. The line of people seeking entry was not many at this time of the evening, for which they were thankful. Kai, who had before visited the capital, said the gates were closed at sunset, no matter how long the line may be. Anyone left outside would have to wait until sunrise the next day. It made good business for the several tent hirers who had set up camps at the city’s walls.

Eoin himself had never been to a city before, and he didn’t know where to look first. Food stalls, whose tempting aromas assaulted his nose, lined the road to the gate.

“Fish, freshly caught lake fish, cooked ’til it flakes...” called one stall owner.

“Mutton stew. Warm, tasty and filling. Cheap at just a kresling a bowl.”

“Warm bread, freshly baked this morning...”

Eoin turned to Kai. “If it was freshly baked this morning, how can it still be warm?”

Kai laughed. “You catch on quick my friend. The bread is not warm, you’d be lucky if it wasn’t stale, the fish are not freshly caught, and it wouldn’t surprise me if the mutton stew was actually squirrel or rat.”

Eoin wrinkled his nose up. “How do they get away with it?”

“They’re outside the city gates, so of less concern to the officials. Also, the people who purchase food from these stalls are usually tired after a long journey and hungry as a horse. They probably don’t care. Though being stuck in camp with gut rot is not at all pleasant.” He grimaced, his face speaking of experience. Eoin decided that it was one thing about Kai he wouldn’t ask him to elaborate on.

As they shuffled along, waiting for their turn with the gates’ guards, Eoin took in the busyness around him. The cacophony of voices, sellers, buyers, friends and guards. The hum of conversation was like nothing he had heard before. Even in Legracioa on market day, there was never this much to see or hear. His senses were being attacked, a rich smorgasbord of life that he had never before encountered.

Kai bumped his shoulder and laughed. “Mouth shut, Eoin, you’ll only catch flies like that.”

Soon it was their turn at the gates guard. “Business?” he asked in a bored tone, barely stifling a yawn. Eoin let Kai answer. He had, after all, been here before. He knew the routine. They’d washed in a stream late that afternoon, so there was no need for Eoin to even glamour them as he had in the mountain foot town those weeks before.

“Merchants. We’ve rabbit skins to sell,” said Kai holding open his bag to show the guard, before answering the list of questions the guard needed answering before he would allow them in.

Wanting to appear bored by the proceedings, as if he’d done it a million times before, Eoin turned and surreptitiously surveyed the last of the travellers coming up the road, lining up behind them for entry to the city. Amusing himself by guessing at the possible business his fellow travellers might have in the city.

It was pretty boring as games went, he decided quickly, it was obvious these were mostly merchants. There had been an inn a short way back down the road, and Kai had already told him those of consequence would wait there until the gate opened again on the morrow, rather than face the possibility of being turned away. It was considered vulgar apparently to be found wanting entry after the gates shut.

There really were not many people at all still trying to seek entry, but those that were seemed as tired and hungry as Eoin himself felt, and many appeared a

great deal more bedraggled. Just as he was about to turn back to Kai, the sound of horses' hooves rose above the babble of voices and caught his ear. His heart stopped. Though too different to see clearly, the long black cloaks reminded him of the shadowy figures he'd seen through the spyglass in Gracie's kitchen.

He turned to Kai, shuffled closer to the gate, trying to make himself as invisible as possible.

Invisible.

The art of being invisible in plain sight. It was one he'd read about, but he didn't know if he could do. Would it be risky to try with so many other people around? Suddenly appearing different... or would the magic just make them appear not worth noting? Should he risk it?

He risked a peek back, trying to determine how to let Kai know without catching the attention of the guard. His heart thudded as ideas raced through his head. Sickness threatened his stomach, all the geniality of the day vanished in a flash, he schooled his face as best he could pulling at Kai's cloak.

"Fine. Let 'em in," the guard called, just as Kai started to pay attention to the incessant tugging. "And shut the gate. No more entry until the morning."

As the noise of discontentment rose from those still queuing, relief shuddered through Eoin so quickly that he forced them both through the gate before turning and dry-heaving beside the inner wall.

Hands rubbed circles on his back, and Kai asked, "What is it, Eoin, what's wrong?"

"Edward." He managed to spit out. "I'm sure Edward and his men have just made it to the gate." His stomach churned once more, and he heaved again, thankful he had not been tempted by any of the wares near the gate. Kai was silent as he processed the information, all the while his hand rubbing comforting circles on Eoin's back.

Once he was sure his stomach was settled, Eoin stood up. He couldn't quite bring himself to move away from the comforting contact though. Instead he leaned ever so lightly into Kai's touch, and he could have wept as Kai stilled his hand and pulled him forward into a loose embrace.

"What do we do?"

"We find somewhere to stay, and we plan." Kai spoke resolutely, his tone firm and without fear. "We have at least until the morn before Edward can

follow us into this city, we have the advantage of the entire capital to lose ourselves in.”

Letting Kai’s words work their way inside his head, Eoin took deep breaths drawing comfort from the hand still pressed tightly to his back. “Okay Kai. Let us do this.”

Together they made their way through the main thoroughway of the capital. The road was wide and paved, edged with inns and alehouses. Places to eat and drink and rest. The sky was now dark overhead, but tall lamps lit the way with their fiery orange glow. “Gaslights,” Kai muttered when he saw Eoin looking wide-eyed at them. Small towns and villages did not have the like, night time was lit by hand held torches and candles.

It was so different to what he was used to. The sulphur smell of the lights mingled with the horseshit on the road and the aroma of cooking. Each inn was a temptation. Lit up windows revealed customers dining, drinking and making merry. Even the weariest of travellers seemed to find a bellyful of laughter when their belly was also full of food, Eoin noted. Each tableaux was homely, warming, a temptation to the soul.

“Are we to book a room here?” Eoin asked, part of him longing to be in the warmth of an inn, hidden away, feeling safe.

“No.” Kai did not expand on his answer, and something about it made Eoin ask no further questions. He followed Kai, trying not gape at the magnificent architecture and the multitude of people.

Soon the people moving here and there thinned. Kai turned off the main road—the road that led to the palace, so he’d said—and entered a maze of twisting turning back roads. Here the brightness of the main thoroughfare was missing. Houses and businesses sat side by side, bricks dingy with age, it held none of the colour and light and gaiety of the city’s entrance—yet, for all its dinginess, Eoin felt safer here somehow.

He instinctively kept quiet as he followed Kai. Their footfall made barely any noise at all now they were off the stone road and back on those of packed earth. The roads were quiet. Some houses showed a dimly lit room—none of the plethora of candles that lit the inns here, instead just one or two, Eoin imagined they were mounted on wall sconces and would be all the light the families of each home required. Occasionally they passed another citizen, exchanged nods and carried on their way.

Just as Eoin was preparing to ask Kai where they were actually going the other man grabbed his hand and pulled him into a narrow side alley. “Stay here and keep watch,” he hissed. “Whistle if anyone comes down here.”

Before Eoin could respond Kai had darted off, further into the alleyway before turning off again. It took all of Eoin’s strength to stay still and not run after his friend. Distracting himself from his loneliness, Eoin studied the buildings that lined the alleyway. Several were houses, much the same as the ones they’d been passing, though seemingly less occupied. Some, he realised were businesses, shut already for the night.

A sign above the wooden doorway into which he’d wedged himself declared, “Green’s Candle Makers” and the building beside it had a painted facade, faded and dim in the night light, that gave the prices for a hair treatment and shave.

Ears pricked open, Eoin glanced nervously up and down the street checking for footsteps. One woman hurried by the end of the alley with a screaming child in tow, but she spared not a glance in to Eoin’s hidden alleyway. A muted muttering was heard at one point, followed by the slamming of a door. Then there was silence, no footsteps or voices to be heard until suddenly Kai was there behind him making Eoin jump clean out of his skin.

“Any sign of anyone?” he asked breathlessly as he pressed a bundle into Eoin’s hand. “Here, hold this while I change.” It took Eoin just seconds to realise Kai was stripping off right there in the street. He wasn’t sure what was more shocking, the sight of all that beautiful flesh again or the red and black uniform he was attiring himself with.

“Kai...?”

“Your idea wasn’t at all bad, Eoin,” Kai said, as he slipped ebony buttons through holes and attached his own dark cloak—the cloak that was part of Kai’s own uniform Eoin belatedly realised—around his shoulders. “I knew there was a washerwoman’s down here. I knew she was always full to capacity of guardian garb, she charges less than most and does a good job, despite the location. It wasn’t hard to sneak in and take one.”

Eoin opened and closed his mouth like one of the trout they used to fish back home, before he could form words though, Kai was speaking again.

“I need you to do that illusion thing you did when we were in the town. Just for yourself this time. I need others to see you as one of the upper class, nobody

too high up that they'd have heard of but enough that you would have a guardian. Can you do that?"

Eoin nodded and rummaged through his bag for the bitter herbs required to help him maintain the illusion. When he'd chewed them and meditated himself into the image of respectability, he once again followed Kai. They wound through the back alleys and byways until they came out on another, wider road. Though far smaller and less busy than the main road, it was much more similar in nature to that thoroughfare than the winding alleys they'd just inhabited.

Lack of food and the dry heaving he'd suffered earlier meant that the magic was pulling heavily on his reserves of energy, so it was easy to stand there looking haughty as Kai arranged them a room. Bigger than the room they'd shared at either Gracie's or the previous inn, Eoin was disappointed to realise that the wide bed in the centre of the room was meant only for him as he noticed the small cot beside the door intended for the guardian to use.

Once the door shut behind them, Eoin let the illusion drop and made himself drink the tankard of ale Kai pressed into his hand. He'd ordered that and some cheese sandwiches when he'd booked the room and insisted on carrying them up himself. The inn keep's face had been quite the picture.

The cheese was rich, salty and tangy and the bread pillowy soft. Eoin didn't realise quite how hungry he was until he started eating, then he made short work of what was on his plate. He yawned loudly and rubbed his eyes. Despite his full stomach, a knot had settled in his gut. He hadn't given much thought to this 'til now, but he knew he had to explain the rest of the quest to Kai.

Chapter 17

Twenty-nine years before...

The best plans were those that unfolded over time. The best co-conspirators, those that knew only what you wanted them to know. Of course, knowing everything oneself was vitally important, especially if your companions thought they had their own secrets. It gave you the upper hand, and the upper hand was vital.

The ultimate goal was power, and the mage knew patience would be required. Some things could not, *should not*, be rushed. The pieces were in place, the plan already rolling out. He waited at the palace gate, a look of fear and contrition on his face. He knew his mask well, and when the guards came through and told him the queen had granted him her ear, he made sure it was firmly in place.

The pain of offering up his firstborn child for protection was not as hard to fake as he feared. He felt no loss for the babe, so young and fragile; after all, it was not his flesh and blood, no matter what his wife told him. The pain he felt was at the deception his wife and friend thought they could cast over him. It was a good pain though, a reminder that a man who trusted was as foolish as a man in love.

He let tears form in his eyes, told the queen of his misguided quest for the Virium stones. How the demon now knew his scent, how he had sworn to take revenge on his child when it was born. The lies tumbled easily from his tongue, but the mage considered himself a good actor and gave it his all. He begged the queen to take them in, to protect himself, the bairn and his wife.

Of course, he subtly emphasised how important the protection of the bairn was. Used his skills of manipulation to let the queen think the idea of taking the bairn only was her idea. *Poor foolish barren woman*. By the time his audience with her was over, the new prince was as good as born, the mage and his wife left to whatever punishment the demons inflicted, and the second part of his plan set in motion. He let the guards march him from the building, his face the perfect mix of anger, fear and relief.

Back in the place they temporarily called home, the mage schooled his features once again—this time into a look of distress. Fear, upset, determination. He shared the details of the meeting, emphasised how the queen

demanded the babe be taken there on the morrow if he was to receive any protection. He suggested that they just run, take the bairn and hide... but he made sure there was just enough fear in voice, enough suggestion of worry about the babe's safety that his wife instantly shut him down. The child's safety was most important, she said through her tears. They'd been beyond foolish, but if his safety was the price to pay then pay it they would.

Jaeger couldn't understand Betty's betrayal. Edward could promise her all the roses in the world, but what were roses compared to diamonds? And that was what the mage had to offer, diamonds. At least it had been, now all he had to offer was regret.

So they both wore their masks and played their parts, and when the morning came, the wife said her goodbyes and kissed the bairn on the head and left. Tears rolled down her face as she cried for a wisp of a dream in the night. Everyone needed dreams, but only a few had the tenacity to make those dreams come true. He was one of the few.

This time at the gate, he was granted access immediately. The queen saw the babe, the king too. A court healer looked over the child to make sure he was fit and healthy. The court mage too, checked for signs of magic—of course, there was no trace to be found. The queen didn't pick up the child, but it was easy to see in her face her longing for him. Letting a tear roll down his face, he began the next part of his deception. The real reason he was here.

"May I have one last stroll with him, a walk around the gardens?" he pleaded, his face and actions showing how unworthy he knew himself to be, how much this would be a favour granted if the queen would allow it.

"Of course, I do not expect to be allowed unaccompanied."

It was this humbleness that swung it, he knew. And so it was, he strolled round the palace gardens cradling a babe he cared nothing for, looking for the perfect spot to hide the stone. He found it near a willow tree by a small lake. The kind whose long branches bow in the wind, fronds of pale green, swaying in the lightest breeze. It was an old tree. Older than the palace he thought, the kind that kept many a secret through the passage of time. His would be just one more secret, one more for it to guard in all its majesty.

He dug the stone of power out of his pocket, let the beautiful blue of it dazzle him for just a mere second before turning to the guard who was closest and asking, "May I plant this here as a reminder of my everlasting love for the boy?" The stone the guard saw though was not the sparkling blue stone he had

lifted from the cave, but a simple grey stone, not at all spectacular other than it was shaped in the rough likeness of a heart. Such a simple sleight of hand for a mage.

The guard was a father himself, the mage had read the looks he had been giving him and the baby. The looks that were subtle but changed between disgust at a man so willing to give up his son, regret for the things he had not done with his own son yet with this reminder that sons could be taken away, and compassion for the man giving away the very thing that should be what he lived for.

The guard took the heart, rolled it over in his hand, felt the cool roughness of it and, with a pitying look that this was all the mage had to offer his child, nodded his agreement. Once more, he used sleight of hand and wrapped both stones in a cloth. He laid the babe down on the soft lawn under the guard's watchful eye and loosed the earth at the base of the tree with a small shell he had carried for this very purpose. Giving the stone one last squeeze, he buried it in its shallow hiding place and covered the earth back over it. Time would pass until he saw it again—how much he wasn't sure—but he knew it would be found easily when it was needed.

And then, it was simply a case of playing the painfully grieving father, kissing the boy dotingly, and walking away. It was amazing how simple a complex plan could be.

Chapter 18

Now...

“In the palace?” Disbelief oozed from Kai’s words. Eoin hadn’t even mentioned the whole “Prince Pretiosus is Jaeger’s son” thing yet. As if that was one secret just too big to contemplate at that moment in time.

“In the palace *grounds*.” Eoin wiped his hand over his face, suddenly feeling older than his years and more tired than he’d ever believed possible. “*Where there is majesty and splendour, at the roots of nature’s Queen.*”

“Why all the riddles,” Kai muttered, pacing around the room. “Couldn’t he just tell us where the bloody thing is so we can get it and return it to the demon?”

“It’s just how Jaeger is... *was*,” he corrected himself, gasping anew at the pain of his mentor’s death. He was bone tired, drained from the energy he’d used earlier, and every memory, every thought of family and Jaeger and the task ahead was painful and overwhelming. He’d not allowed himself to think of them since those first nights in the forest. Not let himself realise that his family was already likely dead. The pain would be too much, all consuming.

“You need to sleep, Eoin.” Kai stopped pacing and looked at his friend. Concern was etched across his features, a painful thing for Eoin to see in his current weakened state because he let himself read more into it than he knew was there. He nodded, not even bothering to argue, instead he simply lay back on the bed on which he was perched, forgoing even the removal of his footwear in his eagerness to find that place of unconsciousness that gave some reprieve from his thoughts. Before he forgot, he needed to let Kai know. “It is not possible to use magic in the grounds of the palace. Only the queen’s own mage may do that.”

The bed was soft, the cotton covers fresh under his weary head. Sleep washed over him, and he was unaware of Kai removing his boots and wrapping his own cloak over him as a blanket. He was unaware of the hand that caressed his head and unaware of the uttered nonsense meant to soothe away the fears of the day.

While he slept, Kai continued his earlier pacing, his mind working overtime to formulate a plan that would ensure they could get the last stone and leave the palace grounds unharmed.

While he slept, the night terrors he had experienced in the woods slipped back in. Darkness. Emptiness. A void where the laughter of those he loved should be. Kicking out at invisible enemies, Eoin thrashed and turned in the blankets. The dream was all consuming. Black and hollow and never-ending nothing. No love, no laughter. He shied away from the dark fingers trying to pull him further in. His heart pounded in his chest, and his breath left his lungs. He could feel the slow tracks his tears were making down his face but he could not escape the prison the dream held him in.

“Eoin.” A soft voice called to him in the darkness. “Eoin.” Eoin juddered awake, limbs jerking as he moved from the depths of the dream to the soft candlelight of the room at the inn. Kai’s gentle hands held his shoulders, and he was talking quietly to him, repeating the same thing over and over, soothing him much as one would soothe a child.

“You’re alright, Eoin, it was just a dream.” Kai whispered the words and his breath caressed Eoin, a safe blanket after the hard coldness of his dreams. Kai’s face was just a hair’s breadth away from him, green eyes laced with concern. Eoin stared into their depths. Eyes that reflected back the longings he had in his own heart. Carefully, deliberately, he lowered his gaze to the gentle curve of Kai’s upper lip and on to the soft plumpness of his bottom lip. For a brief moment, he imagined what it would be like to taste them, to feel them beneath his own weather-roughened mouth. The thought filled his whole self with longing, and he couldn’t hold back the quiet moan that eased its way out of his mouth.

A moan so quiet and yet so loud.

As if a drum had been struck beside him, Kai started and moved away. No further than the foot of the bed but the chasm between them felt as wide as the gully between the mountains to Eoin. Desire thrummed with nowhere to go, replaced by loss and loneliness. He shook his head and refused to let himself think of his desires. The time for that was not now.

“I have a plan,” Kai said, his face once more that of a guardian. “Some magic is illusion, it relies on a person believing what they are seeing, correct?”

Eoin nodded.

“Then, is not deception too a kind of magic? It also relies on a person believing what they are seeing.”

Eoin nodded again, trying to understand what Kai was getting at.

“Every seventh night the palace opens up to visitors of nobility. It is a party of sorts, a gesture by the monarch to show their love for the people of the city.”

Eoin gasped at the plan, at the idea of boldly walking into the palace pretending to be something they weren't. Well he would be at least, Kai actually was a guardian. If they got caught the price would be their lives, and if they were dead what would happen to the people of the village then? What would happen to his family?

He shook his head. “It's too dangerous, Kai. The risk of getting caught is too high.” He scrambled from the bed and walked to the jug of water resting on the table. He poured himself a cup, drinking slowly, trying to let himself wake up properly and contemplate how to fulfil this task.

“I can't see any way we can get into the palace grounds without the prospect of being caught. At least we stand a chance to be there legitimately this way. Well as legitimately as we can be in a scheme of lies.”

The absurdity of the situation hit Eoin then. That he would pretend to be a noble of birth and walk straight into the palace. That the best way to do this would be to lie blatantly to the highest people in the kingdom.

“We couldn't carry it off. I know nothing about being nobility and you...”

“And I know everything about being a guardian. Trust me...” Kai's face held a look of resoluteness that Eoin remembered well. His friend always had been as stubborn as a mule when he had his mind set on something. He swallowed another sip of water. The annoyance was Kai was generally right. Whenever he put his foot down, the plans they'd made usually worked well.

Of course persuading their mothers to let them have a day at the lake, or the village merchants to let them earn a few kreslings was not the same as walking into the palace and feeding the royalty there a great big bunch of utter fabrication.

Eoin sighed. “I do trust you, Kai. Enough that I am going to let you talk me into this madness.”

Kai leapt from the bed, the beginnings of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “You won't regret this, Eoin,” he promised wrapping his arms round his friend and pulling him close for a brief moment. Eoin wasn't sure he entirely agreed.

The night air, blowing in through an open door, was pleasantly cool against Eoin's flushed skin. His heart was pounding so loudly in his chest he was sure everyone else milling around them could hear it too. He adjusted the collar of his new embroidered jacket, the starched stiff collar unfamiliar against his neck.

"Eoin," Kai warned again, and he reluctantly dropped his hand and attempted to arrange his features into the haughty look of a spoilt noble—the disguise they'd agreed would be best to discourage as much unwanted attention as possible. Who wanted to talk to a stuck-up noble?

Yesterday, once the sun had risen, Kai had spent the morning in the city, using the little coin they had to purchase cheap clothes similar to that which the nobility wore. He'd spent the afternoon with a thread and needle embroidering them as best as he could in the time he had. Eoin had been ridiculously surprised at the results, having no notion that Kai knew how to use a needle and thread.

While Kai had been working, Eoin had spent his time trying to decode Jaeger's cryptic riddles. Just when he thought he would never understand it, it hit him—at the roots of nature's *Queen*, a tree. It had to be. They had no idea which one, but at least they had some idea of what they were looking for.

"Drink, sir?" One of the many serving staff that were circling around the great hall balanced a silver tray in his hand and offered Eoin a crystal glass half filled with the sweet mead they were serving tonight. Eoin remembered to sneer at the server, as though he was not worthy of talking to him, and swiped a glass from the tray. It made him ache inside, even though the server kept his features perfectly schooled in the blank look they all wore, Eoin knew though that it must hurt him to be treated as if he was more worthless than the horses in the stables.

The room was bigger than any he had seen his life. Swathes of crushed-velvet cloth in green and scarlet hung from windows. Windows that were not only made from glass, but from coloured glass. Glass that glittered and sparkled in the light flung from the chandeliers hanging from the ceiling.

At one end, a raised platform held two ornate chairs, as yet unoccupied but above which hung the royal coat of arms carved into the finest, most-polished wood Eoin had ever seen and inlaid with rubies and emeralds.

Guards lined every wall of the room and stood sentry at each of the doors. Their uniforms were a deep green unlike that of the many guardians standing near their noble families, their uniforms scarlet and pristine.

Eoin had forced himself to make small talk with several of the other nobles that graced the room. Kai following him silently like the other guardians. Though they were entertained by soft harp music, thankfully nobody was expected to dance. As Eoin was contemplating whether to try and strike up a conversation, another door opened and the guests were invited through to another, equally ornate, room to partake in the feast laid out for them.

Two lengths of tables dissected the room in half. The same arrangement of platform, chairs and coat of arms was at the head of the two tables, this time with a table also there. Each noble person was guided to a seat at one of the long tables, those of obviously high importance at the end nearest to the royal thrones.

A gong sounded, and the herald announced the arrival of the queen and king. Duly everyone bobbed low in a bow or curtsy, rising only once the royals were seated. Eoin didn't realise until then how much he had been hoping for a glimpse of the prince, of Jaeger's son. But he was nowhere to be seen.

The queen addressed the room briefly. She welcomed them all to the palace and its gardens, and at the point Eoin lost all track of what her majesty said. The gardens. She'd welcomed them to the gardens, surely that meant they would be free to roam them after they'd eaten.

The meal passed at a snail's pace, despite the fact that Eoin spent most of it in a daze. He forced himself to speak with the gentleman and lady seated either side of him. He felt like a fish out of water, and the haughty look he'd chosen to wear helped him as he struggled to recall the facts of the deception he and Kai had dreamt up that afternoon.

Kai was stood behind him, on guard as were all the other guardians in the room. Eoin wished he was sat beside him, that they were both pretending to be nobility or that their roles were reversed... it was a pointless wish though, as it was only Kai's membership in the guardians' guild that had allowed them entry into the palace at all.

Finally though the room stood and bowed low while the royals left the room. That was the cue for everyone in the room to start leaving the tables. This time there was dancing in the grand hall they'd been in firstly, some danced and others milled around chatting. Then the guards threw open the large doors at one side of the room leaving guests free to roam the gardens.

The gardens were stunningly beautiful. Flowers grew abundantly, even in the muted light of the moon it was easy to see the explosions of colour the daylight would reveal. A sweet smelling honeysuckle climbed over a lover's arbour, its scent flavouring the air with honey. Eoin suspected the palace's mage was responsible for the plant flowering so far out of season. Such magic amazed him; the littlest tasks drained his energy, to cause a flower to bloom so copiously out of season took a kind of power Eoin found hard to imagine. It also frightened him more than he was willing to own.

The gardens seemed to be the draw for young lovers, strolling beneath the star-studded sky, whispering endearments to each other. Many were trailed by their guardians. It surprised Eoin to see several guardians the obvious companion of the noble they were with, not just as a guard but as a sweetheart. His eyes widened as he saw one couple saunter past, the guardian linking arms with a delicate lady who was laughing at whatever he was telling her.

Kai laughed. "Don't be so surprised, Eoin, being a guardian is seen as a worthwhile position. While the higher nobility would not dream of entangling themselves romantically with a member of their staff, for minor nobility it is not at all unusual for an arrangement of employment to turn into marriage."

"I have to say, Kai, I am rendered almost speechless." He smiled broadly, the mead he had drunk with his meal making him bold. "So have you ever had a dalliance whilst working?" They walked on, and Eoin could have sworn that Kai was blushing. Tempering his own amusement, Eoin nodded to another guardian and the young man with whom he was walking hand in hand. He didn't let himself acknowledge the knot of jealousy that tightened in his stomach at the sight of them. They had enough to think about tonight without him letting errant feelings start to rule his head and dull his senses.

"No." Kai's answer was short, and without him stating it, Eoin knew his friend wanted him to concentrate on the matter at hand. As much as he longed for them to be just another couple strolling across the lawn whispering promises to each other in the light of the moon, the deities knew that was not in their plans.

"Where there is majesty and splendour, at the roots of nature's Queen." Kai repeated the phrase, a whisper under his breath.

"A majestic tree, it has to be." Eoin let the conviction he'd felt yesterday echo in his voice, though really here and now in the palace gardens he was not half as certain as he had been. Especially considering the hundreds of trees that

populated the palace gardens. Many of them beyond the boundaries of where guests were permitted to wander tonight.

Queen's guards were plentiful in the gardens, but they were all but invisible unless an infraction took place. One pompous gentleman, brain addled with far too much liqueur, was extracted from the garden with the least commotion. Eoin let himself be impressed by the swiftness of the guard, then realised how, in their position, it was actually depressingly frightening.

The further they moved away from the palace building the quieter the grounds were. The odd peal of tinkling laughter could be heard floating on the air and the hushed words of lovers, spoken whispers, promises made in the moonlight.

"Let's try down there," said Kai, breaking their silence, when he spotted a trio appear from a path almost hidden by a tumbling rhododendron bush. Together they followed the twisting grass path through arches and passed arbours all draped in the most aromatic of plants. More honeysuckle, cherry blossom, bunches of lavender. A hedonistic walk of pure pleasure. Again Eoin suspected the mage's hand.

Suddenly the narrow path widened and they walked out to a stretch of lawn beside a small ornamental lake. And towering at the edge of the lake was the oldest, most gnarled willow tree Eoin had ever seen. Its delicate frond-like branches swayed gently in the almost non-existent breeze. With every fibre of his being, Eoin knew this was the tree that Jaeger had riddled them with.

The look on Kai's face told Eoin that he thought the same. The sound of quiet conversation and a flash of pale gold in the moonlight brought both Eoin and Kai to their senses and the realisation that they were not alone. Eoin was panicked all of a sudden. He watched the woman in the pale shimmery dress as her and her companion crossed the lawn to a green-suited guard that he had not noticed. They'd found the tree, but he had no idea how they were going to search for the stone buried at its roots with others around. Before he could whisper his concern to Kai though, his friend grabbed his hand, pulled him slightly closer and led him towards the lake whispering in his ear along the way.

Even without Kai spilling his plan into his ear in hushed tones, Eoin would have worked out what it was. His mouth dried at the nearness of Kai, and in the most inappropriate reaction that he was going to curse the deities endlessly for later, he felt his cock begin to stiffen in his breeches.

Together they circled the lake, talking softly to each other. Eoin followed Kai's lead and stopped when they reached an ornate little bench that looked out over the lake. Together they surveyed the land, searching out the other people that were also taking their leisure at the moonlit lake. Whenever they found someone else, especially a queen's guard they whispered it to each other. Kai had taken to letting a soft laugh pass between his lips every time Eoin leaned into him. Eoin soon caught on and copied him, knowing that to any passers-by they would look all the world like two lovers whispering sweet nothings to each other.

There were two queen's guard in total, and three other couples, but after a time two of the couples wandered back towards the path on which they'd entered followed by one of the queen's guard. The couple that were left were mismatched in age completely, Eoin realised, as he let Kai tug him to a stand and started strolling with him round the lake. The gent was older than his father, and the lady seemed even younger than Eoin's own twenty years. Not by much, he guessed, but still a mismatch of ages.

As they languorously walked the lake's edge, fingers entwined, their feigned casualness suggesting a comfort that comes only with familiarity, Eoin realised that the guard too seemed most intent on the other couple. The deities really did seem to be favouring them tonight.

"Kai, I think they're of more interest to the guard than we are. Is it worth making our way towards the tree?" Kai looked at him and nodded, bringing a hand up to gently caress Eoin's face before laughing and tugging him forward. Eoin's cock hardened more and it took everything he had to concentrate on the plan in hand as he followed Kai's lead.

Even with the casual stroll they affected to take them around the lake's edge, it did not take them long to reach the tree. Fronds tickled their shoulders as they stood beside it admiring its beauty and wondering where, under the draping canopy, Jaeger had hidden the third stone.

Across the lake, the queen's guard turned away from the other couple and looked across at them. Before Eoin could process what was happening, Kai had spun him round and claimed his mouth with his own. Lemons and softness. The sharpness of teeth and the gentle exhale of breath. Kai's fingers clenched tighter where they gripped his upper arms and pulled him closer. One calloused hand caressed his face as Kai deepened the kiss. His tongue slid effortlessly into Eoin's mouth, and Eoin found he didn't know what was up or down any

longer. His brain shut down; there was nothing other than Kai. No quest. No Jaeger. No anything. Just the man standing in front of him, the man with whom Eoin was sharing his heart. The man he loved.

When Kai's lips left his, Eoin felt bereft. He looked up at his friend, scared of seeing rejection in his eyes. Scared that he alone felt the fire stirring within. Kai though looked at him in wonder. Green eyes wide, his soul visible, vulnerable in the love and want nakedly displayed there.

Eoin shook his head attempting to pull himself from the hypnotic sway of Kai's eyes. Now was not the time. Kai took a breath and looked over the lake at the guard. Eoin followed his gaze, and then he shrugged to the guard, an impish grin spreading across his face. Eoin wasn't sure how much of it would translate across the moonlit lake, but the nod of the head the guard gave them before he turned away implied that he understood exactly what Eoin was asking.

Knowing it was now or never, Eoin took the reins this time and wrapped his hands around Kai's neck pulling him back into the kiss. Deities! He would give anything to just be allowed to lose himself in it... except he couldn't, the price was too high. So he gently manoeuvred Kai until they were completely under the canopy of the willow tree. It took all the self-will he possessed to move away from Kai.

"It's here somewhere."

"We need to be quick," Kai hissed, dropping to his knees and searching the gnarled roots that spread out from the bottom of the ancient tree. "Where's the charm?"

Eoin hooked the leather thong with his hand and pulled the charm free from where it was nestled against his chest. He had no way to know if this would work. He was relying on the ancient magic contained in the stones to be more powerful than the magic protecting the palace. It was a risk.

He looked at the charm in his hand and waited.

But nothing happened, no glow, no warming.

"Please, deities, give us this one thing," he asked as despair started to bloom in his belly. He hadn't realised until that moment quite how much hope he'd put into this working—how sure he had been that it would work. He swung the charm over the ground, waiting for some reaction.

Nothing.

And then the hope, the need, the desire—everything he'd placed so much need on, came crashing down around him. He had failed. He was not worthy of the trust Jaeger had placed in him.

He started to crumble from the inside out. Loss, overwhelming and all-consuming, drowned him. From the highest high, to the lowest low. Without the stone it was all for nothing.

“Eoin.” Kai’s voice was low but sharp. “Don’t you dare give up.” He was easing his left boot off. It came free, and he tipped it up, the second Virium stone rolling free. Eoin picked it up as Kai put his boot back on. As he lifted it in his hand, both stones began to glow. It gave Eoin hope.

“I’ll keep an eye out for the guard Eoin. Work quickly, trust yourself.”

And Eoin found he did. He held the stones together, cleared his mind and felt them guide him. Then he just knew. Right there. That was where the third stone was.

Using his uniform’s dagger, Kai dug where Eoin pointed and, barely buried at all, they found the stone.

Chapter 19

Thirty years before...

The two young mages sat each side of the smiling woman in one of the most popular inns of the city. The woman's stomach was swollen, full of life, an unusual sight in an inn, even one in the capital, but all three were experts at ignoring any strange looks thrown their way.

"So the plan is set?" The younger of the mages asked. His tone was nervous, though he tried not to show it, and the older mage found that the fear pleased him. Tonight his life was going to change forever. Tonight *all* their futures were going to change forever, his two companions just didn't quite realise exactly how. It certainly wasn't going to be the way they thought.

It didn't take much to change a man, Jaeger had realised just a few short months ago. All he'd wanted was for him and Betty to settle down, to live together until they were in their dotage. To have children, to share the love of their family with his best friend Edward and whoever he chose to share his life with. It had been so clear to him the life he would lead. The lives they would all lead.

One betrayal was all it took to break a man though.

Just one.

Jaeger wasn't the weak man today that he had been when he'd realised his best friend loved Betty as only a husband should. He watched as they shared laughter. Jealousy rose in him, and he was sure they were having an affair. The one day Edward took her to the town for the day. By the time she had returned home to him that evening, without so much as an averted gaze to show how she had wronged him, he had rebirthed himself. The man had died, but the mage was strong.

The fable of the three stones of Virium had always been an obsession of his. His favourite bedtime story as a child, a myth he'd studied as an adult—the curiosity of how such a tale would come into being. He'd long since decided he believed the story was based in fact and not fable, but it wasn't until the evidence of Betty and Edward's betrayal started to swell in Betty's stomach that he knew he needed the stones if he was to destroy them as forcefully as they had destroyed him.

Death was too kind for his wife and friend. They would suffer as he had.

Chapter 20

Now...

Before they left the shade of the willow tree, Eoin found himself once more in Kai's arms being kissed senseless. Recklessly, passionately. Strong hands stroked through his hair. His mouth he was sure must look kiss-swollen and red. Then Kai stood back and appraised him. A short nod of the head and he led him by the hand, retracing their steps back through the gardens to the palace.

The presence of the queen's guards seemed almost overwhelming to Eoin. He felt sure they would be stopped at any moment and demanded to show the secrets they had hidden. His heart pounded when he saw the palace mage, but the mage paid them no mind, and then they were out in the stable yard collecting the horses they'd hired that morning to transport them to the palace.

And then, they were free. They had the stones. They had succeeded in the task Jaeger had required of them. Now all they had to do was return them to the Virium demon.

Eoin felt a laugh rumble in his stomach.

All they had to do. Jaeger had earnestly repeated to him that returning the stones would be the easiest part of the task, and he'd believed his mentor. Now he was facing this, he wasn't so sure.

The horses made short work of the journey between the palace and the inn. They stabled the horses and went to their room. Kai bolted the door behind them and turned to Eoin. The look on his face was one of pure want. For all that, he was scared of losing Kai. Eoin could not, *would not*, ignore the energy that was sparking between them both. *What was life without regrets?* he thought bravely to himself as he stepped towards Kai.

Lips met lips tentatively. They were both shy, this was something different. Eoin felt the promise he was making as he let his mouth open, inviting Kai in. His hands stroked slowly up Kai's arms and across his shoulders, until he could tangle them in Kai's hair. He gripped, pulling Kai closer; he needed him so much.

He wanted him more.

Kai's hands fumbled with Eoin's buttons, slowly releasing them each from their fastenings. The jacket shrugged off easily and fell in a heap on the floor. Followed by his shirt and undershirt.

Kai stepped back and traced his hands over the contours of Eoin's upper body. Each touch was feather-light, sensual, searching. Claiming what had always been his. Thumbs passed over nipples, and Eoin shivered. Kai smiled, obviously pleased with that reaction, and he lowered his mouth, letting his tongue stroke ever-decreasing circles over the sensitive nubs.

Heat surged in Eoin's groin, and he hardened in his breeches. The need to be rid of all his clothes made itself apparent, and he pushed Kai away as he slipped out of his remaining attire, until he stood there naked and hard and without shame.

"Eoin." His name, moaned in low reverence from Kai's lips, had never been so important to him before. His cock pulsed, hard and full, and then there were hands stroking him everywhere. Lips, seeking and finding. Sucking and caressing. Licking him intimately, collecting the precome leaking from him.

Eoin knew very little about sex, he was innocent, guarded from the ways of the world, but he knew that he needed more of Kai than this. He wanted a stronger connection, he wanted Kai inside him, intimate and unreserved and claiming the place that had always belonged to him. Claiming the part of Eoin's soul that was all for Kai.

"I need you, Kai." The words meant in so many different ways, but Kai seemed to understand them all.

"For always," he said, pulling off his uniform and letting it lay where it landed on the floor. "I tried to fight it, Eoin, I really did. You are worth so much more than me, I can't let you go, it would shatter me."

They tumbled together onto the bed. Rubbing and twisting together. Heat and lips and hands caressing. There was so much Eoin wanted to do, but he knew in his heart that he had a lifetime to find all the ways he could belong to Kai and all the ways Kai could belong to him. For now, the need was basic and primal.

The time for words had passed, and as if they were in each other's thoughts, they moved together, satisfying the yearning that was so strong inside them both. Kai coated his cock with oil from the small vial he kept to ease chapping on his hands. He sucked again at Eoin's nipples and Eoin arched his back at the fiery pleasure it created. And then Kai's fingers were stretching him wide, slowly working his hole open until he was able to accept Kai's cock.

They eased through the pain of entry together until all Eoin had left was pleasure. Intense and sweet and swelling to a crescendo from the very core of

his being. He came, looking into the green depths of Kai's eyes. His whole body pulsed, and he gave in to the sensation pooling inside of him. Kai followed him over the edge, and they spent the night tangled together, sated, exhausted, found.

Morning came too early, but Eoin woke knowing the world was his. He packed up their few belongings, making sure that the Virium charm was safely in its place around his neck. Kai had disappeared before breakfast, to return the guardians garb to the washerwoman's he'd appropriated it from.

Carefully, Eoin made sure that the stones were packed separately; it was not the time to throw caution to the wind. As he tidied away, waiting for Kai, memories of the night before echoed through his head. Warmth pooled in the core of him, longing and desire to be with Kai again.

A glance out the window told him time was starting to pass, the early morning was getting busier, and he wondered where Kai was. Just as the thought entered his head, a knock came to the door, and he smiled to himself. He didn't know what games Kai was playing, but he wasn't going to discourage him.

It has been said that love can make the most sensible of men stupid, and so was the way with Eoin. Without caution he opened the door, expecting to see Kai's familiar face... instead there stood a figure, clothed head to toe in black robes.

For a second his heart stopped. Edward had found him. In the span of less than a heartbeat, he thanked the deities that Kai was not there, that though he had failed, Kai would be safe. Surprise had rendered him senseless; he did not try and shut the door. He did not try and summon his magic. He just took a breath and froze.

"Eoin, my boy." The words... the words were not what he expected. The voice, it was as familiar to him as his own.

"Jaeger?" He stuttered the name, not quite believing even after the man lowered his hood and he could see with his own two eyes the figure of his mentor standing before him.

"How?" He was motionless, waiting for his brain to catch up with what he was seeing. Then it did, and he reached forward and touched Jaeger, pulling

him into an embrace, even though it was not something they would normally have done. Normality had ceased to be the day he'd come home to an empty village.

"Can I come in, boy? It's been a long trek for these old bones, even with a horse to aid me." Eoin moved, and Jaeger made his way into the room. Eoin let him sit in the one chair and poured some water from the jug they'd had fresh with breakfast. He fussed, wanting to ask a million questions but not quite daring until the older man was settled. He wondered where Kai was, imagining the look on his lover's face when he saw the healer in the room.

Just as Jaeger was starting to tell his tale, another knock came to the door, and Kai called to him. Eoin hurried up to let him in, bursting to tell him the news. As soon as he passed the threshold though, Kai drew his dagger and held it to Jaeger's throat.

"Kai! Stop." Eoin was mortified. He tried to pull Kai away, but Kai held him back.

"Kai," Eoin tried again, "it is just Jaeger. He's alive, and he's here. I don't know how, but he is!"

"Young Kai is right to be cautious," Jaeger said as he sat stock still, eyes fixed on the hand holding the blade to his throat. "It serves him well. You should follow his example, young Eoin. It was a wise move to bring Kai with you on your journey."

"Enough of the flattery, old man, what are you doing sitting here when Eoin told me quite clearly you were dead?" Kai moved closer to Eoin, standing between him and Jaeger, making sure the dagger did not move from its spot on the older man's throat.

"Eoin never actually saw me dead, Kai, ask him. I know I told him I was dying, it felt like it... maybe part of me did die; Betty and I had been together for many long years—longer than the years you've been in the world Kai. It felt like dying watching her go. Part of me did die. Part of me wanted to stay dead, except I wasn't, and I'd sent a young boy to right my mistake. I knew I had to follow, and that is what I did as soon as I was able."

In that moment, Jaeger looked so frail Eoin stepped forward and moved Kai away. "Enough Kai, it is Jaeger, and he is here to help."

Kai glared at him but lowered the dagger.

Jaeger straightened. “Thank you, boy. It is only fair that I tell you, unless you took me completely by surprise the dagger would not harm me, my magic is too powerful, even in my weakened state.”

“And you tell me this expecting me to trust you?”

“I tell you this out of respect. Now Eoin, tell me of your adventures since we parted company, and I will tell you of mine.” And so Eoin did, talking about the hamlet and the stones and the night before at the palace. The only thing he didn’t share was the intimacy between himself and Kai, for that was still too new, too fresh to share.

Jaeger then told his tale. Of how he’d been sick with grief but managed to bury his wife. Of how he’d finally shook himself awake, left the cloak of despair he’d been wearing behind and decided to track Edward.

“Oh but first, good news, Eoin, I should have started with this. The villagers are safe. Every one of them. Edward’s threats were nothing but empty air, he’d trapped them just for one night, pretending to be an official from the palace and using fear to aid him. Not fear of himself, but of a tale he spun about a rabid prisoner escaped and coming this way. He was convincing, telling them the only way every man, woman and child could be saved was for them to be ensconced in the basement of Tye Landry’s house and sealed there with a magic spell.”

“And they believed this?” Kai asked, disbelief dripping from every word.

“They did.” Jaeger himself had a sharpness in his voice, as if he was already fed up with Kai questioning him. “And the fact they did saved them. Edward attacked me and Betty, but the rest of the village was safely locked away under the protection of magic. Edward had no grudge with the villagers, so it was not his place to harm them.”

“So...”

“Your family is safe.” Jaeger smiled kindly at him, and Eoin felt his knees give way. They were safe. His family was safe. A strong arm caught him before he hit the floor and wrapped itself around his waist. Pulling him close, sharing his strength, Kai lowered him down gently down and embraced him tightly. He whispered gently in his ear, though Eoin couldn’t have said of what. The words *your family are safe*, just echoing round his head.

Too soon Kai pulled away. “We need to be going soon if we are to make a good start before nightfall.”

“But the villagers are safe, Kai.” Eoin stood shakily, trying to order his thoughts.

“The villagers are safe, but Edward is still out there, and we will not be safe from him until the stones are returned to the demon.”

What Kai was saying made sense, but Eoin was weary, and now he’d learnt of his family’s safety, he wanted to see it with his own eyes.

“Kai is right, Eoin,” Jaeger spoke up. “I was foolish enough to take these stones once, it is important this task is completed. I would take them myself, but I feel I might give in to temptation and not return them. I have been weak before.”

“We would not leave the stones with you.” The ice had returned to Kai’s voice. He turned back to Eoin. “I could take the stones the rest of the way alone if it is important that you return to your family. You could go back to the village with Jaeger.”

But Eoin shook his head. “No, Kai, I’m not leaving you.”

“Then we need to be going, especially if Edward is still on our tail.” Kai glanced at Jaeger and Eoin thought the look was one of disbelief. Then he remembered how cautious Kai was and how he did not really know Jaeger like Eoin did.

“Fine,” Eoin agreed. “Thank you for coming to tell us about the villagers, Jaeger. I’m sorry we need to leave so urgently after your arrival, but it is a long walk yet to the cave.”

“Let me come with you,” Jaeger asked, looking at Kai but addressing Eoin. “I have use of a trap with two fine horses to pull it. The way would be much faster as such. I will be an extra person to help if Edward does find you.” Grief, tiredness and regret lined his face, and with nothing more than a glance at Kai, Eoin nodded yes.

Chapter 21

They left the city from the northern side, travelling as they were further north to the dwelling place of the Virium demon. With the horses and trap the journey was easier, as Jaeger had promised. Though they headed north, the weather wasn't as chill as it had been in the mountains. It was cool but not biting so. Here though, the land became uninhabitable for man. The soil was poor, nothing could grow. It was said that an ancient magic had scarred the landscape forever, and seeing the dead wastelands spread before him, Eoin could quite believe it. A barren landscape of rocks, and poor earth.

Day passed into night, and they rested a while, though Kai insisted that Jaeger be allowed to sleep while he and Eoin shared guard duties. When the old man was softly snoring in the trap, Eoin sat outside wrapped in a blanket with Kai.

"How well do you know the old man?" asked Kai suddenly. "Do you trust him?"

"Why all the questions, Kai? He has been my mentor for many years, and I trust him implicitly. If he wanted the stones, he had the perfect opportunity earlier to take them. I believe he is a man ashamed of his actions and counting the cost of them."

Kai nodded his head in agreement, yet Eoin suspected his trust in Jaeger had not grown one iota. They flipped a kresling to see who would take first guard duty, and when Eoin lost, Kai settled himself down. His head was nestled against Eoin's thighs the blanket swaddling them both. "Tell me again about magic," he said, hiding a yawn behind his hand. "Tell me about energy and how it works and how we all have the ability to perform it, however latent it may be."

So Eoin did. As he spoke, he ran his hands through Kai's hair, telling him all he wanted to know until he heard Kai's breath even out into the shallow breath of slumber.

The sun was high in the sky when they finally reached the area of the cave. They'd left the horses tethered to a tree a way back, easily within reach of a clear stream, the trap left beside them. As Jaeger had said, if Edward made it that far the loss of a trap and horses was the least of their worries.

Eoin wasn't sure what he was expecting when facing the home of a demon, but it wasn't this. The landscape was barren, but it held a kind of haunting beauty that was hard to describe. It felt as though the world was never ending here. As though no living thing had ever stood there before. It felt like they alone existed. No birds soared, yet the sky was bright and beautiful. No grass grew, yet the rocks demanded the viewer see the own unique beauty of them, not simple, not easy, but there all the same.

The cave itself was a gaping mouth in a bank of rock, and it was here any beauty ended. It was easy to imagine the hole leading straight to the resting place of fallen deities, deep in the bowels of the earth.

The three men stood facing the blackness, resolute though scared. At least Eoin knew he was scared, and he assured himself both Jaeger and Kai must be feeling the same.

“So what now?” Eoin asked.

“Now,” Jaeger said, shifting slightly so he was facing Eoin. “Now you summon the demon and kill it or I kill Kai.”

He spun and grabbed Kai, disarming him with a flick of his wrist before Kai's dagger was even drawn. The ageing man he had been changed before their eyes. Not into someone else, but to a more robust version of the mentor Eoin had known.

Kai, strong and proud, stood perfectly still. Unnaturally still. His face riddled with pain.

“Stop gaping, Eoin, I expected better of you,” Jaeger said, his mouth twisted in a sneer. “The stones alone are powerful, but to truly own them, to wield the power within them the previous master of them must die. A Virium demon however, can only be killed by one who is pure of heart, and that I'm not. Fortunately for me, you are.”

Eoin wanted to cry out, to say he didn't understand, but it would not be the truth. He did understand, all too well in fact. He understood that Kai's doubts had been right. His suspicion not misplaced.

“Don't hurt Kai,” he said.

Jaeger shrugged. “The concept of hurt is quite subjective, don't you think? I won't though, as long as you do your part.”

Eoin met Kai's gaze. Saw the pain etched there—pain caused by whatever magic Jaeger was wielding. He also saw the defiance, and he knew that Kai would not want him to give in to Jaeger, not even if the price was Kai's life.

But Eoin wasn't as strong. He couldn't risk losing Kai, not when they'd just found each other again. It was trite, it was not the hero's way, but Eoin had never claimed to be a hero, just a boy who wanted a simple life.

"Why, Jaeger?" Time might be the only thing he had left on his side.

"Why, my dear boy? Why do you think... I would be the most powerful man in the kingdom. I would have the gift of youth, though I think life eternal is a more apt description. Who would want to be young forever, with the folly that comes alongside it? I would have wealth, more wealth than I can ask for—abundant and overflowing." He paused and looked at Eoin, paying no mind to Kai, not caring one bit that he was torturing the other man.

"But wealth is more than physical riches, wealth is knowledge and love. It is the warmth of companionship and so much more than the loneliness of a man with only endless money and treasures. Then there is the stone of power. The third stone. The one that makes me more powerful than any being, mortal or not. I would be a deity in the world. I would be worshipped and adored."

Eoin laughed bitterly. "And here I was yearning for the life you had. It all seemed so perfect to me."

"A veneer, dear boy. Beneath the roses in the bowl was fetid water. Stinking fetid water. You know better than anyone the importance of illusion."

Eoin looked at Kai, felt his heart slowly crack at the pain he saw. As he met Kai's eyes, something made him pause. Beneath the pain, there was something else. While Jaeger rambled on absently about the power he would have and how he had been betrayed once and nothing would hurt him like that again, Eoin watched. *Keep him distracted. This is not how we die.* Flickering pain and determination and Eoin didn't know what or how, but he knew he was going to do his damndest to ensure that Kai stayed alive today.

"Is this about Pretiosus?" Eoin asked, not really giving a damn but choosing anything that would give them time.

"As if I care about him. All he was good for was slowly breaking his mother's heart. She thought she could fool me, that I would fall for the deception. Our child was supposed to be the start of our lives together—but he never was our child. He belonged to *him*."

As Jaeger talked, Eoin moved slowly, drawing his attention away from Kai. He knew it wouldn't be fooling Jaeger; that his mentor would not need to keep his eyes on him to keep the spell in place. It was the first time he'd realised quite how powerful Jaeger was. To keep Kai pinned in pain as he was without seemingly using any energy.

They shifted just enough that Kai was out of Jaeger's line of vision. Jaeger smiled as if he was finding Eoin's attempts at deception amusing.

"Belonged to whom?"

"Edward."

"Edward. Well now doesn't he just get everywhere?" Eoin laughed mirthlessly.

"Not anymore." The smile that spread across Jaeger's face was one of pure venom. "Not since I killed him. Twenty-five years to the night I killed Betty. Poetic, do you not think?"

Eoin turned cold. He did not know one thing about the man standing in front of him. The man he'd once seen as part of his family.

"Why Jaeger? Why go to all this trouble, why did you not just keep the stones when you took them? Why did you not collect them yourself?"

As he spoke, asking anything he could think of to keep the attention away from Kai, to keep Jaeger talking, Eoin saw the smallest movement from Kai. He didn't know how he was doing it, Jaeger was extraordinarily powerful, but he prayed to the deities that it would work.

"Why, my dear boy? Because I wanted Edward and Betty to suffer. Because I knew I could not kill the demon to gain full power so I waited until I found someone who could. Because I had no idea if Edward had cast magic on the stone buried in his hamlet house. Grief apparently rendered him useless instead of vengeful, I should have guessed that."

The last remark was uttered quietly to himself. "And lastly because my magic has become too powerful to allow me entry into the palace grounds now. A fact I had not thought through when I hid the stone of power there all those years ago." He shrugged. "At the time, I just liked the irony of the stone and the boy both being left in the same place."

The look on his face changed then. "Now, Eoin, I have indulged your little fantasy that you will be able to somehow beat me in a battle of magic, but I

have had enough. You are to summon the Virium demon now or I will kill Kai. You know you have no chance against me.”

Eoin closed his eyes. He had done all he could.

“No, but I can.” At Kai’s voice, Eoin’s eyes snapped open, just in time to see his sword cut clean through Jaeger’s neck. With a wet plop, the detached head fell to the ground, and Eoin turned and upended the contents of his stomach on the ground.

Epilogue

One year after...

Eoin waved goodbye to his family as they set out in the warm evening sun on the short journey home. They visited every seven turns of the sun since Eoin had returned to the village. They'd not known where he had gone, and when he explained, they had no knowledge of *a night every villager disappeared*. It took him a little while to unravel the fabrication Jaeger had woven. The whole thing had been an illusion, conjured for Eoin's eyes only.

All of it, except Betty dying; that had been more than real.

As his family disappeared from view, he swung the heavy door shut on the healer's cottage and made his way through to where Kai was clearing away the remnants of their meal. Crossing the kitchen, he took the bowls from his lover's hands and clasped his face gently. Smiling, he leaned in and gave him a gentle kiss before releasing him again.

"So the prince has found a bride?" he started conversationally as he joined Kai in the task of cleaning. It was the news his parents had brought as they shared the meal. "Jaeger's son is to be married."

"It seems to be the case." Kai lifted the great stone cooking pot the stew had been in and took it to be washed.

"Do you think about it at all, Kai, how Jaeger became so destroyed over something that just wasn't true?" And it wasn't true. Pretiosus was Jaeger's son. When they had settled into the house that had been Jaeger's they had found a diary hidden away in the depths of a cupboard. In it, Betty had poured her heart out, how Jaeger had taken a friendship and read it wrong. How his yearning for power had left them all bereft.

She'd been powerless to stop him. He'd stolen some of her grief and used it to keep her a prisoner in her own home. Taunting her with the constantly open door through which she was unable to pass. She could make no plea to anyone, for who would believe the wife of the well-loved village healer?

"Not for one second, Eoin. I'm looking to the future and not the past."

"May I ask you a question then, Kai, before we put it away never to be spoken of again?"

Kai dried his hands on a cloth and reached for Eoin. Pulling him into an embrace, he whispered, "Of course you can, my love, anything at all."

Eoin swallowed. "I'm ready to know now, how you escaped from Jaeger's magic."

Kai chuckled. "It was all you, Eoin. I knew if you killed the demon for Jaeger, then he had no choice but to kill you—he could only claim the power from the person who wielded it... and that would have been you. I could see in your eyes that you had not realised this though..."

"...all I could think of was you, in pain or dying!" Eoin interrupted, pulling Kai closer still, remembering that day a year ago when he thought he would never feel Kai's warm embrace again.

"I know. I'm not casting aspersions. Remember though, suspicious character that I am, I already did not trust Jaeger. That is why I asked you about magic the night before. I knew the sword alone would not defeat a man so strong."

Eoin stretched up and kissed him again. The type of kiss that held the promise of so much more. He teased Kai's lips for a minute, deepening the kiss for a heartbeat before pulling away.

"Tease," grumbled Kai before carrying on. "You emphasised to me, many times over, that magic is illusion or manipulation. If it was manipulation, I don't know what I would have done, but I guessed Jaeger was using illusion—he held nothing in his hands to manipulate. So then, all I had to do was find the place inside where I could truly believe the pain was just an illusion."

"The quiet within," Eoin said under his breath.

"Exactly, *the quiet within*. The same place where I was seething with anger at his plans to use you and kill you. The anger gave me enough energy to break Jaeger's magic." He reached for Eoin again, and Eoin let himself be kissed.

"A mage might use manipulation and illusion as the tools of their trade, but a guardian uses the element of surprise. Once I'd freed myself, I attacked. He'd disarmed my dagger but not my sword, such was his arrogance."

"And there was no time for Jaeger to do anything," Eoin finished. He held on to Kai's hand and led him to the bedroom. Their bedroom in the house that was once Betty's prison. The house where Eoin now served the village as its healer. The house that was their home. He knew as they crossed to the ornate

bed Kai had carved that they were both thinking of the demon. The one they had summoned from the depths of his cave, the one to whom they had returned the stones. Safe away from the greed of humans.

Pushing Kai onto the bed, Eoin kissed him again, knowing that this was the last they would speak of the matter. The past belonged in the past. And all he wanted was the now and the future and day after day of Kai.

The End

Author Bio

Books with romance, books with sex,
Voodoo books and books with hex,
Fantasy, mystery, humour and crime,
Young adult, adult adult and kids from time to time,
In all their shapes and all their sizes,
I love books in all their guises.

Olley White is the pseudonym of Lori Powell, an English gal who likes reading too much, housework too little and her family the perfect amount. As she writes YA books under her actual name and doesn't want a youngster stumbling across the smutty, more adult books she writes, she thought an AKA was the way to go.

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Free samples of her writing are available on both of her blogs.

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