

COURTNEY SCHAFER

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THE TAKEN

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“[Courtney Schafer's] evocative narrative makes images leap off the pages... One thing is for sure: There is more depth than meets the eye in this novel... *The Whitefire Crossing* is an original, unusual, fantasy title that shows a lot of potential.”

—*Pat's Fantasy Hotlist*

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“Smuggling, magic, secret identities, a dark mage coming after the heroes, a grand adventure and trek over dangerous mountains...Schafer's world-building is exquisite...I can't recommend this book enough.”

—*Bibliotropic*

“Wow. Simply Wow...The fact that this is Courtney's debut novel leaves me in absolute awe... *The Whitefire Crossing* is a suspenseful romp through a well-built world of intrigue and dark magic. And I loved the cliffhanger ending that fully wrapped up the main conflict in this first book, while leaving me gasping to know more, and itching to get my hands on book two, *The Tainted City*.”

—*ThinkBannedThoughts Blog*

“What do you get when you mix blood magic, smuggling, and a wild chase across a treacherous mountain range?...A marvelous fantasy debut by Courtney Schafer, and the first in a series of books

in a world where the simple act of casting a spell can be a death sentence.”

—Examiner.com

“*The Whitefire Crossing* is an astonishing and surprisingly intimate adventure story...If you’re looking for a new and entertaining fantasy adventure, you must read this book. It’s an adventure of the highest order and it’s one of the best and finest fantasy books of 2011.”

—*Risingshadow*

THE
TAINTED
CITY

The Shattered Sigil

Book I: The Whitefire Crossing

THE
TAINTED
CITY

BOOK II OF THE SHATTERED SIGIL

COURTNEY SCHAFER

NIGHT SHADE BOOKS
SAN FRANCISCO

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To Kevin, who already knows the joy of adventure

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About the Author

(Dev)

I wedged my fingers higher in the crack snaking up the boulder's overhanging face. A push of foot, a twist of my body, and the overhang's lip was nearly within reach. Good thing, since I had to finish this little warm-up climb fast, or risk a whipping if the shift bell rang before I got to the mine. Dawn's light already streaked the gorge rim far above me with gold, though it'd be mid-morning before the sun rose high enough to touch the reedy mudflats here in the gorge's depths. Beyond my boulder, clumps of men in grime-streaked coveralls trudged toward the yawning black mouth at the base of the cliffs. Lights bobbed in jerky rhythms within the tunnel as the night haulers hurried to finish sacking their quota of coal.

"Spend one instant longer crawling up that rock instead of joining your crew, boy, and I'll choke you blind."

The torc around my neck heated in warning as overseer Gedavar spoke. I jerked my fingers free of the crack and dropped to land in the mud at the boulder's base. Sudden sweat laced my palms. What the hell had Shaikar's hells brought Gedavar sniffing around? With the day shift soon to start, he should be relaying the minemaster's orders to the crew chiefs, not skulking about behind the prisoners' barracks. The thin copper disc of the stolen glowlight charm hidden beneath my sock cuff felt large as a wagon wheel.

"I'm on my way," I muttered, and made to dodge past him.

"Hold." Gedavar barred my path. Easy for him to do, since he dwarfed me not only in height but in bulk. All of it solid muscle, despite the gray salting his close-cropped dark hair and the lines seaming his scowling, olive-skinned face. "I heard tell from Lanedan he saw you sneaking around the quartermaster's yard yesterday. Looking to steal, were you?"

"I wasn't stealing—or sneaking, either. Jathon sent me to tell the quartermaster we only had two pallets of sacks left. I didn't touch a gods-damned thing." That was nothing but truth. The charm under my sock hadn't come from the quartermaster's stores. I'd palmed it off the corpse of a miner who suffocated after hitting a pocket of poisoned air. Alathian charms carried little more than glimmers of magic, but I didn't need magic for my plan to ditch this muck-infested pit of a mining camp. I just needed copper.

Gedavar smiled, not pleasantly. "I've a mind to make sure. Spread your arms."

Shit. He didn't truly believe I'd stolen anything from the quartermaster. He knew perfectly well the man kept his supply chests warded as tight as gem vaults. But Gedavar never missed a chance to scrag me. If he searched me thoroughly enough to find the charm, weeks of planning would come to ruin. I had to distract him.

I lifted my arms and sneered, "What, the camp jennies won't have you, so you've turned desperate enough to grope scut-men?"

Gedavar's broad face purpled. He twisted a ward-etched gold ring on one thick finger. The torc tightened around my throat until I choked and doubled over. A shove sent me sprawling face-first into

mud black with coal grit. “Don’t you mouth off to me, you piece of goat shit!”

~~The torc cinched tighter. Red hazed my vision. I thrashed, fear rising with the pressure in my lungs. I’d meant to provoke him into punishing me without a search, but not to strangle me outright—~~

A sucking squelch of footsteps announced a newcomer. “Leave him be, Gedavar. I can’t get proper day’s work from him if you throttle him senseless before he so much as touches a coal sack. Jathon’s raspy voice lowered to a mutter. “You want that Council mage lurking in the minemaster’s office to burn your hide?”

The torc loosened. I sucked in a lungful of air and promptly set about coughing my guts out. Between coughs, I cast a wary glance at Jathon, whose weathered brown face was clean of expression. His thick-muscled arms crossed. Thank Khalmet he’d called Gedavar off—but why had he bothered? He’d never shown anything but cold disdain for me, the lone prisoner assigned to his crew of coal haulers.

Gedavar leaned over me and spat. “*That’s* for Council mages and their gods-cursed orders. Daylight labor’s meant for honest Alathians who’ve earned the right, not foreign lawbreakers. Even rights this little weasel should be on scut duty with the other criminals, so deep in the tunnels he withers from lack of light.”

“No argument here,” Jathon said. “I’d be chewing bile if it was my nephew got shoved off to work the blacklights so a prisoner could take his place.”

I froze in the act of swiping away spittle. I’d long since guessed from the muttered asides and resentful glares of Jathon’s haulers that some poor bastard had gotten booted from their crew for my sake—but Gedavar’s nephew? No wonder Gedavar hated me. Coal hauling might be backbreaking work, but it was as safe as picking wildflowers in a meadow compared to tending finicky, powder-fueled lights in the deeps of the mine.

Jathon shook his head and went on. “Bad enough to lose a good crewman on the orders of some sleek citified bastard of a mage. But after Halden’s fuck-up with the oxen last week, we’re a hundred sacks down on the quota. If you choke Dev ’til he can’t haul, you leave me shorthanded with no hope of catching up before the tally tomorrow. We don’t meet tally, me and every decent man on the dayside crew won’t see our full pay this month. I don’t doubt Dev deserves a little discipline, but for the twin gods’ sake, man, do it after his shift.”

Ah. Money, I understood as a motive. I kept my eyes down and prayed Gedavar would listen. Like most of the miners here, Jathon was no prisoner. He’d come to Cheltman Gorge some fifteen years ago, lured by the generous pay the Alathian Council offered skilled men willing to leave civilization behind, and he’d been crew chief over the dayside coal haulers for near half that time. Even authority drunk pricks like Gedavar didn’t care to antagonize a miner with such seniority.

“You want him breathing, teach him to rule his tongue.” Gedavar aimed a vindictive glare at me that made it plain I’d only delayed further abuse, not escaped it, and stomped off toward the coal shed.

I let out a relieved breath, taking comfort from the press of the glowlight charm against my ankle. If my plan worked, I’d be free of Gedavar right along with the rest of this shithole. If it didn’t...well, Gedavar would be the least of my worries.

Jathon clamped my shoulder in a meaty hand. He steered me over to join the ragged line of men plodding away from the squat wooden cabins of the camp toward the mine.

“Thanks,” I told him. “I’m in your debt.” Regardless of his reasons, it wouldn’t hurt to show my very real gratitude.

He gave a contemptuous snort. “I didn’t do it for you. I won’t have my crew’s pay docked because

a scut-man's too dumb to keep his mouth shut. You slack even one instant today and I'll strangle you myself, no matter what that mage thinks about it. Gods only know why the Council cares for the life of a foreign charm smuggler."

Despite his harsh tone, his dark eyes held a glint of curiosity. I shrugged and took care to keep my face blank. The minemaster refused to speak on the matter, but the miners weren't fools. They'd seen me arrive in Cheltman Gorge accompanied by a mage of the Council's Watch—who instead of dumping me off to work the darkest deeps with the rest of the scut-men, had not only insisted I be assigned to the far safer role of daylight laborer, but had stayed.

For two gods-damned months, now. Not the same mage—every two weeks, they switched out. Besides lanky, curly-haired Talmaddis, who'd brought me here and had shown up again last week, I'd seen a middle-aged woman with a scarred cheek, and a short, stocky man with skin near as dark as mine. Not that the identity of the mage mattered. The snapthroat charm I wore was prison enough, but the lurking mage was the sandcat pacing beyond the bars.

The hell of it was, the Council didn't really care about me. I was merely their leverage against Kiran, the Arkenlander blood mage I'd helped sneak into Alathia. Kiran had only wanted a life free from his sadistic viper of a master. He'd meant to renounce his magic entirely rather than cast spells fueled with torture and murder.

The Council hadn't bought a word of that when they caught us. Oh, they let Kiran live, in hopes of picking his brain for knowledge of forbidden magic, but they wanted him leashed tight. And Kiran had shown the Council he'd do anything to help me, out of gratitude for my saving his skinny ass from his master Ruslan.

Which meant the Council would never let me go. I'd be stuck here as combined bait and hostage for the full ten years of my sentence—doubtless longer, if the Council had their way. But back in Arkenland, a child's life depended on me, her time fast running out. I didn't mean to fail in my promise to save her, no matter how many mages the Council sent to sit on me.

Jathon prodded me toward a veritable mountain of bulging burlap sacks beside the mine entrance. Drovers were hitching oxen into traces attached to a set of giant interlocking wheels. From the topmost wheel, a rope thick as a man's leg and studded with metal hooks carried coal sacks up the cliff to a second pullwheel at the gorge rim. There another set of haulers unloaded the sacks to pass into convoy wagons headed for Alathia's cities. Coal sacks removed, the rope snaked back down through a series of smaller guide wheels bolted to ledges on the cliff face.

The harsh clang of the shift bell sent echoes ricocheting between the gorge's sheer sandstone walls. Jathon shoved me over to a barrel-chested Alathian whose skin bore the deep pockmarks left by blacklight powder embers.

"You haul with Nessor today," Jathon told me.

Nessor's mouth curled in a brief, slight grimace. He stared over my head as if I didn't exist. Always, I stepped up as casually as if I hadn't noticed his disdain.

Jathon raised his voice. "Step lively, lads! We've still a chance for our full pay if you put your backs into hauling."

The drovers shouted to their oxen, and the wheels groaned into motion. Nessor and I heaved the first fat burlap sack up within reach of a pair of hookmen perched on a platform beside the rope. My back and arms burned with the sack's weight, though nowhere near as badly as they had when I first came. I'd been a frail shadow of myself then, my body still healing from my use of the deadly blood magic charm that had all too briefly reawakened my childhood Taint.

A bolt of bitter longing skewered me at the memory. If I were still Tainted, I could toss these coals

sacks sky-high by will alone. Or better yet, smash my neck to gleaming shards and fly straight over the Whitefire Mountains to my home city of Ninavel in Arkennland.

Yeah, right. That charm was locked away in some Council vault now. Assuming the Alathians hadn't destroyed it. And if the Taint lasted past puberty, I wouldn't be in this fix in the first place.

Long weeks of hauling coal had restored much of my strength, though I still looked a scrawny scrap compared to the rest of Jathon's crew. As we lifted an unending stream of sacks, my gaze drifted up the cliff. Beside the second guide wheel station, purple-brown lines of kalumite streaked the craggy sandstone.

Kalumite was innocuous enough on its own, hardly worth a decet per hundredweight in Ninavel. Yet I'd learned in my Tainted days that kalumite flecks added to copper filings in a certain precise ratio, mixed in oil and smeared over a charm's surface, made the charm's magic flare up in a conflagration that burned it out within seconds of the charm triggering.

The copper from the glowlight charm in my sock would provide more than enough filings, and a flask of oil, a file, and a pot of burn salve lay hidden in a crevice on a boulder by the barracks. Better yet, I had a plan to fox the mage to stop him hunting me down once I ran. All I needed now was a few fingersweight of kalumite.

The oilmen had lubricated all the guide wheels yesterday, as they did once each month. And two nights ago, I'd sneaked into the storeroom and dumped a bucket of coal grit into the cask of oil marked for the second guide wheel station. Surely it wouldn't be long now before the contaminated oil on the wheels abraded the rope enough to—

A sharp twang and an ear-rending squeal sounded above. The great wheel beside me juddered to a halt, oxen straining against taut traces.

Jathon cursed and squinted up the cliff. "Stand down, lads! A strand's snapped and snarled a guide wheel." His black brows lowered in a scowl, and I knew he was thinking of the minemaster's quote. He whistled to a drover. "Run for the laddermen, and be quick."

Beside me, Nessor thumped down a sack, his brow beetling in a frown. "Ladder men are working the Dragon's Maw today."

"Don't I know it." Jathon's scowl grew more thunderous than ever. The Dragon's Maw was another mine entrance a good mile off. The minemaster had decided a week back to string a secondary supply rope up the gorge wall there. It'd be high noon before the ladder men managed to stow the gear and hurry back, let alone set up to clear the snarled wheel.

The drover dashed off. I wiped sweaty hands on my trousers and straightened.

"You want that wheel cleared without waiting on the ladder men?" I asked Jathon. "I know a way that'll have you hauling again in no time."

Jathon cast a black look my way. "Don't think to try some scam on me, boy. A puny charm smuggler who knows nothing of minework can get us hauling again? I think not."

"I wasn't just a charm smuggler in Arkennland. Outriding was my trade, and I've guided many a convoy across the Whitefires. I've climbed cliffs that'd make your ladder men piss themselves, and I can rig ropes with my eyes closed. Give me a knife and a length of hitch line, and I'll climb up to the wheel, set a bypass, and cut the tangle free."

Jathon swung round. His dark eyes narrowed. "Never seen a scut-man so eager to get back to work."

"I didn't say I'd do it for free. Though seeing as how you pulled Gedavar off me this morning, I wouldn't ask much in return."

Jathon's suspicion shifted into hard appraisal. Plenty of scut-men tried to strike bargains for ext

rations or shorter work shifts, though it was a whipping offense for miners to give us coin. Jathon tapped his ward-etched ring, twin to Gedavar's, and looked pointedly at my torc. "I could order you up that cliff."

"You could," I agreed. "But a man does his fastest work for reward, not under threat of punishment."

Jathon grunted and crossed his arms. "What kind of reward are we talking, here?"

Now came the tricky part. Ask for too little, and Jathon would get suspicious again. Ask for too much, and he'd laugh in my face and refuse. He might order me up the cliff anyway, but I didn't care to count on it. Thankfully, the morning's confrontation with Gedavar had sparked an idea.

"Make sure Gedavar stays off me. I don't fancy getting strangled every time I blink, all thanks to an order I had no hand in. But he won't cross a crew chief. He'll back off if you make it plain you don't take any further 'discipline' poorly."

Jathon stood silent, frowning. I kept my stance casual despite the churning of my stomach.

"Send him up, Jathon," Nessor said, to my surprise. "If you don't, we'll never see that coin. We've all seen him crawl up those boulders by the barracks every morning like he's got feet sticky as blackfly's." He spoke with all the pleading I hadn't dared use. Murmurs of agreement came from the hookmen on their platform above.

Jathon fixed Nessor with a disgusted look. "Lost all your pay to Temmin last night, did you?" His gaze settled on me again. "A boulder's one thing. But this cliff...wouldn't you need iron spikes like the laddermen use?"

I snorted. "Pitons wouldn't do much good without a partner to belay." As his brows lowered, I hurried to assure him, "No need for partners or pitons on something this easy. See all those cracks and ledges? Khalmet's hand, the climb's no harder than scaling a tower stair." That part was true enough. Water seeps and moss slimed the cliff in spots, but the cracks angling up toward the guide wheel station were dry.

Jathon glanced across the gorge to the minemaster's office, tucked amidst a gaggle of storehouses against the opposite cliffs.

I tapped the torc around my neck. "I can't go anywhere." Talmaddis had warned me when he brought me to Cheltman that the torc would choke me unconscious if I got more than a quarter mile from the mining camp.

"And if you fall?"

I laughed, unable to help myself. "Fall? On this?"

"Cocky little bastard, aren't you?" Jathon chopped a hand at a drover. "Get a spare hitch rope." As the drover scrambled to comply, Jathon pulled his belt knife. "Fine," he said to me. "You get the wheel unsnarled in time for us to make the quota, I'll talk to Gedavar—but only if we meet the tall man's understand?"

I interlaced my fingers in the sign for a bargain sealed, then remembered he'd never been on the streetside in Ninavel. "Bargain's made."

He handed over the knife and the drover's coil of hempen rope. "Get to it, then."

I tucked the knife into my belt, slung the rope across my chest, and leaped for the cliff. I didn't have the spike-nailed boots I'd used for climbing in the Whitefires, but my work boots would serve well enough for rock as fissured as this. My blood sang as I wedged my fists in a slanting crack. Good as it felt good to climb something more than a lump of a boulder, even if the cliff was a crumbling mass of sandstone instead of the clean, sharp granite of the Whitefire peaks.

A rush of memory overwhelmed me: the sun blazing down from an indigo sky, turning quartz

studded cliffs brilliant as icefields. Sharp peaks stretching to the horizon, and below my airy ledge Cara's lithe form scaling the cliff with flowing ease, her blonde hair shining near as bright as the rock.

The stab of pain this time wasn't so easy to ignore. Cara. I missed her, desperately—and feared for her, too. Right before the Alathians dragged me off to the mines, I'd begged her to forget any ideas of rescuing me, and instead return to Ninavel to seek out the cunning bastard of a spy who represented my one last hope of saving young Melly from a life of mindburned slavery. Melly's father Sethan had been Cara's friend same as mine, though Cara didn't owe Sethan the way I did. But now I lay awake nights praying Cara wouldn't do anything too rash. Her skill in the mountains was unparalleled, but she had little experience with the darker games played by ganglords and shadow men.

Exactly why I needed to get the hell out of Alathia and sneak back to Ninavel. I stabbed fists and feet one after the other into the crack, twisting my wrists and ankles to lock each successive limb in place as I moved up the cliff. Past the first guide wheel station, the crack grew too thin for my boots to grip, slowing, placing my feet with care upon crumbling ledges. A shower of dirt and pebbles pattered down the cliff each time I moved.

My heart beat faster as I neared the offending wheel. The guide station was a simple scaffold of iron bars bolted over a sloping ledge. I unslung the rope from my chest, shook it out, and tied one end around my waist. Four feet into the rope, I tied a quick clover knot around the lowest scaffold bar. Dangerous to leave so much slack, since the force of even a short fall on a slack hemp rope could easily snap it, but I needed the freedom of movement if I wanted that kalumite.

I glanced down the cliff, and froze. Beyond the upturned, black-streaked faces of haulers and drovers, a lanky man in a blue and gray uniform was picking his way over the mudflats.

Talmaddis, the Council mage. Fuck! The miners didn't know the kalumite-and-copper trick, but the mage might. If he guessed my intent on the cliff, my chances of escape would vanish quick as frost on a firestone charm.

I mastered panic. He might only have glanced out the minemaster's window, seen me climbing and decided to investigate. If I could scrape and stow the kalumite before he got close enough to stop me properly, I might still have a chance.

Hurriedly, I adjusted my stance to block my right hand from view and set the edge of Jathon's knife against a fat purple vein of kalumite. With my left hand, I picked at a dangling strand of snarled rope.

A low, grumbling roar froze my knife hand mid-scrape. Startled shouts rang from below, Jathon's gravelly voice rising over the rest.

"Earthquake! Get clear—"

The roar swelled to drown him out. The cliff shook my feet from the ledge like a horse shivering and flying from its hide. In pure, useless reflex, I tried to halt my fall with the Taint, as if I were still a snoot-nosed kid rather than a good decade past my Change.

The dead spot in my mind didn't so much as twitch. I dropped like a stone. The rope attaching me to the guide wheel station snapped taut, near cutting me in two, and I slammed into the rock below the ledge. I twisted and made a desperate grab for a handhold, even as the vicious pull on my waist vanished.

I got one hand on the ledge rim, had an instant to register the rope end slithering past, the fibers sliced clean through—and lost my grip on the still-shuddering rock.

Air whistling past, the spiked teeth of the pullwheel rising to meet me, and all I could think was *Oh, fuck—*

Something yanked me sideways. The pullwheel flashed past. My plunge abruptly slowed to leave

me hovering with my nose and chest not a hands-width from the ground.

~~For a moment I could only gasp, unbelieving. Then I looked up and saw Talmaddis on his knees~~ the muck, eyes shut and one hand extended toward me, the rings on his fingers glowing softly silver. Behind him huddled a group of open-mouthed haulers. The white rush of shock faded, and I laughed shakily.

“Wouldn’t want to lose your prize hostage,” I said.

Talmaddis didn’t answer, only lowered his hand. I splatted down into mud. The ground no longer shuddered, though the clatter of falling rocks echoed through the gorge and waterfalls of sand hissed between ledges.

A tortured shriek of metal from above made us all jerk and duck. I rolled, getting a glimpse of thrashing haul rope and a dense spiderweb of black bars, rapidly growing larger.

The pullwheel station from the clifftop—Khalmet’s hand, it’d crush us all—

Talmaddis shouted a string of words, in a high, keening wail. Fiery lines streaked the onrushing iron. The fire spread, the bars crumbling to ash in its wake. I scrabbled to my feet and staggered back, still half expecting to be crushed flat.

All that reached me was a rain of embers. My heart felt like it might leap straight out of my chest. The miners cowering beside me were whey-faced, some babbling prayers.

Talmaddis’s curly head was bowed, his hands braced in the mud and his shoulders trembling. His breath came in rattling gasps. Jathon was shouting, urging men away from the cliff. The smarter ones had run, dark forms scurrying to the relative safety of the reedy flats near the stream winding through the camp. Yelling men boiled out of the mine tunnel. On the opposite side of the gorge, another swarm erupted from the night shift’s barracks. Several cabins had collapsed into a jackstraw of logs.

I took a step backward, then another. I should run. Now, while Talmaddis was too drained to cast another spell, and the overseers too busy to bother about a stray prisoner. I could find another band of kalumite somewhere further down the gorge, get my snapthroat charm off before anyone thought to hunt me...

“Mage!” Gedavar pushed past me. His eyes stared white from a face black with coal dust. “The quake—the main tunnel’s collapsed at the Broketurn junction! Three hundred men trapped beyond and the blacklights have gone red, means the air’s turning bad—can that cursed magic of yours break through the rubble?”

Talmaddis raised his head. His olive skin had gone sickly grey, the laugh lines bracketing his mouth turned deep as chasms. “I’ve nothing left,” he said in a raw whisper. “But my casting was more than enough to trigger the Watch’s detection spells. They’ll come...”

“When?” Gedavar demanded. A good question. I held my breath, waiting.

Talmaddis eased back on his heels. “For a spot so far from a city or the border, they’ll need time to target a translocation spell...” He dragged a shaking, mudsmear hand across his brow. His rings had changed from silver to dead black. “A few hours, no more.”

Gedavar raised a fist, as if he’d strike Talmaddis if he dared. “Twin gods curse you, man! The blacklights are red. Those men have minutes to live, not hours.”

I shuddered. Men suffocating in darkness, begging for help that wouldn’t come...damn it, I couldn’t let this stand. I leaned around Gedavar.

“What’s this shit about waiting, Talmaddis? You need more power to cast? Then take more. There’s plenty of life here.” I swept an arm at the oxen, at the ferns trailing beside the cliff seeps.

Talmaddis matched my glare. “I’m no blood mage! In Alathia, our magic is fueled by our own energies. We do not steal life from others.”

“You’re going to let those miners die, all for your gods-damned principles? For fuck’s sake nobody’s asking you to torture men to death! Who cares if you kill a tree, or an ox? Kiran could—”

“Kiran ai Ruslanov spent years training to work blood magic,” Talmaddis snapped. “Do you think it’s so easy? I haven’t the faintest idea how to raise power as a blood mage does without either destroying myself or everyone in this gorge.”

The haulers in earshot were staring at me as if I’d confessed to trafficking with demons. Run Alathians took an even more jaundiced view of magic than the Council. They nattered on about how the use of magic poisoned a man’s soul and invited the gods’ anger. Even an officially sanctioned mage like Talmaddis was viewed with deep distrust. Foreigners like me who smuggled illegal powerful charms through the Alathian border were considered little better than plague-carrying vermin. As for blood mages, who even in Arkennland had reputations worse than Shaikar’s devils, the miners thought the Council’s policy of execution far too lenient a fate.

Jathon spoke from behind me. “No choice but to dig our men out, then.” He gripped Gedavar’s shoulder. “Go tell the minemaster. I’ll organize a crew.”

The anger leached from Gedavar’s face, leaving it drawn and old. “Aye. But you haven’t seen the cave-in. It’ll take days to get through, even if we use blasting powder. My Rephet and the others. well.” His throat bobbed in a hard swallow.

“Wait,” Jathon said. “The Broketurn junction, you said? An air shaft slants in at the tunnel split. If we lower a powder charge down and blast through to the trapped side, they’ll have a chance at good air until the mages come.”

Gedavar pointed to a jutting prow of rock high and to the side of the mine entrance. The prow’s underside was a stair-stepped series of overhangs. Water dripped from cracks green with moss. Beneath one overhang lay a round black mouth. “With the haul rope downed, not even the laddermen can reach that shaft.”

Jathon turned. His dark eyes met mine. My fists clenched behind my back. Gods all damn it, I should’ve run.

You still can, an inner voice whispered, in the sly tone of my old partner Jylla. *Say you can’t help, but the climb’s too hard. Accidents happen in the mines. Those men knew the risk, and you owe the Alathians nothing. You won’t get another chance like this again.*

Of the two of us, Jylla had always been the clever one. Doubtless that’s why she was living in luxury in Ninavel instead of slaving away in this muck pit. Yet I couldn’t shake the image of Gedavar’s nephew, dying by inches in darkness, all because I’d taken his place. If I hadn’t climbed, Talmaddis hadn’t expended precious magic saving me...maybe Talmaddis wouldn’t have been too drained to help.

“I can reach the shaft,” I told Jathon. “But I’ll need pitons this time.” I wasn’t such a fool as to think I could climb a serious overhang unaided on such rotten rock. Not to mention the risk of aftershocks after a quake so large.

Jathon clapped me on the back, hope bright in his eyes. “Gedavar, get a charge. We’ll save those men yet.”

Gedavar wore a dark, skeptical scowl, but he strode off, shouting to the men milling about the mine entrance. Doubtless he figured he’d nothing to lose.

“Have you any men who know ropework?” I asked Jathon. “I need a belay from the ground.”

“The cartmen work with ropes and pulleys. I’ll find someone and get you a set of those spikewires from the supply chests.” Jathon hurried away.

Talmaddis was watching me. “You surprise me, Dev,” he said softly.

I barked out a laugh. “What, you thought I’d run?”

~~His mouth pulled in a wry, weary smile. “You considered it, I’m sure. For not doing so—I thank you. If you save the trapped men...the Council will also be grateful.”~~

“So grateful they’ll let me go?”

Talmaddis looked down. I sighed. “That’s what I thought.” I glanced up at the twisted spars jutting outward from the gorge rim, all that remained of the pullwheel scaffold. “If you’re so grateful, tell me one thing. Are quakes this strong common in Alathia?”

I’d heard tell that the Arkennland side of the Whitefire Mountains had been plagued by earthquakes, way back before Lord Sechaveh built the city of Ninavel in the bone dry desert of the Painted Valley. When he’d offered mages the chance to work magic without law or restriction in exchange for supplying the city’s water, likely he’d asked them to stabilize the ground as well. Ninavel hadn’t endured a major quake since the mage war some twenty years back, when so much magic was thrown around it unbalanced all of nature. I’d only been a toddler at the time, but I’d grown up hearing the stories.

Maybe earthquakes were natural in Alathia. But if they weren’t, I had a terrible suspicion I knew what—or rather, who—might’ve shoved the world out of balance.

“No,” Talmaddis said. “Quakes so strong are not common.”

His hazel eyes locked with mine. Within them I saw the echo of my own dread, and the name neither of us wanted to say.

Ruslan Khaveirin. Kiran’s master, the strongest mage in Ninavel, and a vicious, clever bastard. That was that. Who’d want revenge not only on the Alathian Council for keeping his apprentice, but on me personally, for crossing him. If he was casting spells in an attempt to rip apart the defensive wards that barricaded all of Alathia from foreign magic, I could well believe the earth might split and shudder in response.

And Kiran, kept under the Council’s thumb in Tamanath...the chill in my blood was nothing compared to the fear he’d endure when he realized Ruslan was coming for him.

I winced and shoved aside memories of a white-faced, desperate Kiran. I couldn’t afford to worry over him now. First I’d reach that air shaft, do my best to keep those miners alive. Then I’d think of Ruslan, and what I might salvage from the embers of my escape plan.

(Kiran)

Kiran straightened on his stool and rolled his shoulders in an attempt to relieve cramped muscles. The sky beyond the high slits of the workroom windows burned crimson with an approaching sunset. The labyrinthine chalk lines of his spell diagram had already grown difficult to read; soon further work would be impossible without additional illumination.

He eyed the inert crystal sphere of the magelight perched at the table's end and set his teeth. Thanks to the binding the Alathian Council had cast on him, he could no longer cast even the simplest of spells. He'd grown accustomed to the constant gnawing rasp of the binding against his *ikilhia*—his soul's fire, the source of his power—but not to the bitter ache of yearning every memory of magic brought.

The charm gleaming beside his slate seemed to mock him, mutely. A burnished vambrace of silver long enough to cover a man's arm from wrist to elbow, the metal was encrusted with gemstones and etched with sigils. Even with his inner senses dulled by the Council's binding, Kiran could feel the vast reservoir of magic bound within, a deep, soundless thrum that shivered his bones. The charm's dizzyingly complex spellwork had allowed the blood mage Simon Levanian to walk through Alathia's supposedly impassable border wards. Not just once, but on multiple occasions, with the Alathians none the wiser.

The Alathian Council had spared Kiran's life on his promise he could decipher Simon's spell and explain how he'd breached their defenses. More, they'd promised if Kiran could provide that knowledge quickly enough, they'd hear a plea for Dev's release from the mines.

Frustration tightened Kiran's throat. He laid a hand on the charm, once more seeing Simon's magic in a dense, fiery scrawl across his inner sight. He was so close now to a full sketch of Simon's pattern, but the last piece was by far the most difficult. How had Simon managed to stabilize the flow of the charm's immense energies without distorting his spell into uselessness? All week, Kiran had sketched diagram upon diagram, struggling to find the solution. Yet his every attempt contained some fatal flaw.

After all he owed Dev, he'd sketch diagrams until his fingers fell off, if that was what it took. But if he wanted light to work after sunset, he'd have to ask Stevannes.

Kiran glanced at the far side of the workroom, where Stevannes sat before another broad table of polished cinnabar wood. The arcanist's auburn head was bent over an array of slender malachite and jasper rods set within a charcoal sigil sketched on the table. Above the rods, the air rippled as if seen through heat haze. Occasional hints of viridian and indigo tinged the shifting air, reminiscent of the way Simon's charm had stained the air with color as it revealed and penetrated the border wards.

Alathia's foremost expert on defensive magic, Stevannes had made it all too clear he bitterly resented any interruptions by the Council's pet blood mage to his own investigation into the breach of Alathia's wards. He had a savagely sharp tongue at the best of times; and today his mood had been black from the start.

Yet success was so nearly within Kiran's grasp. He squared his shoulders, resolving to hold his calm no matter what Stevannes said.

"Pardon the interruption, but—"

A staccato series of raps on the workroom door silenced him mid-sentence. Surely Kiran's guard hadn't come to collect him yet? Usually he was allowed to keep working so long as Stevannes remained, and Stevannes's dedication was so fierce as to be disturbing. He worked hours that would put a bloodbound slave's to shame, and rarely left before midnight.

Stevannes twisted on his stool to aim a swift, vicious glare at Kiran, and flicked a ringed hand at the door. The black lines scribed around the doorframe glowed briefly silver as the workroom's ward was released.

The door creaked open to reveal a slender, straight-backed young woman whose blue and gray uniform bore the copper braid of a lieutenant of the Council's Watch.

"First Lieutenant Lenarimanas." Stevannes's glare vanished. He stood and bowed with formal precision. A wash of cerulean shot through the shimmering air above his table. "You've come to remove the blood mage?" He sounded hopeful.

Kiran gripped his slate. "Lena. It's early yet, and I'm so close to completing this pattern. If I could just have a few more hours..."

Lena nodded to him, her brown face grave under its crown of dark braids. "You needn't leave Kiran. I bring a message for Stevannes from Captain Martennan." She handed a sealed letter to Stevannes and came to peer at the diagram on Kiran's slate. "You've made progress, then? The captain will be pleased to hear it."

Stevannes snorted as he broke the letter's seal. "Progress? Hardly. His spell diagram hasn't changed a whit all week. All he does is dally over his slate and waste my time."

Silence was always the better option with Stevannes, but Kiran couldn't let the remark go unchallenged. Lena might be the closest thing he had to a friend in Alathia, even allowing him to call her by the short form of her family name, but she reported every scrap of information on his work to her superior, Captain Martennan, and through him, the Council.

"Deciphering these last power pathways is more difficult than I'd hoped," Kiran said, careful and mild in tone. "Simon used a technique for them I'm not familiar with."

Stevannes's iron-gray eyes lifted from the letter. "You're a blood mage, same as he was. Either you're stalling, or you're incompetent."

"I'm working as fast as I can," Kiran protested. "You can't fault me for not instantly grasping Simon's methodology. He wasn't my master. His mind follows different paths than Ruslan's. It's not an easy task, to think like him—"

"Easy enough for you, I'd imagine," Stevannes snapped. "All you blood mages think alike, seeking power without the least shred of morality. The Council should never have agreed to this farce of yours. Better to put down a rabid dog before it bites—"

"Stevannes." Lena spoke with cool authority. Though she was only in her mid-twenties and a full decade younger than Stevannes, as Martennan's first lieutenant she outranked even a master arcanist. "You know how important this work is, and you cannot think your insults are helping."

Stevannes's shoulders stiffened. "Why do you defend him? You know what he is."

"I judge men by their actions, not hearsay," Lena said.

"Hearsay!" Stevannes looked incredulous. "He raises power by murdering innocents. Not even he denies it." He jabbed a finger at Kiran. "I saw the report Pevennar and Alyashen wrote after they examined him. Even with his power bound, he still steals life from everything around him. He's not

man, he's a parasite."

"What?" Kiran's slate dropped from nerveless fingers to clatter on the table. Six weeks ago he agreed to spend a day being poked and prodded by the healers in the Sanitorium in exchange for scry-vision to confirm Dev's fair treatment at the mine, but the healers had barely spoken to him. They certainly hadn't mentioned anything like Stevannes's claim.

"Don't pretend you didn't know," Stevannes said. "You may have fooled Lenarimanas with your meek lamb act, but you don't fool me."

Kiran ignored him, looking to Lena. "Is what he says true?"

Lena sighed. "Yes."

Kiran could only stare at Lena, mutely. The dissonant discomfort of the binding heightened until pain clawed along his nerves.

Lena's brows drew together. "Kiran, you're not harming anyone. The power draw is minuscule. Alyashen and Pevennar think it's completely out of your control, like your heart beating. They have a theory it's meant to prevent you from aging."

Kiran put his head in his hands. He'd known the *akhelashva* ritual Ruslan had performed when Kiran came of age involved more than anchoring the mark-bond that permanently linked their minds and souls. He'd even known Ruslan had created a connection between Kiran's body and *ikilhia* to allow magical repair of physical injury. But he'd thought that connection internal to himself, and under conscious control.

What else had Ruslan done to him without his knowledge?

"Did they find anything else?" His voice sounded tinny and faint in his own ears.

"Nothing conclusive," Lena said. "The healers say your blood reacts strangely when exposed to the substances they use for healing diagnoses, but they don't know the cause. Pevennar believes that when Ruslan mark-bound you, he altered your body in a variety of subtle ways to make it more congruent with a blood mage's style of magic."

Stevannes issued a derisive grunt. "More congruent with slaughter and torture, you mean. Let me guess," he said to Kiran. "It feels *good* when you kill someone, doesn't it?"

Power rushing in, sweet and burning, like sunlight after endless dark—Kiran couldn't get enough air. "I don't kill people."

Stevannes's mouth curled, his eyes horribly knowing. "Simon Levanian is dead, isn't he? He tried to use you in a spell, and you destroyed him. And what about the convoy men you killed in the mountains?"

"The drovers' deaths were an accident! I tried to take only from animals when I cast to divert the avalanche from our convoy. And I had to cast—if I hadn't, the slide would have killed hundreds." Yet Kiran couldn't meet Stevannes's gaze. Harken's gentle, weathered face still haunted his dreams, accompanied by the shadowed figures of the drovers Kiran hadn't known.

"So you claim," Stevannes said. "Do you think a handful of feeble excuses for your murders are enough to make us forget who you truly are?"

Kiran flinched. Ever since the Council had spared his life, he'd cherished the hope that one day the Alathians' distrust of him would soften. That they'd stop seeing him as a threat, and allow him the time and materials he'd need to discover some means of dissolving his mark-bond. Yet if Stevannes's attitude was any indication, that day would be years in coming—if it ever did.

"*Enough*, Stevannes." Lena's voice was colder than he'd ever heard it. "I will not warn you again."

Stevannes drew himself up. "Forgive me, First Lieutenant. I merely wished to clarify the point." He thrust the opened letter at her. "Tell Captain Martennan I will indeed search the Parvyi treatises for

—” He stopped, his head tilting.

The floorboards under Kiran’s feet shivered. Chalk rolled along the tabletop to fetch up against the slate as the tremor subsided.

Stevannes dropped the letter and knelt to place his hands on the floor. Lena mirrored the movement, frowning. Kiran put his own hand on the table and strained his inner senses, but felt nothing beyond the dissonant throb of the block on his power.

“Another tremor.” The disdain had vanished from Stevannes’ voice.

“Go,” Lena said. “I’ll check.”

“Be certain.” Stevannes stood and left without a backward glance.

“Lena? Another tremor—there’ve been others?” Kiran hadn’t noticed any, but the quake had been so swift and subtle. Locked in concentration on his spell diagram, he might easily have missed it.

Lena approached, close enough he could have counted the smattering of dark freckles that marked her nose and cheeks. She reached for his temples. He shied away.

“What are you—”

“Kiran. This is necessary.” She reached again.

Reluctantly, Kiran held his ground. Her hands settled lightly on his skin. A slender thread of power snaked through his head, swift and shining as quicksilver.

“My apologies.” Lena stepped back. “I needed to examine your binding.”

“You think the tremor was my doing?” The words came out sharper than Kiran had intended, but the notion was so ridiculous. From the moment the Council had bound him, he’d been unable to use his magic for anything but passive reading of charms, living day and night with the constriction of their spell flaying his inner senses raw.

A faint frown creased her forehead. “I do not.”

“But others do, and not just Stevannes.” Kiran’s hands clenched. “Isn’t it enough that you keep me bound like this? That I’ve done everything the Council has asked?”

“The Council is entrusted with the safety of Alathia,” Lena said coolly. “Do you truly think the caution with you is unreasonable?”

Kiran didn’t answer, his attention caught by Stevannes’s still-active spell. The shimmer above the sigil had taken on a sickly gray tinge, mottled by holes with dark, crackling edges. Dread coalesced in Kiran’s chest. He pointed at the spell.

“If that represents your border wards...it’s Ruslan, isn’t it? He’s casting against Alathia, and your wards are failing.” He’d known this day would come. But so soon—he’d thought Ruslan would need more time to analyze the ward patterns. For all Ruslan’s hot temper, he was far too clever to cast against an enemy in haste. He’d waited twenty years to strike down Simon Levanian, until Kiran had unwittingly presented him with the perfect opportunity. Kiran hadn’t dared hope for nearly that length of time before Ruslan moved against the Council, but he had thought he’d gained a few seasons’ grace.

“Our wards hold.” Lena passed a hand over the sigil on Stevannes’s table. The gray shimmer vanished. “Stevannes’s spell showed...merely a warning.” But her eyes slid aside from his, her motions abrupt as she collected Stevannes’s carved stone rods.

“You don’t deny Ruslan is casting against you.” *Return him to me, or I will tear down your countenance stone by stone*, Ruslan had said; and the Alathians had refused him.

Lena surveyed him, a sharp line between her brows. “There is no direct evidence of Ruslan’s involvement.”

Kiran blinked. “What? But—”

“I cannot say more.” Lena turned away. She thrust Simon’s charm into the warded copper chest sitting beside Stevannes’s neatly ordered stacks of treatises. “Put away your things. You’re finished here for today; I’ll escort you back to your quarters.”

Her clipped tone said he’d learn nothing further. She must have been ordered to keep silence; and while Lena might treat him with calm kindness, she’d never disobey an order.

Kiran’s mind raced as he picked up chalk shards with cold, fumbling fingers. No direct evidence, given the cunning Ruslan had displayed against Simon, the Alathians had to realize Ruslan’s capacity for subtlety. Yet if Ruslan cast against Alathia, why should he conceal it? The Council would suspect him regardless. Far better for Ruslan to strike openly, counting on his dark reputation to instill further fear and division within the Council.

It didn’t make sense. Yet Kiran couldn’t shake the bleak certainty within. His reprieve from his master, brief as it had been, was over.

✱

(Dev)

I knelt amidst bedraggled reeds and thrust my hands into the chill shallows of the stream. Weariness dragged at my eyes and turned my muscles to lead. The sun had long since set; stars spattered the stretch of sky visible between the black bulwarks of the cliffs. The peeping of mossfrogs echoed from the seeps, punctuated by clanks and shouted orders from the mine as crews worked to shore up the main tunnel. In the dim silver glow of Talmaddis’s magelight, the blood crusted on my hands and forearm was as dark as the grime coating my clothes. Talmaddis stood silent beside me, his shoulders slumped as I scrubbed gore from my skin.

Jathon’s idea had worked. The powder charges I’d eased down the airshaft had blasted through the back side of the cave-in. The shaft wasn’t large enough for a man to pass, but it allowed enough good air through to keep the miners who’d survived the initial collapse alive until a crew of mages from the Watch finally showed up.

I’d hoped for another chance to slip away, but Jathon kept me dangling from pitons beside the airshaft to relay messages to the trapped men until the mages managed to create a narrow passageway through the cave-in. The effort of keeping the tunnel stable and the air breathable apparently took all their concentration; they left it to the rest of us to evacuate the injured. I’d spent the rest of the day climbing through rubble under Talmaddis’s supervision, seeking those survivors too badly hurt to make their own way out.

I grimaced and scraped harder at my fingers. Talmaddis had given me bloodfreeze and skinsear charms, but even so, I’d lost count of the men who died before I could lever them free.

I’d seen my dead mentor Sethan in every gray, pain-wracked face. *Splintered bone gleaming in the pitiless glare of high altitude sun, blood pouring from Sethan’s nose and mouth as I screamed curse and shoved at the boulder pinning him...* I yanked my hands from the river.

“That scut-man, the one whose crushed leg I had to sever—will he live?” The miner had looked as young as Kiran, somewhere in his late teens. His screams had dwindled into ragged croaks as I sawed through the flesh of his pulped leg. Thank Khalmet, he’d fainted before I had to drag him over the crack I’d slithered through to reach him.

“He may.” Talmaddis sounded as tired as I felt, though he no longer looked so haggard as he had in the immediate aftermath of the quake. His rings were still black, but he’d sparked the magelight easily enough. I took that as a warning. He might not have the full strength of his magic back yet, but he’d need only a trickle to deal with an untalented man like me. “Captain Jevarrdanos brought a full supply of herbs and elixirs, and several among his Watch have made extensive study of healing spells. If anyone can save a man from wound fever, they can.”

I swiped my hands dry on my pants, uncaring of the grimy cloth. Coal muck I could live with, not I’d consigned the dead men’s blood to the river. “If he’s not dead by the time they bother with a messenger scut-man.”

“This isn’t Ninavel.” Talmaddis’s voice gained an edge. “Those worst injured will be treated first, regardless of their status.”

“Yeah? If the Watch is so concerned for the injured, how come you’re still breathing down my neck instead of helping cast healing spells?” I pointed at the distant lantern-lit bulk of the camp mess hall, which now served as a makeshift infirmary.

“Because I’m not an idiot.” A brief, sardonic smile touched Talmaddis’s mouth. “You think I haven’t sensed that glowlight charm you’ve got stuffed down your sock? Admit it: you have some ill-conceived plan to run.”

My heart jolted. I stood, carefully casual. “No harm in carrying a perfectly legal charm in case I get sent on an errand in the tunnels. I just don’t want it stolen off me. I share barracks with criminals, you know.”

“Ah.” Talmaddis’s tone made it clear he didn’t buy that for an instant. “Well, consider my presence as an appeal to your better judgment. A clever man like yourself must realize the dangers of venturing outside our protection. Ruslan Khaveirin bears you no love, and you well know the torment a blood mage can inflict.”

Yeah, Ruslan was a vengeful, sadistic bastard. Yet Kiran had once said, *He thinks of untalented men as tools to be used or cast aside, not enemies worthy of attention.* It was Kiran he’d shatter the world to reclaim, not me. With all Ruslan’s attention focused on tearing down Alathia’s wards, I figured I’d stand a fair chance of surviving a return to Arkennland, so long as I was quiet about it. Hell, I’d probably be safer there than here, if the day’s quake was any indication.

“After today, I’m not overly impressed with your protection,” I told Talmaddis.

“Even after I saved your life twice? You’re a hard man to please,” Talmaddis said dryly.

I winced, remembering my fall, and the plummeting pullwheel station. “Right. Uh. Thanks for that.”

“You can thank me by refraining from anything foolish.” Talmaddis passed his hands over his face. “Especially tonight. I warn you, I won’t be in a forgiving mood if I’m roused from my bed. I’ll drag you back to camp.”

“Don’t worry,” I told him, truthfully. “I’m not even sure I can make it back to the barracks. Better anyway to wait until the latest crew of mages returned to Tamanath before I tried again for some kalumite, no matter how frustrated the delay left me. Far easier to fox one mage than a horde of them.”

“Nevertheless, you’ll understand if I insist you hand over that glowlight charm.” Talmaddis stuck out a hand.

“You want it, it’s yours.” Copper wasn’t hard to come by, not with half the chipping crews wearing the weak little glowlight and sharpening charms considered legal here. I slapped the charm into his waiting palm. “Trust me, all I want right now is sleep. Stand over my cot all night if you like, so long

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