

TRACING THE SHADOW

SARAH ASH



BALLANTINE BOOKS



TRACING
the
SHADOW

Book One of the Alchemist's Legacy



Sarah Ash

BANTAM BOOKS

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For Joan, *ma belle-mère*

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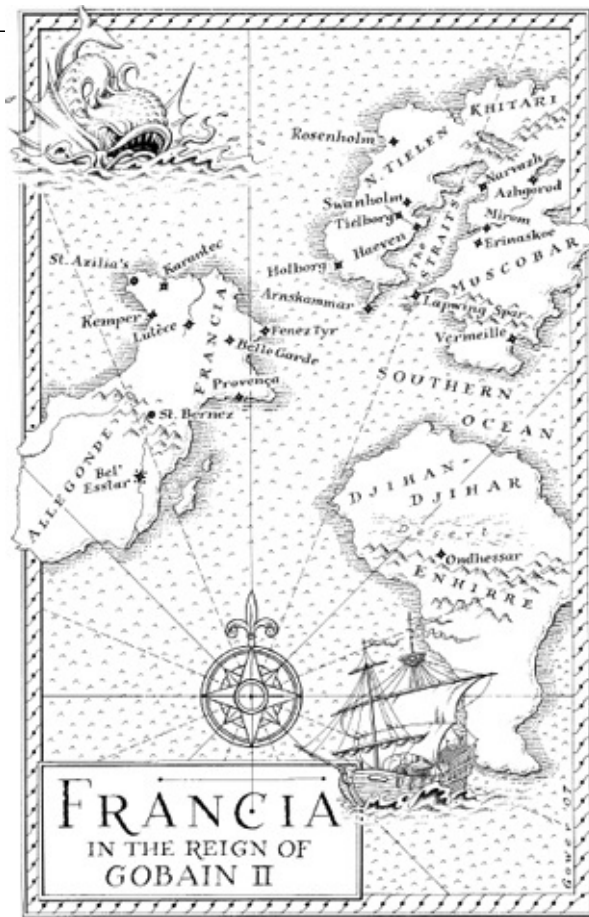
Ariel, my ever-resourceful webmaster

Alain Nevant and Stéphane Marsan and all their fellow Mousquetaires for welcoming me
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*Blessed Azilia, let thy light shine through the darkness and
show us the way to paradise.*

—VESPER PRAYER OF THE KNIGHTS OF THE COMMANDERIE



PROLOGUE



Ruaud de Lanvaux staggered as he passed beneath the archway into fabled Ondhessar. He was exhausted. Blood dripped into one eye from a scimitar slash he had received in the final assault on the citadel, and he wiped it away on the back of his hand.

“Fly our standard from the highest tower,” he ordered. “Let all Enhirre see that the Francia Commanderie is here to stay.”

The courtyard in front of him was strewn with bodies. The Enhirrans had fought like cornered dogs, desperately refusing to admit defeat. Even a hardened soldier like Ruaud was shaken by the sight; the night air stank of death. Even as his triumphant Guerriers took possession of the citadel, meticulously checking out every tower, every passageway on his orders, he heard the occasional pistol shot and stifled cry.

Ruaud walked slowly on across the bloodstained courtyard. His men were checking the dead, turning them over one by one, stripping them of their weapons.

And then he caught a low, rasping groan close by.

“This one’s still alive, Captain,” called Lieutenant Konan, holding his knife blade to the Enhirran’s throat. Ruaud went over. By the torchlight, he saw that the wounded man was young, hardly more than a boy. From the glistening blood seeping out from beneath his body and trickling from the side of his mouth, it was obvious that he wasn’t likely to last long. “Shall I put him out of his misery?” growled Konan.

The Enhirran murmured something and Ruaud saw a flicker of defiant fire in his dulled eyes. “Is he asking for water?” He went down on one knee beside him. “At least give the lad a drink.”

“You...defile...the holy place,” whispered the Enhirran in the common tongue. “You...have no right...to be here...”

“No right?” Konan grabbed the boy by the hair as if he was about to slit his throat. “You insolent—”

“Konan.” Ruaud placed a restraining hand on his lieutenant’s arm. “Let him be.”

“In Azilis’s name...I curse you...and all Francia...” The young warrior’s voice became more indistinct. “They will avenge us. They will come after you, the hawks that fly in the night...” The threat ended in a choking cough as blood gushed from his mouth. When Konan laid him down, his eyes had slid upward, staring sightlessly at the stars.

“Look, Captain.” Lieutenant Konan pointed. “See this? Is it some kind of tribal marking? Every man I’ve found has it.”

There was a tattoo, in indigo ink, on the boy’s left hand and another identical mark on his forehead.

“It looks like a character in Old Enhirran,” Ruaud said. “The letter ‘A.’”

“A? For Azilia?” Konan said, a tremble of emotion in his deep voice. “The Eternal Singer? Have you found the place at last?”

“But at such a high cost.” Ruaud drew his hand over the boy’s staring eyes, closing the lids. “Hundreds of Enhirrans have died here over the past days.”

“We have as much right as they to come on pilgrimage!” Konan said indignantly.

Ruaud let out a sigh that issued from the depths of his soul. “I fear they will not be quick to forgive us for taking Ondhessar.”

She had many names. To the Francians, she was Saint Azilia; to the Allegondans, she was Elesstar, the Beloved, patron saint and protectress of their capital city, Bel’Esstar. To the people of Enhirre, her birthplace, she was Azilis, the Eternal Singer. For hundreds of years, the Enhirrans had kept this place a secret from the rest of the quadrant, constructing the fortress-citadel of Ondhessar to protect Azilis Shrine.

A faint, high, eerie voice drifted over the scene of carnage, as clear as if spun from starlight...

“D’you hear that, Captain?” said Konan, wiping his bloodied knife clean.

Ruaud’s rational mind told him that the singing was just a natural phenomenon, the cold wind of the desert night whistling between the towers...

Until Alain Friard appeared at the doorway of one of the towers, beckoning excitedly.

“We’ve found her, Captain.”

Ruaud followed Friard. The fragile thread of sound grew clearer, more intense as he entered the shadowed doorway. A gleam of light faintly illuminated a dark passageway that wound down deep into the earth.

The atmosphere grew colder as he descended, one hand against the rough rock wall to guide him. The eerie song made the air tingle. They must be drawing nearer.

A pale figure glimmered in the shadows. Ruaud stopped, heart beating too fast—until he realized it was only a marble statue. Ancient, yet radiant with a bewitching, androgynous beauty, Azilia stood with both hands cupped, holding a lotus flower, symbol of the immortal soul. White light emanated

from the crystal petals. And at the heart of the lotus lay the source of the sound: a white crystal of glittering purity. The high, unearthly strain was emanating from the stone.

“How can it be that the stone is singing?” Père Laorans, the regiment’s priest, stood gazing up at the statue, his bearded face bathed in the white light. “Is it a natural phenomenon or the miraculous influence of the saint?”

Ruaud, entranced, extended one hand to touch the crystal lotus petals. As his fingers made contact, a loud grinding startled him; the other Guerriers whirled around, grasping their sword hilts, fearing a surprise attack. But an opening had appeared in the wall behind the statue, slowly gaping to reveal a dark cavity. Père Laorans thrust his hands into the cavity before Ruaud could stop him and let out a shout of excitement.

“Look!” he cried, pulling out his discovery. “Manuscripts. Scrolls. Ancient writings.”

Ruaud looked at the ancient parchments, so discolored with age and dust that it was hard to see any writing on them until Père Laorans held them close to the crystals. Faint characters began to appear on the faded vellum, almost as if the silvery light had brought them to life.

“Old Enhirran,” said Père Laorans triumphantly. “*The Book of Azilis*,” he translated. “‘The Eternal...Singer.’” He looked up at Ruaud. “This is one of the Sacred Texts,” he said in hushed tones.

“So this is a significant find?” Ruaud forgot his exhaustion; even his wound seemed to have stopped stinging since he entered the cavern.

“It must date back to Saint Sergius’s time...or even earlier. Maybe even to the time that Azilis herself was still alive.”

The great citadel of Ondhessar dominated the ridge, towering high above the hidden valley. Armed sentries constantly patrolled its battlements, where the crimson banners of the Commanderie fluttered in the wind. Cannons protruded from its battlements, ready to repel attackers.

But the trespasser had infiltrated the citadel by a secret way. With the setting of the sun came the faint, high, eerie voice he had been waiting to hear, as clear as if spun from starlight...

The trespasser flitted from tower to tower, gazing up at the worn carvings that surrounded each gaping doorway. He kept glancing uneasily over his shoulder, aware that he could be discovered at any moment. He had entered forbidden ground, and the price for discovery was death.

No time to linger.

The fragile voice grew clearer, more intense. He entered the shadowed doorway and followed the thread of sound down a dark stair. If he was caught in the act of trespass, there would be no possible escape; he would be trapped deep belowground. The Guerriers of the Commanderie had dedicated

their lives to the annihilation of all who practiced the Forbidden Arts. It had taken him many months of delicate investigation and deception to discover the location of this mystery. He was not going to let a few fanatical Francians stand in his way.

“And here you are,” he said softly. The statue of Azilis stood before him, holding the lotus flower which nestled the source of the unearthly sound. “An aethyr crystal.”

The trespasser gazed down at his prize in amazement, the soft radiance illuminating his face. Then he moved swiftly, purposefully, taking a sharp chisel from his pocket, working to pry the rare stone from the lotus within the statue’s curved fingers.

Just as it came loose, the sound stopped abruptly. Hastily, he thrust his prize into his inner pocket and took out another stone, a clear crystal, and put it in the lotus gem’s place.

“Someone’s in the Shrine!” Booted feet clattered overhead, coming nearer.

He had been discovered.

“Give yourself up! You’re surrounded.”

He made for the winding stair and started to climb.

“The tower! Cut him off at the entrance!” There was still a chance he might get away, but his knees were aching as he stumbled on upward, each worn step seeming steeper than the last.

The arched doorway lay ahead. The moon had risen while he was underground. He hurried onward, hearing his own painful wheezing echoing in the lofty vault of the tower.

I’m getting too old for this kind of venture.

Outside, the citadel towers loomed above him, silvered by the rising moon. If he could just make it to his craft...

A Guerrier appeared out of the shadows. “Stop, or we shoot.” He leveled a pistol at him. “You won’t get away.” The voice was young and earnest.

Yet the trespasser ran on, ignoring the warning.

“Fire!”

Tiny bursts of flame lit the darkness as the powder in the pans ignited and shots rang out. Musk balls whizzed past him, grazing off chips of stone as he ran.

“After him—don’t let him escape!”

He reached his craft, little bigger than a rowboat, and crawled inside, shaking loose the sail.

Must find enough strength to get away.

He closed his eyes, seeking the path of the winds. Streaking like crystal dragons, they scored interweaving tracks through the night, high above. He reached out to them and felt a sudden shudder in the air as one tore across the desert toward the fort.

Clouds of dust and sand arose, blotting out the stars. And as the sail filled, the wind began to lift the craft into the air.

The first Guerrier, swifter than the rest, caught up with him. He made a grab for the craft, clinging on to the side.

Damn you, you won't stop me now.

The trespasser twisted his fingers together, making the hand signs to control the wind beneath the craft.

Dust, grit, and sand, sucked up from below, showered down, peppering the Guerrier, lacerating him as sharp as tiny shards of glass. Half-blinded, he loosed his hold and fell. The craft rose and went spinning away. The last the trespasser saw as the fast-gusting wind bore him swiftly upward toward the stars was the young Guerrier lying sprawled on the ground.

CHAPTER 1



The Aethyr Vox stood on Magister Linnaius's desk, collecting dust. It had stood there for many weeks, awaiting its inventor's return. And Rieuk Mordiern, Linnaius's apprentice, had been assigned to cleaning duties again. With a feather duster, he began to clean the delicate mechanism.

"Apprentice alchemist? Unpaid servant, more like," he muttered to the empty laboratory.

In his master's absence, Rieuk had been kept busy assisting Magister de Maunoir, but he was still charged with keeping Linnaius's laboratory spotless, in readiness for his return.

The Aethyr Vox had been developed by two alchemists, Linnaius and Hervé de Maunoir. The device was designed to convey the voice through the aethyr by setting up resonances, using crystals that had been alchemically charged. A second Vox had been installed in Magister de Maunoir's cottage beyond the college walls, and the two magisters had spent many long hours trying to communicate with each other. But to their frustration, it still did not work.

Next to the Vox stood a tray glittering with quartz crystals of varying shapes and types; each one had already been tested in the Vox as a conductor and discarded. Rieuk set down the duster and lifted one, balancing it in the palm of his hand.

He could sense a faint resonance emanating from the heart of the crystal. This natural connection between his flesh and blood and the rock was intoxicating. It was as if he were listening to the heartbeat of the earth itself. He had begun of late to realize that the other students did not share this ability. If he closed his eyes and let his mind become fully attuned to the pulse, he could sometimes glimpse the aethyr stream: a fast-flowing current moving between worlds and dimensions.

The crystal vibrations flowed through Rieuk's body. This one sang like a high, reedy flute, emitting little pulses of citrine light. Entranced by the purity of its cleansing tone, he stood there, his taste forgotten, listening intently.

The door burst open. Startled, Rieuk almost dropped the crystal. But it was only Deniel, Magister de Rhuys's apprentice.

"Magister Gonery needs you. It's urgent."

Rieuk slipped the crystal into his jacket pocket for safekeeping. "What's so urgent it can't wait till I've done my chores?" he asked as he followed Deniel out into the corridor.

"Important visitors from the capital. Asking for your master. Hurry!"

Rieuk ran all the way from Magister Linnaius's tower to the principal's study, almost sliding down the spiral stair. He arrived out of breath.

"Ah, here is Rieuk Mordiern, Magister Linnaius's apprentice," said Magister Gonery, beckoning him inside. "Close the door, Rieuk. We don't want to be interrupted."

Two strangers turned to stare at him. Both wore long and travel-stained coats, yet there was something about their haughty bearing that spoke of power and influence. These must be the government officials, come to check on the invention that they had funded. One had a grizzled, neatly trimmed beard; the other, smooth-shaven, hovered behind, holding a dispatch case.

"Well?" asked the elder of the two, seating himself opposite Magister Gonery. "Is the device ready?"

Rieuk shot an anguished look at the old alchemist.

"There have been a few...minor problems," said Gonery in level tones.

"Unfortunate for my masters...but rather more unfortunate for you and the college." The government official's voice was smooth and pleasantly modulated but Rieuk heard an unmistakable hint of warning and shivered. "Magister Linnaius made us a promise. He assured us that the Vox would be finished by early summer. And now, when Francia has its greatest need, you tell me that he encountered a 'few problems'?"

"Where is he?" demanded the other. "Why is he not here, as we arranged? Does he intend to insult us by sending a mere apprentice in his stead? Or is he too ashamed to show his face?"

A mere apprentice. That stung.

"Rieuk, tell our visitors where your master has gone."

Rieuk felt as if a hand had tightened around his vocal cords. "My—my master has gone overseas to find a special kind of crystal for the Vox."

The elder of the two let out an impatient sigh. "This is unacceptable. The Ministry has paid the college a considerable sum of money to finance this project."

"Exactly when was your master planning on returning?" said the other, rounding on Rieuk. Rieuk took a step back.

"If the Admiralty could just grant us another week or so..." put in Magister Gonery. Rieuk had never heard Magister Gonery speak so deferentially before.

"In my opinion, too much is riding on the success of Magister Linnaius's invention," said the elder official to his colleague. He leaned on Magister Gonery's desk, confronting the old alchemist. "Have

you any idea what's happening outside the peaceful confines of your little college, Magister?"

Gonery shook his head.

"Francia is under threat. War with Tielen is almost inevitable. We need the *Vox now*."

War? Rieuk's eyes widened at the thought. Were the Tielens about to launch an invasion?

"Heaven knows, it's been hard enough trying to keep the Inquisition away from your doors. And now there's a new Inquisitor, who is more than eager to prove himself to the king."

"A new Inquisitor?" Magister Gonery repeated slowly, as though digesting this information.

"Alois Visant. And he has his eye on this college. It seems that there have been complaints in the town. Accusations. At the first whisper of forbidden practices, he will shut you down and put you on trial."

"We have nothing to hide," said Gonery mildly.

This news only increased Rieuk's apprehension; if the Admiralty officials went away empty handed, they would withdraw their protection and the college would be in danger from the religious fanatics running the Inquisition. They were suspicious of alchymy, regarding it as little different from the forbidden Dark Arts.

"We're busy men, Magister. We can't waste any more time here," said the elder.

"If you were to return tomorrow, gentlemen, I'm sure that—"

"We're on our way to the naval dockyards at Fenez-Tyr. If there's a breakthrough, send word to us there, at the manager's house." The younger official placed a paper on Gonery's desk and snapped his case shut.

"If we hear nothing from you by the end of the week, then your funding will be stopped and the project canceled." The elder official stopped at the door, then turned back as if a thought had just occurred to him. "And if that happens, we can no longer protect you from investigation by the Inquisition."

Magister Gonery nodded.

"We'll show ourselves out. Good-day to you, Magister Gonery."

When the visitors had gone, Magister Gonery sank back down into his chair. Rieuk glanced at the elderly alchemist, uncertain what to do. The official's ominous last words kept repeating in his head. An Inquisition investigation.

"This is serious, isn't it, Magister?"

"What?" Gonery looked up, blinking, as if he had forgotten Rieuk was there. "Events have"

overtaken us, Rieuk. It seems that the Tielens have taken our ministers by surprise.”

“But if we could make the Vox work, it would save the college from closure.” Rieuk’s hand slid into his pocket where the citrine crystal lay and felt a little tingle of energy tickle his fingertip. “Magister, let me try. You know I have some skill with crystals. If it’s to save the college—”

“And has Magister Linnaius given you permission to work on his invention?”

Rieuk hesitated. “Well, not exactly…”

“If I were you, I would not attempt anything that would make Magister Linnaius angry,” said Gonerly, regarding him severely over the top of his spectacles.

“So what was all that about?” Deniel met Rieuk as he approached the laboratory. “Oh, come on, you can tell me. I won’t blab. Was it about the Vox?”

Rieuk recovered enough to nod.

“Can’t you ask to be transferred to Maistre de Rhuys? He’s much more easygoing.”

“But he already has you and Madoc.”

“And we split the work between us. Which leaves time for fun.” Deniel reached out and tousled Rieuk’s hair. “When was the last time you came out into Karantec with us?”

Rieuk gave a little shrug.

“Madoc and I are off to the tavern after dinner. There’s a new girl working there, Jenovefa.” Deniel outlined a voluptuous silhouette with both hands.

“I’ve got to work.”

“Poor Rieuk. Nearly eighteen and never been kissed. I’m getting worried about you.” Rieuk winced and ducked out of Deniel’s range. “Always studying. There’s more to life than alchemy.”

But Rieuk had sensed a breath of winter’s wind shiver along the passageway. Deniel must have felt it too because he turned instinctively, just as Magister Linnaius appeared behind him.

“M—Magister!” stammered Rieuk. “You’ve just missed the Admiralty officials.”

“Unfortunate.” Linnaius loomed over Rieuk, his eyes burning cold as ice. “Where is Magister de Maunoir?”

“I—I heard that his wife was sick,” offered Deniel. “He’s looking after little Klervie.”

Magister Linnaius let out a short sigh of exasperation. “I have urgent news for Maistre Goner. Rieuk, take this down to Magister de Maunoir.” He thrust a small wooden box into Rieuk’s hands.

“N—now?” It was nearly six in the evening and the dinner bell would soon be ringing out over the college towers.

“Must I repeat myself?” Magister Linnaius gave him a look of such chill disdain that Rieuk abandoned any hope of eating. “And Deniel, what are you doing idling outside my laboratory? Magister de Rhuys is looking for you.” With that, Magister Linnaius swept on down the passageway.

“So no dinner for you tonight?” Deniel called back over his shoulder. “Shall I ask the kitchen to save some for you? It’s fish stew—with mussels.”

“Why couldn’t you have got back a quarter hour earlier?” Rieuk muttered. But at least he had the chance to put the citrine crystal back before Magister Linnaius noticed it was missing. He reached into his pocket and drew it out, feeling again the pulse of its crystalline heartbeat.

But now he could sense another faint pulsation nearby. The crystal that nestled in his cupped hand must have set off a sympathetic resonance in another. And wasn’t that precisely what Magister Linnaius had been trying to do, find two crystals that were “in tune” with each other?

Rieuk cast around for the source of the answering vibrations. The sound grew stronger as he moved toward the plain wooden box that his master had told him to take to Magister de Maunoir. With shaking fingers, Rieuk undid the metal catch and opened the lid.

Inside, cushioned on midnight-black silk, lay a crystal. It was clear, except for a single vein of milky white at its heart. “So beautiful,” Rieuk murmured, hardly daring to touch it for fear of sullyin its purity. “Like a fallen star.”

Surely it wouldn’t hurt to try? He lifted the glass cover and carefully inserted the still-vibrating citrine quartz in the Vox on the desk and adjusted the voice receptor. Then he closed the box lid on the crystal and set out. He could just imagine the magister’s astonished comments when the Vox Aethyri began to transmit his voice. “*So young Rieuk Mordiern solved the problem that had you foxed, Kaspar!*”

Clutching the box, Rieuk ran down the winding lane that led toward the river and Magister de Maunoir’s cottage. A fair-haired little girl was teasing an indolent grey tabby cat on the doorstep, waving an aspen twig over its whiskers and giggling delightedly whenever the cat opened one sleepy eye to bat the twig away.

“Hallo, m’sieur Rieuk!”

The little girl was smiling up at him, her eyes blue as the summer sky. He recognized the sweet face of Klervie, Hervé's daughter.

"Klervie, is your father at home?"

Klervie banged on the front door. "Papa!"

Magister de Maunoir appeared on the step with one finger pressed to his lips. "Ssh, Klervie. Mama still has a bad headache. Play quietly with Mewen." The cat rolled off the step and made a sudden dash toward the back garden with Klervie dancing after it. "I'm sorry, Rieuk." Magister de Maunoir looked even more careworn and bemused than usual. "Have you brought a message from the college?"

"It's about the Vox," Rieuk said in a loud whisper. "I think I've found two crystals with sympathetic resonance."

Hervé de Maunoir's tired expression vanished. "You'd better come in!"

He led Rieuk to his study which, unlike Magister Linnaius's spotless laboratory, was crammed with precariously piled stacks of books, jars of gruesome specimens pickled in cloudy alcohol, and cases of dried insects. On the desk, amid all the clutter, gleamed the second Vox, twin to the one in college.

"I don't recall ever seeing a stone like this before," said de Maunoir in puzzled tones. He picked it up and examined it. "Where did you find it?"

Rieuk hesitated a moment. "Magister Linnaius brought it back with him."

"So he's returned at last! And he told you to use it in the Vox?"

Rieuk made a vague gesture. "He told me to bring it to you..."

"Well, I don't suppose it can hurt to try."

"It worked in the laboratory." Rieuk refused to let himself be defeated. Yet the crystal remained silent and every attempt to make it sing as it had before failed.

"Perhaps we should try again tomorrow."

"Hervé," called a woman's voice weakly. "Has Klervie had her supper?"

Hervé leaped up. "Is that the time already?" he called back. "I'm on my way, dear." He returned a minute or so later. "She's not in the garden. She must have gone to her friend Youna's." Rieuk did not miss the flustered look in his eyes. "I'll be back soon."

"Let me try once more, Magister." His future as an alchemist might rest on this one act. If he succeeded, the Admiralty would get their invention and the college would be saved from closure.

“By all means...” Hervé was already hurrying out of the door.

Rieuk took the crystal out of the Vox and pressed it to his forehead, seeking again for that elusive voice. For a second he felt a tremor of energy, like a distant flicker of lightning. Hastily, he replaced it, and waited.

And waited.

Tired and dejected, Rieuk leaned forward on the desk beside the Vox and let his head rest on his outstretched arms. He closed his eyes. So close to success and yet still so far...

“So you really think this will lead to war?”

War? Who was talking of war? The voice had been faint, but utterly distinct.

“Francia laid claim to the islands first. Yet the Arkhan of Enhirre has just signed a trade treaty with Prince Karl of Tielen.” That dry tone sounded just like his master’s. But how could it be? *“He granted Tielen exclusive rights to the spice trade. And now it’s stalemate...”* The voice faded out. Rieuk raised his head, wondering if he had caught fragments of a conversation drifting in as people passed by the cottage.

“Are you being entirely frank with me, Kaspar?”

Rieuk sat bolt upright. Few people were permitted to call Magister Linnaius by his first name.

“You’ve a distracted look about you.” The voice was issuing from the receiver of the Aethyr Vox. *“You haven’t been doing any meddling yourself, have you?”*

“I may have stirred up a little trouble, yes, but nothing that I can’t take care of.”

Rieuk gripped the edge of the desk, rigid with concentration. The voices faded in and out, almost as if the two speakers were pacing to and fro in front of the Vox.

“Yes, but trouble may follow you here to Karantec and bring misfortune on us all,” came Gonery’s voice, suddenly clear, as though he were bending close to the speaker, making Rieuk jump.

“What’s this?” demanded Magister Linnaius. *“Who placed this crystal in the transmitter, Gonery? Has Hervé been working on the Vox?”* Rieuk shrank back. Even though logic told him that neither alchemist could see him, he felt as if he had been caught red-handed.

“I haven’t seen Hervé today.”

“Then who’s been in my rooms?” The question was asked in such a menacing tone that Rieuk felt a sick, sinking sensation in his stomach. Magister Linnaius did not sound in the least pleased.

“Only your apprentice.”

“Rieuk? Could he have tampered with—”

A thin, high whining sound began to emanate from the Vox.

“*What is that infernal racket?*”

The sound set Rieuk’s teeth on edge. It was like chalk rasped over a blackboard, a knife blade scraped against glass. And it went on and on, growing ever more piercing.

“*It’s coming from the Vox!*”

“*I’ll remove the cryst—*” The voices ceased abruptly as the connection was broken. But the excruciating sound continued, drilling through all the cavities of his skull. Pressing a hand to one aching ear, Rieuk reached out to prise out the throbbing stone from its setting.

But the excruciating sound did not stop. The crystal lay in his sweating palms, still emitting its shrill vibrating cry, almost as if it were alive. His whole body began to judder in sympathy. And now the crystal began to glow with a cloudy white light, so that its brightness made his flesh seem transparent.

The door was flung open and Hervé de Maunoir ran in. “What’s happening?” he shouted, his voice barely audible above the din.

“The Vox works. But it’s—tearing me apart!” Someone—something—was trapped inside. Its agonized cry possessed Rieuk until he felt himself sucked helplessly into its frenzy of despair.

“Where are you?” he cried, his voice barely audible above the wailing cry.

A slender, translucent figure appeared, sealed within a column of milky-white light. The light was so dazzling that he could not see the figure clearly, he could only hear its anguished cry—a cry that seared all thoughts from his brain but one: *Set me free.*

CHAPTER 2



A deliciously creamy perfume wafts through Klervie's dream: she runs through dew-soaked grass, the cool wetness dampening her bare feet. The pale shadow of the unicorn flits in front of her as she pursues it, eager to stroke its silky flanks. It will lead her to the hidden grove where the Faie dance under the moonlight. And if you catch a Faie, it must grant you a wish. White flowers open their petals as the unicorn passes and a delicious scent breathes out. Mmm...vanilla cream...

A faint, thin cry shudders through the starlit night...

And Klervie awoke. She lay still, clutching the sheet to her. It had been such a beautiful dream until—

There it was again! And it was coming from the kitchen, she was sure of it. It was the desolate, desperate cry of a trapped creature.

“Mewen, you *bad* cat!” she whispered. The family's sleek grey tabby had taken to bringing in his prey half-dead, delighting in tormenting it until it expired of exhaustion, or he grew bored. Klervie slipped out of her truckle bed and padded across the moonlit flagstones, wondering if it were a field mouse or a baby rabbit. Could she rescue it in time from Mewen's cruel claws?

Yet again the cry whispered through the cottage. Klervie stopped. It made her feel cold and shiver, even though the summer night was close and airless. And it was not coming from the kitchen; it had issued from Papa's study. And the light she had taken for moonlight was seeping from beneath Papa's study door. Was he working late?

Klervie went up on tiptoe to raise the latch. The door slowly opened, revealing a strange radiance that flickered like silver firelight burning from a tray of translucent coals on the desk. The light sharply outlined in shadow-silhouette the two men bending over the tray. They were so engrossed that they did not see her. She just stood staring, bewitched. A little voice nagged at the back of her mind, warning, “*Go back to bed. Papa will be angry if you disturb his work.*”

And yet she lingered.

“What is it?” She recognized the voice of Rieuk Mordiern, hoarse with excitement.

“I believe it may be an aethyrial spirit,” said Papa. Both men spoke softly, amazedly.

“But how did I—”

“In working with aethyr, it is always possible to encounter forces invisible to mortal man. Even entrap them. It seems you may have done just that.”

Klervie heard the words but did not understand them. She must still be dreaming. For there, fading in and out of clarity like a reflection seen in a wind-rippled lake, she glimpsed a face, its features twisted into an expression of such agony that it pained her to look at it. And as she gazed, she saw it fix on her for a second with its anguish-riven eyes.

Was it a Faie? So translucent was its form, it could have been scratched on glass. And it seemed to be begging her to help it.

“It’s changing,” warned Papa. “Don’t let go, Rieuk. If it gets loose, God knows what damage it’ll do.”

The dazzle of light emanating from the Faie was increasing, until it was so bright that Klervie’s eyes ached to look at it. It began to spin, particles of brightness flying off like scattered raindrops.

“It’s resisting.”

Its high-pitched scream of defiance shattered glass and made Klervie press her hands to her ears.

“Help me,” gasped Rieuk. “I can’t hold it for much longer.”

Papa raised his hands high above the wavering spirit. “By the power of my blood, I bind you. Transmute,” he commanded, “and contain.” Klervie could not see what they were doing as both leaned over the desk, their shadows blotting out the silvered light. There came a last faint, wailing shriek—and suddenly all the brilliance was sucked out of the air.

“What have you done, Rieuk?” a voice asked exhaustedly in the darkness. “What have you done?”

“You damned fool!” A stinging blow caught Rieuk across the cheek and chin; he reeled, toppling backward, knocking over a laboratory stool. He had no idea that the magister could muster so much physical strength. “What were you thinking of, risking something so dangerous?” Magister Linnaius’s silver eyes glinted with fury in the gloom, cold as winter lightning. “You let out an aethyr spirit. You could have killed us all!”

Rieuk cowered, terrified. He had never seen his master so angry before. “B—but I made the Veil of Aethyria work—”

“You deserve to be expelled. Meddling with elemental forces far too strong for you to contain.”

“Expelled?” That single word shocked Rieuk to silence. Not one student had been expelled in all his seven years at the college. To be expelled before completing his apprenticeship was the worst possible punishment the magister could inflict.

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