

A MAGE'S
THRONE

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NATALIE THORPE

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TRIGGER WARNINGS: (mentions of) Ableism, Alcohol, Blood, Death and near death, Gaslighting, Profanity, Sex, Substance abuse, (mentions of) Suicidal thoughts, Violence

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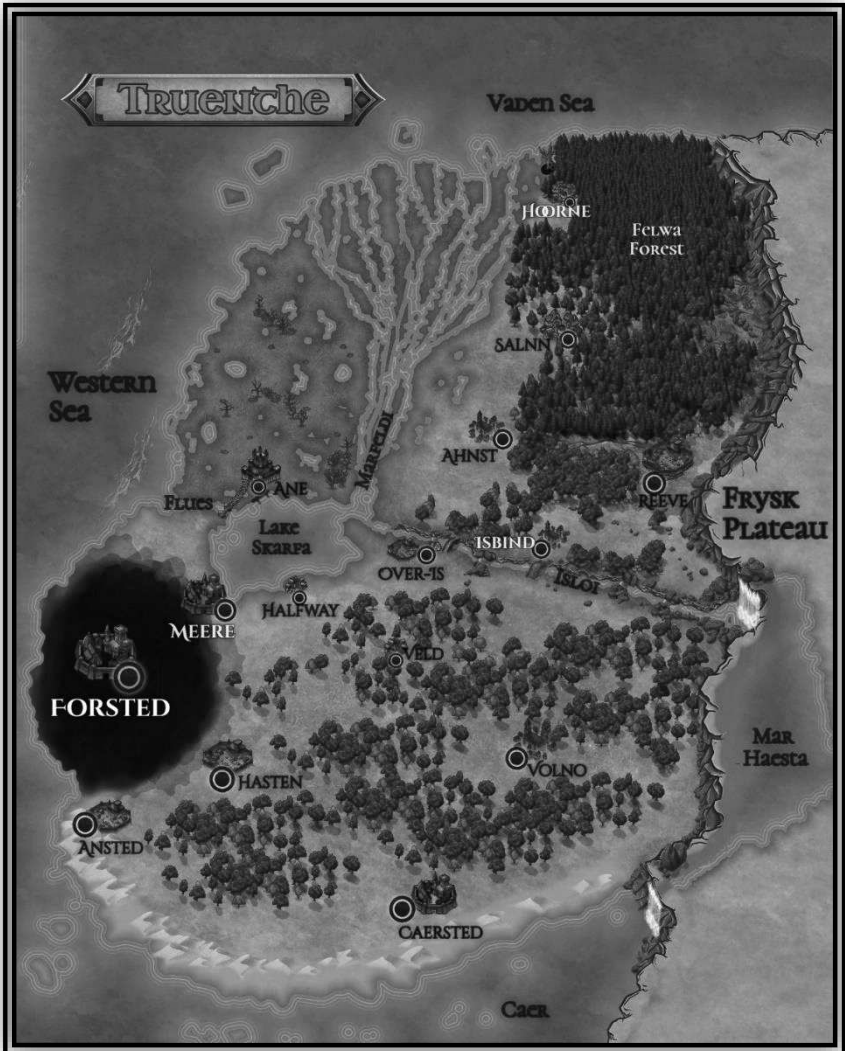
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*To my oldest daughter,
who once asked me if I was writing the book
or if the book was writing me...
The book definitely wrote me*

*And to my son,
who showed me the resilience and forgiving nature of teenage boys*

*And to my youngest daughter;
sorry, mummy isn't going to read this book to you.*



PROLOGUE

I hate magic...

... and love it. I'd love to have it but hate that I don't. It's not fair.

We were supposed to be the same. He and I; together forming a little island in the rest of the world.

We look so alike even our parents have difficulty telling us apart. Only our location is often an indication of which twin stands before them; my brother favours the bustle of people and animals in the stables, while I prefer the quiet company of my battle figurines that I like to set up on maps to fight out their imaginary skirmishes. For all else, we are one.

But it is all a lie. We are not the same at all because his magic appeared and I have none. How can this be? We are identical in everything—we should both have magic!

I'm happy for him though, not envious at all, just a little sad that it

makes us different. I tried telling him that and how remarkable I thought it was that he came to have magic when neither of our parents were Mages or even Gifted at the very least.

What *does* hurt is that he kept it from me. He thought telling me would hurt my feelings and so, he kept it a secret. That he kept it a secret from *everyone* doesn't make it hurt less. There have never been any secrets between *us*...

My brother tried to soften the blow by telling me it doesn't seem to work all the time because he's only just started showing the first signs and that he's still learning how to control the magic. I told him it didn't matter, that I was happy for him and wanted him to show me. Maybe it was the pressure I placed upon him, maybe it was the guilt of having kept his magic a secret, but he couldn't get it to work.

He was embarrassed and I'm ashamed to admit that I pushed him into trying until he snapped.

"It doesn't work because of *you!*" he shouted, "because *you* don't have any magic! It only works on people who *do* have magic; it makes them stronger, more powerful!"

He ran away after that outburst and it took me a long time to find him—he wasn't in any of our usual hiding places. Not in the small spare room we confiscated and built into our very own fortress, with blankets and cushions we scrounged up from all over

the house. He wasn't at the kitchens or the stables, and he didn't take one of the horses to go riding at the beach. I was about to venture into the city when I happened to pass by the library and went in on a whim.

I found my brother there, tucked away in a corner, a book on his lap, a peculiar sight. He detests reading and would rather be anywhere than in the 'stuffy dead tree mausoleum'. I don't mind reading much, as long as it teaches me something new and useful like sword techniques or battle strategies. He likes it when we play out what I have learned; sometimes taking our wasters to fence on the beach, other times watching me set up my figurines on a map of the Kingdom and battling it out there.

Slightly ashamed I caught him in the library *with* a book, he tried hiding it from me. It was a book about magic.

"It's all right," I said. "You don't have to hide it from me. I'm sorry I pushed you into showing me."

"No, *I'm* sorry," he replied remorseful. "I should never have kept it from you. I should have told you immediately... You don't feel it? You don't feel anything?" His voice was barely above a whisper as if he was still afraid I would be hurt by this difference between us.

"Not yet," I replied with a chipper smile, more to make him feel better than because I actually believed I would soon start to

show signs of having magic myself. "I'll help you learn to control it. Read with you," I offered, pointing at the book.

"Actually, I was thinking..." He looked down a little embarrassed then huffed a laugh. "What if I try really hard on focusing on your magic? If I can make other Mages stronger, maybe I can make your magic stronger too, make it reveal itself, and then we can both train together!" The thought of him being able to coax out my magic encouraged him so much that I hadn't the heart to dissuade him from trying by telling him this all relied on whether I even *had* any magic.

"You could try if you want to... It makes no difference to me. I'll be fine without it," I said, wishing I spoke the truth, but I had to admit, if there was even the slightest possibility of his idea to work, I was ready to jump at the opportunity to get started.

Over the course of several weeks, my twin brother and I read everything we could find on magic. Unfortunately, most books in our library only mentioned the various kinds superficially, we had no access to in-depth treatises on the workings of magic, if there were any. Nevertheless, my brother would try every technique he could think of to call forth his magic and have it coax out my own. At first, all it did was exhaust him to the point where he'd shout in frustration and I sometimes had to beg him to stop, lest he topple over with fatigue. His brows would furrow, sweat beading

on his upper lip, complexion paling and still I felt nothing. He would lose sleep trying to find new ways to call upon his magic and had me try doing the same. His face turned colourless from all the time spent indoors, in the library, even poring over every book that vaguely mentioned the use of magic or its origins. He spoke about how he wished he could go to the Royal Library in the capital as there were bound to be even more and better books there. Even when our parents finally found out one of us had magic, he refused to be mentored by other Mages for as long as I had none. He simply did not wish to start his training without me and he claimed he had no time anyway as every single free moment of the day was spent calling to my magic. The both of us had already learnt so much about *all* kinds of magic, not just one, that there was little any other Mage could possibly teach us anyway.

Despite all the knowledge and all the effort, nothing we did seemed to have any effect and I was ready to force him to abandon his efforts to start his own lessons, having prepared a speech to tell him I wanted to quit in the gentlest way possible.

“I appreciate all that you have done for me, all that you are still doing, but it is time you start thinking about your own training. You’ve been a good brother—the best—but now it’s my turn to be one and for that I need you to stop trying to do what can’t be done.”

“You want to quit?! After all this time?” he bristled.

The look of devastation on his face broke my heart and so did knowing that I was going to lie to him. “I think it’s for the best.”

“Why? It’s not hurting you is it?! And it’s not hurting me, so I say we keep going.” His harsh tone caught me by surprise and, in hindsight, my honest reply may have been what led to his rapid decline.

“No, it’s not hurting me. I like spending time with you, it makes me feel good. Warm and happy—”

“Tingly?” he asked, face lighting up in sudden anticipation. “Like something is buzzing *inside*?” I could only nod because that was exactly it.

My magical, tenacious twin became even more relentless after that, forcing his magic upon me as he tried to pull out mine, convinced that what I was feeling during our sessions was a sign the magic was starting to take hold. Something was there! He was sure of it because he said his magic felt the same, only stronger; warm, pleasant and buzzing.

By this time, he had dark circles under his eyes from the lack of sleep. He often forgot to eat, hollowing out his cheeks as he lost weight. His expression became gaunt. Where we were once each other’s spitting image, the differences between us grew starker with each passing day, until one day he just collapsed. I carried him to his bed in our shared room and he felt so light in my arms.

I took a moment to watch him sleep; this thinned out version of myself that I barely recognised any more. His skin had paled to the point of appearing grey, his hair was dry and lifeless, and his eyes that were once bright and sparkling, though now closed, were dull and emotionless. The difference between us couldn't be more absolute. My cheeks were round and blushing, my hair thick and gleaming and my eyes sparkled like precious jewels. There was a bounce in my step and I had grown tall and strong. At just thirteen years of age, I was already starting to show the signs of the man I would become. But not him, not my brother.

Common healers were called in. Legions of them, but no one seemed to be able to help my brother battle his exhaustion. I refused to leave his side but I made him stop trying to use his magic to call upon mine. If it wasn't coming, I wanted him to accept that and focus on his own recovery. I just wanted my brother to feel well again so we could enact our battles once more, go riding along the beach, or get up to our usual mischief without getting reprimanded because no one could ever be sure which of us was the culprit. I didn't care about the magic anymore, no matter how good it made me feel, I hated it and what it did to my brother.

At last, a Mage-Healer was found and he made me leave the room while he set on trying to cure my brother from what ailed him. He was an old Mage with a long, pointy white moustache and a beard

to match and when he came back out of our room, his face was nearly as white as his hair. He said he had done all he possibly could without yielding his own magic but it wasn't enough. It would never be enough. And although he seemed to have improved a little bit after the old Mage-Healer's visit, he died soon after.

My brother. My twin.

The other half of my soul.

For the first time in my life, I was utterly alone and though I tried everything in my power to make me feel as good again as I once did with him—coming close a few times—nothing could fill the hole his absence left inside of me.

CHAPTER ONE



~ *Esben* ~

There's a gentle wind blowing from the north-west, sending tiny ripples of waves across the surface of Lake Skarfa, and the plumes of reed that line the lakeshore sway gently in the breeze. This slightly elevated part of the road to Over-Is lies as close to the lake shore as possible without the risk of it flooding when the water level rises.

The cormorants that are drying their wing feathers in the sun are often spooked by my closeness, swiftly diving into the water with a plop and a splash. The sun appears and disappears from behind the clouds and makes the tips of the waves shimmer; specs of silver amidst the blue-green surface... like Svea's eyes.

After having spent so much time in the desolate expanse of the Ane marshes and then being confronted with the horrible decay of the

Wilt—which has already spread as far as Meere's west side—I relish the beauty of the untainted landscape spreading out before me and the thought of where I'm going brings back a sense of lightness to my heart.

The direction the wind is coming from means the temperature is quite mild for the time of year, but it also makes the weather unpredictable as far as the chances of rain are. Keeping my eyes on the clouds that drift in from the Western Sea I spur the horse to pick up its pace a little.

Riding on horseback is really not so bad, even though it's quite high, it's definitely better than having to walk all this distance, but I find it difficult to let go of my fear entirely. It's not the height of the horse that I'm afraid of, or falling off it, nor is it the fact that I have to steer it with just one hand; it's the mental stability of the animal that I distrust. Horses can be unpredictable, especially when spooked, and I'd hate for this one to throw me off and risk the possibility of injury while being out here alone. A spooked, rearing horse is what cost me half my arm, and the reason for its panic was a strike of lightning.

I cast another anxious look at the gathering clouds. I like lightning even less than horses, but those clouds don't seem to be thunderclouds. They might carry a hefty dose of rain though, and if the wind picks up, they may reach me before I make it to the inn

Haine told me was about halfway the road from Meere to Over-Is.

Haine...

It's a strange feeling to be travelling all alone now, and even though we were never overly chatty on our travels together, I find that it's somehow quieter without my moody, dark-haired companion. You just get used to having someone present, I guess. Even when he was unconscious for nearly three days straight due to his infected wound and the fever that came with it, I didn't feel as alone as I do now.

I try to calculate how long I've been away from home but I seem to have lost track of time somewhere along the way.

Travelling through the marshes was somewhere around a week, including the time we spent at the empty prison fortress of Ane, then two more days of walking to Meere...

Before all of that, I never really felt like I was away from home because I was with Svea... Apart from the four lonely nights I spent without her—barely able to sleep—when The Roper had taken her away from me and after which we had only one night before he separated us again.

I huff a mirthless laugh at the thought as I wonder how I made the distinction between 'The Roper' and Haine when, in truth, they are one and the same.

No, I don't think that is entirely true—not anymore. I hope not anyway.

I try to force my thoughts away from this particular subject; it's all too confusing, like my feelings for him. Since I was twelve years old I was sure of what I wanted, *who* I wanted, and I still am, but since I was offered more, I want that too. A warm feeling rushes up my throat to settle on my cheeks at thinking back upon our farewell. Me kissing him was...

My head is starting to spin with all the random thoughts going back and forth and I'm considering getting off the horse to continue on foot as the exertion will, hopefully, calm my mind, or at least wear me down enough to stop me from forming any more coherent thoughts. It did during the long trek through the marshes, where I needed all my concentration just to place my feet right and keep my balance, and a good thing too; there were some things I couldn't bear to think about and doing so would have gotten me nowhere. I've always found physical labour to quiet my mind—that and being with Svea—and being without her, what *lead* to being without her... it's difficult to think about.

I can't even imagine what she must be going through right now—or has been going through since she saw us fall off the bridge and into the Isloi, which is infamous for its deadliness. Where is she now? I have no doubt she abandoned the journey to Forsted but somehow I have difficulty believing she would have

returned home, to Hoorne, immediately. Despite her seemingly strong personality and impatience, she can be quite indecisive sometimes. I can only hope Gamela and Hellä have taken her under their wings again, not just for Svea's sake but also because it would give me a clear direction where to go from here as well as some indication of how long it would take to get me there. To see her again. To hold her again. If she'll still have me...

As I feared, the wind indeed picks up in speed and what I first think is the spray of the lake swept up by the wind, is in fact rain. The drizzle's tiny droplets are so fine they quickly permeate every piece of clothing I'm wearing and it is creating a haze that makes it hard to see what lies up ahead. The horse trots along as if it's entirely unbothered by anything and I send a silent 'thank you' to Haine for providing me with such an easy-going mare.

With a soft snort she alerts me to something further down the road, which I hadn't yet seen with the rain obstructing my view.

A cart, having come from the opposite direction, has halted and stands a bit askew. My first reaction is to tuck in my head and continue on—which is odd because I've always been the first to lend a helping hand to those in need, despite that I only have one—but I've spent my life in service of others and I'm tired of it. I'm tired of always feeling inadequate—when I help, when I don't help; it's never enough, *I'm* never enough.

Unfortunately, seeing as how there are no other travellers on the road and I won't be able to pass by unnoticed, I feel obliged to stop and I do so with great reluctance.

"Well met," I call out. "Are you in need of aid? Perhaps I can offer assistance."

"Well met," a woman's voice answers back as she appears from behind the cart where she was sheltering from the rain, raising a hand in greeting. A young man with blushing cheeks steps out beside her.

"We've run off the road—a momentary distraction..." the woman says, shaking her head in defeat. "Thank you for your offer, but I fear there's not much you can do on your own."

I dismount nonetheless and huddled in my cloak I walk towards the travellers to make up for my not-so-genuine offer to help. What the woman doesn't know is that because of my Gifted strength there is quite a lot I can do on my own, including lifting carts that have run off the road back on it.

Upon closer inspection I see that one of the wheels has indeed run off the road and sunk into the lakeside's soft earth beside it, unfortunately, the cart is loaded with wine barrels, that, if filled, make the whole far too heavy even for me to lift.

"Nothing damaged?" I ask the young man as he comes to stand beside me while I inspect the wheel.

“No sir, but we can’t get it back on the road. It only digs deeper in the mud if we get the horses to pull. We’ll need to unload and lift it out, but the rest of our company will be along shortly; there’s a few strong men among them.”

I look at the cart and let my hand run along the bottom of the box, still feeling slightly guilty at having wanted to pass these people by and leaving them to sort out their own troubles.

“I’ll help you get started.”

“Honestly sir, don’t trouble yourself.”

The young man keeps calling me ‘sir’ but now that I’ve had a better look at him, I doubt he’s much younger than I am. I think it might be because of my rough voice and my bushy beard which is nearly all that is visible of my face beneath the hood of my cape.

“It’s no trouble, it’ll keep me warm,” I assure him with a smile and he nods once before climbing into the cart and pushing out a plank to roll the barrels down on.

As my cape is already soaked and it’s hindering my movements, I take it off and drape it over the back of my horse. The woman has taken the mare by the reins, but I doubt it would have wandered off if left loose; it’s a good horse.

“Sir!” the young man exclaims, looking at me in shock as he finally notices me missing the bottom half of my left arm.

“My name is Esben, and don’t you worry about my arm;

I'm used to not having it. Now, let's get to it.”

“Oh my Stars! That *can't* be!” the woman suddenly cries out loudly as she removes her hood revealing grey hair that is coloured green at the tips. Her beautiful green eyes are so wide the whites are showing, and she has visibly paled as she stares at me open-mouthed.

I nearly let the barrel I've been guiding down the plank drop at the woman's surprised exclamation and apparent shock.

“*Svea's* Esben?” Slowly she moves her hand to cover her gaping mouth as her eyes move from my eyes to my beard and then my missing arm. I blink a few times to clear my eyes from the tears I suddenly feel coming at hearing this stranger mention the love of my life's name along with my own. My love—whom she seems to know!

“Yes,” I say hoarsely. “Yes, *Svea's* Esben.” I stifle a sob. The woman comes over and takes me in her arms. I let her hug me even though we are complete strangers. I didn't know how much I needed to be held and I feel myself melting in her soft embrace.

“Oh my dear,” she whispers while she strokes my wet curls, her voice sounding a little constrained. “You just missed her. She went ahead. To Meere.” The woman takes a little distance to look at me with tear-flooded eyes while still gripping my clothes tightly. “But she will be waiting there for us—for *you*. Oh, my *sweet* dear, you've been *so* missed! Come—come with us.”

“Meere?” my voice cracks. “Are you saying Svea is in Meere?” I look over my shoulder at the road I’ve just travelled, the road to the city by the lake, and I don’t know whether to laugh or cry at knowing I’m so close to finding her. At knowing I’ve *been* closer than I am now.

The sound of horses hooves and rolling wheels pulls me back to the here and now, and I look past the green-eyed woman to see more carts approaching. The first one is driven by a tall, well-dressed man who gives me a sharp look from over his round glasses that balance precariously on the tip of his nose. Next to him sits a short, stout man whose white beard only just peeks out from under his hood, and in the back of the cart, moving to stand, is a slender woman with long, silky black hair. They all seem about the same age—my parents’ age, or perhaps slightly older—as the woman who is still gripping my tunic as if she fears I might vanish if she lets go. She looks over her shoulder to follow my gaze.

“Oh Emeric!” she cries out upon seeing the man with the glasses approach. “It’s Esben! It’s Svea’s Esben!” Again, I need to swallow back a lump that has formed in the back of my throat, but this time it is because of the woman’s exalted relief.

“Is it really?” The man’s pointed look has been replaced by an open-mouthed stare.

“It is,” I manage a weak smile. “But forgive me... I don’t know who any of you are.”

“Perhaps *we* can explain,” a familiar voice booms from a distance as a second cart has appeared from behind the first while two more are still on approach.

“Gamela!” I breathe in relief. “Hellä...”

So it is true. They did take care of Svea... who apparently travelled ahead. And I just missed her!

Suddenly my knees wobble and I take a step back from the green-eyed woman, who releases her hold on me before I drop down to sit on my heels.

Hellä has nimbly jumped down from her seat to come running towards me, dropping to her knees to grab me in a tight embrace. “You live,” she whispers breathlessly. “You live.” I hug the slight woman back as tight as I can without cracking her ribs as tears stream down my face and a laugh bubbles up from deep within me at the same time. Suddenly we are both laughing and as I glance over Hellä’s shoulder, I see smiling faces all around me, that, save for one other, are all unknown to me. The last two carts, having caught up, reveal two identical solid looking fellows who, although much younger, bear an uncanny resemblance to the older, bearded one.

“I may need some help... to fill in the gaps while I’ve

been... away,” I say softly.

“While you’ve been dead,” Gamela says succinctly and with a grim expression. I take a moment to let that sink in and it feels like a blow to head.

“Svea... is she...?”

“Devastated.” Gamela is not one to sweeten their words. “She’s in denial. Out for vengeance.”

“Vengeance?”

CHAPTER TWO



~ Esben ~

Only a few swift introductions are made, as we need the time to quickly unload the cart that has run off the road, re-load it, and get going again if the convoy wants to reach Meere before nightfall. The rosy-cheeked young man, whose name is Niilo, and I get help from last two cart-drivers, Gerd and Kall, who look so much alike that I call them by the wrong name more than once, but who almost match me in strength—when put together that is.

We work as fast as we can, not leaving much time or breath to talk. Emric, the wine-merchant who owns the carts, quips he wishes to hire us at his winery as we get the barrels off and back on the cart in far less time than his workers usually need.

When all is done and the convoy sets out to continue its way, I'm happy to tie my horse behind Gamela's cart and take up a

seat next to them while Hellä offers to take place in the back. We have a lot of catching up to do and the couple is eager to hear about what happened after I fell in the raging waters of the river Isloi and how I managed to survive. They will have to wait though; all I say to them is that I *did* manage, by myself, and am now here, looking for Svea. I really need to know what made her decide to go to Meere, why all these people are trailing behind her with their barrels of wine and what Gamela meant by saying Svea was out for vengeance.

“I should never have pushed her into trying to go cure the Wilt. I did it for all the wrong reasons and didn’t even stop to listen when she was clearly struggling to tell me *why* she thought she couldn’t do it.”

Hellä places a small hand on my shoulder and gives a reassuring squeeze. “Don’t blame yourself and don’t blame Svea either; she is still intent on going to Forsted to stop the Wilt from spreading and if she succeeds it will mean so much more for the Kingdom.”

“How so?”

“Allow me, Hellä,” Gamela interjects. “It’s a long, fairly complicated story to tell in the little time we have but it needs to be told from the beginning to be understood correctly. If you could refrain from interrupting, I will try to do my best.” Gamela shifts in their seat before continuing. “Emric, over there, is not just any wine-merchant; he used to be the Mage-King’s Royal Librarian

before the Coup. He strongly believes—and says there are scrolls to prove it—that the Wilt is a direct result of there not being a Mage-King on the Throne; the magic of the land is missing its conduit.”

“Is that true?” I interrupt, unable to help myself.

“I’m no expert on the workings of magic. I have none myself, and to be honest, I never gave it much thought. Not even Hellä’s. Just as how I’ve never given much thought to plants that grow or the rain that falls. It will do me no good; they just are and will grow and fall regardless of me knowing how they do it.”

Gamela shifts a little uncomfortably and half turns to look at their spouse. “I see how I have been remiss—”

Hellä now places a hand on Gamela’s shoulder stopping them from finishing that sentence. “You’ve not been remiss; you love me the way you are able and I take you as you are, my love. I wouldn’t want to have you any other way.”

Gamela pats the back of Hellä’s hand a little awkwardly but the uncharacteristically softening of their face reveals feelings that go well beyond surface level—perhaps even deeper than most people’s.

On the one hand I can understand what Gamela is saying; I’ve always taken the magic of Mages at face value myself, but on the other hand their message stings, because if I had shown a little more interest in this essential part of the woman I claim to love, I

wouldn't have lost Svea the way that I did.

Gamela is looking at me intently.

“Esben, do you understand what I'm saying?”

“You say Wendl is somehow the cause of the Wilt?” I surmise, as I suppose Gamela was not trying to lecture me on where I went wrong with my spouse.

“And a few other things that are cause for concern—*great* concern.”

“Such as?”

“The paper checks, the increase of Registers about... According to Emric—who, admittedly, may be slightly biased—it is as if the King isn't even trying to hide the fact that he's hunting for Unregistered Mages.”

“Hunting?! And Emric doesn't believe the King maybe trying to find Mages to help cure the Wilt?” I say with slight indignation.

I know the King is looking for Mages—Haine told me—but saying he's *hunting* them seems rather excessive.

“Svea suggested the very same thing, but Emric is convinced the King's contempt for Mages is so immense, he will not consider such a thing. Cleansing Castle Forsted of all of them, Emric himself included, was a sure sign of his intentions, he says. Moreover, if Wendl's looking for Mages to help, why does he not ask those whose names are in the Red Books?”

I have no answer to this, so I remain silent in order for Gamela to continue. “I may have little understanding of the magic of Mages, but I do know people, and right now, people are getting more anxious, spreading Wilt aside. Perhaps not *all* fear the Registers, but they feel limited in their movements, nonetheless. In particular the people Below-River, as I have witnessed myself in just the past two days. And when people are afraid, they will try to find something they can control. Giving the Registers what they seek is such an act of control. It will become increasingly difficult for people to stay out of the Books, if they so wish, and, in all probability, for the people who help them—people like us—to aid them therein. Before long, neighbour will turn on neighbour, and worse yet: Emric believes Registered Mages are soon to follow.”

“Follow where?”

“Forsted... Ane... who knows?” Gamela shrugs. “They will be rounded up and tossed with those that are already imprisoned.”

My head is starting to spin with all the information and I can't quite work out how to fit in everything Haine told me about his 'mission'. Things don't add up.

“Not at Ane. It's empty,” I say without realising I spoke the words out loud. Gamela pulls the reins so hard the horses whinny loudly as they come to an abrupt stop.

“Say that again?!”

“Ane... is empty. I’ve been there, took refuge there. There is no one. Hasn’t been for a while.”

Hellä gasps and puts a hand over her mouth while Gamela draws a hand over their face and stares into the distance.

The other carts have stopped as well, even the two in front of us who were alarmed by the sounds of our horses.

“What’s going on?” the well-dressed man with the glasses, who I now know to be Emric, the wine-merchant, shouts from up ahead. “Everything all right?”

“Quite so. Continue on!” Gamela shouts back before spurring the horses on again, but their face has turned ashen.

“This is... unexpected. You say there are no Mages at Ane Fortress? Not for... a while?”

“None at all,” I confirm. “Not for *years*, is more like.”

“Tell me what you know. Please. And let’s keep this information between us for now.”

As we travel on—or *back*, in my case—to Meere, I recount as best as I can the events that happened since I fell into the river; how I found myself in the marshes and made the long trek to Ane Fortress, hoping I would find help there and possibly a ship to carry me across Lake Skarfa. I tell the couple from Reeve how I was able to find food and build fires, keeping myself alive until the Prison

came into view at the end of the third day and how I stayed there to gather my strengths for the long walk to the crossing at the Flues, and from there onward to Meere. The fact that I am here, alive and well, is testament to my strength and resilience, as well as to my skills in surviving an unforgiving landscape—or so Gamela says. Both chalk it up to me being Gifted and I nod my agreement. There is a twinge of guilt at taking all the praise for these accomplishments, but I don't see how I can tell them I wasn't alone and it was *The Roper* who travelled with me all that time. The man these people know as the one who took Svea—twice—as well as many others, perhaps even having killed a few—he never denied it. I could have left him to die several times, no one would have been the wiser, but he hadn't left me when he found me on the banks of the lake, and somewhere along the way he became... a friend. He seemed just as surprised as I was to find Ane prison empty but then he revealed himself to be the King's own son, prince Haine, and now that I'm out of the marshes and away from his company, I wonder how he *didn't* know. The guilt gnawing at me now is only partly due to me deceiving Hellä and Gamela and keeping quiet about Haine, the larger part is because their words have made me start doubting *his*, even if only slightly.

We reach Meere just when I wrap up my story, answering a few last questions and starting to form a few of my own but Gamela

asks me to wait until we've reached the inn they chose as their meeting point. Where Svea is. The thought of finally being able to see her again wipes all questions from my mind instantly.

Gamela steers the cart in a south-west direction along the outskirts of the city and after a while I think this particular street is starting to look familiar, although I could be mistaken now that the light is fading. No, I think I was here just this morning, parting ways with Haine. I take a closer look around and, sure enough, there is the house we were in and where we were agreed to meet again after I had found Svea. Haine said he would wait for me—for *us*—as long as necessary but it seems I just might have him beat; there is no chance he could have travelled to and from Forsted in the time it took me to get back here as he expected to need two days at least, which would make it tomorrow evening at the latest.

Something flutters in my chest at the realisation my goal is within reach; any moment now I will be reunited with Svea—and Haine tomorrow. Then we'll go to Forsted together and—... The light, fluttering thing inside me suddenly becomes a lead weight; things could very well not turn out as I hope they will, and what I *hope* for is to go home *with* Svea, but that all depends on how much Haine's promises are proven to be worth.

And what are your own promises worth?—I think as an idea popped up in my head; I could take Svea home immediately,

without waiting for Haine to return...

The inn is small and dark and doesn't look as if it gets many patrons. Only two tables are occupied but none of them by Svea, and although she could be in one of the rooms upstairs, something inside me tells me she isn't. Slightly disappointed I turn to Hellä.

"She's not here."

"She could be upstairs. Let me go ask." Hellä doesn't wait for an answer but heads straight for the innkeeper at the bar. While the rest of our convoy is busying themselves with securing the carts and their cargo as well as taking care of the horses, I look around anxiously, hoping against better judgement to catch a glimpse of a coppery braid or sparkling blue-green eyes.

"The innkeeper says they left in a hurry but they paid for supper and rooms for tonight, so he's expecting them to come back," Hellä says after she's returned to my side.

"But when? And where has she gone?" I say impatiently. Hellä puts a small, warm hand on the crook of my elbow and holds out a key with the other.

"I don't know, but I have no doubt she'll be here soon. For supper. Why don't you go up? Take Svea's room, get some rest, in

that case, when she comes back, you won't miss her.”

Reluctantly, I take the key to follow Hellä's advice.

The room is small and narrow but appears to be clean, and the air is fresh despite the tiny window being closed. There is no hearth and only two small cots. I drop down on one of them and start my long wait for my love to return. Every time I hear a sound my head whips to the door but it never opens; Svea doesn't return, and neither do her companions—Osgar and a woman named Sygil who drove their cart. Overcome with fatigue I eventually fall asleep on the cot with my boots and clothes still on.

CHAPTER THREE



~ *Haine* ~

I can't recall how many nights during my time with the Registers I spent wishing I was back home, back in my own room in the Royal Castle. Although... *home*... I've never felt as at home here as I did in our family home near Ansted—there just aren't a whole lot of pleasant memories I have to this place—but now that I'm here I wish I wasn't.

I arrived much earlier than I had expected and I took the time to enjoy a good meal—a *great* meal—and a soothing hot bath before dressing in a clean set of clothes. I even had a healer come in to look at my wound, but they assured me it was starting to heal nicely and would continue to do so if I make sure to keep it clean and not put too much strain on it. There would be significant scarring though, but somehow I don't mind that at all.

A whole carafe of excellent wine has been brought in while I was having my bath—most likely by Davo; his way of welcoming me back—and my bed has been provided with clean sheets that faintly smell of roses. But despite all the lavishness, I can't wait to leave again as soon as I've spoken with my father.

Upon my arrival I immediately let Davo, as he is chamberlain to the King, know of my need to speak with His Majesty urgently, but I was informed he was in a meeting and that I'd probably have to wait until morning. There is no need for me to return to Meere with haste, it could take Esben more than several days to find Svea, but I can't shake the feeling that perhaps I shouldn't have left him at all to go to Forsted by myself.

Thinking of my new-found friend, I pick up my trousers that I had haphazardly tossed on the blue velvet armchair by the grand hearth before I went to bathe. In one of the pockets is Esben's small silver throwing knife and as I pull it out, something flutters to the ground; a few tiny white flower petals and green feathery leaves. I gather the flowers and leaves which are a bit crushed and withered, but not knowing what to do with them and yet for some strange reason unable to throw them away, I place them inside my empty kuun pouch before pocketing it. Then I slide Esben's knife from its small leather sheath. Sitting on my bed, I run my fingers over its intricate carvings and the silver surface seems to shimmer

in response. I can see the magic that is imbued in the blade and try to focus on it while simultaneously reaching for my own in the way Svea described when she let hers flow into the soil around the tree near her village. I can't say for certain if anything happens—it doesn't feel like anything is happening—but I feel my mind wander off to Lake Skarfa; seeing the waves ripple across its surface and the plumes of reed that line its banks sway in the breeze. Cormorants dry their black wings in the sun...

A polite knock on my door pulls me from my vision and I call out for the person on the other side to enter—it's Davo.

"Your Highness," he says after he has closed the door behind him. As my father's chamberlain, Davo is the only one who knows my true identity and has always been quick to greet me upon my return. Not only that, he always seems genuinely pleased to see me despite the reserve befitting his station. "I am pleased to see you—"

"Not look like shit anymore?" I interrupt.

"—*home* and... *well*," Davo finishes, only a hint of a smile lighting up his eyes, but the relief in his voice tells me he'd been worried. But I've been gone from the Castle for longer I have been this time and there is no way for Davo to know I almost didn't survive the marshes to return 'home'.

"Well enough, thank you," I say with a curt nod.

“You’ve been seen by a healer?” Davo inquires more frankly than he’s ever been with me.

“Stiff and sore from the journey,” I lie, “nothing to worry about.”

“Very well, Your Highness. His Majesty will see you now,” with a curt nod Davo turns and moves to open the door for me. At seeing me hesitate Davo clarifies: “The meeting ended sooner than expected and I did stress your urgency to meet with His Royal Highness.”

“Thank you, Davo,” I stagger, and before I follow him to the throne room, I quickly buckle my sword and don a new black cloak so I won’t have to go back for them should I decide to leave immediately after speaking with my father.

At the side-entrance of the throne room at the other end of the Castle, Davo holds open the door to the antechamber for me to step inside but he doesn’t follow; instead, he closes the door behind him as he steps back out into the corridor, momentarily pausing with forearms held out ready to be handed my sword. As I’m dressed in my official capacity as The Roper—cloaked and hooded; shrouded in black from head to toe—not a single soul is privy to the conversations between me and His Majesty the King, not even Davo. In fact, besides the chamberlain, nobody even knows we’re