

# Forests of Grandeur and Malice

## Evermund – Nomad Lands

Airlie stood at my side, the silence between us comfortable as we both gazed across the river. It was so easy being here with her, in our own world within the forest. I could almost forget the responsibilities that usually hemmed me in.

I glanced sideways at her. She'd proven herself a good teacher—our roles reversed as she taught me how to smell people on the wind. A smile tugged at my mouth as I considered the differences between my current teacher and my original one. I had always gotten on well with Drake, but I much preferred my new tutor.

She was certainly easier on the eye. I slid my gaze sideways again. The morning sun made her golden-brown curls gleam, the brightness reflected in the blue of her eyes, as deep and beautiful as the water in front of us. Could anyone hear the way my heart beat faster when she was near?

She smelled a great deal better than my old teacher as well—a fact of which I was acutely aware after days of sniffing at every breeze. It wasn't actually my nose picking up the presence of others on the wind, but I couldn't help breathing the nearby scents in anyway. I just hoped I'd successfully hidden how distracting I found hers.

*She's not your teacher, she's your apprentice,* I reminded myself sternly, as I'd needed to do a hundred times a day recently. Duty and honor had never been such a sour taste in my mouth.

Airlie smiled back at me, her mouth opening to say something. But the words never emerged. Stiffening, she turned upriver, staring at something too distant for me to see.

A beat behind her, I turned as well. I inhaled deeply, forgetting my earlier thoughts as I used the action to focus my new ability. Faintly I caught something that didn't belong. A person, for sure, and probably a mage.

But only one.

I relaxed. Whoever they were, they couldn't pose much threat if they were alone. I'd nearly missed their presence, though. My brow creased as my thoughts turned to the night hours I'd just spent keeping watch alone.

"I don't think I'd have caught that if you hadn't put me on guard with your reaction," I said.

Airlie turned from the direction of the newcomer, examining my face.

"That's because it's just one person," she said reassuringly. "And they're still far away. You've gotten good at recognizing groups or individual people closer in."

I sighed. "No amount of practice or study lets someone with a weaker ability catch up to someone else's superior strength. I'm just not used to being the weaker one in that scenario."

It was an uncomfortable thought. When had I grown so arrogant and puffed up about my strength? I had always thought of myself as humble, and it was sobering to realize how accustomed I had become to being the most powerful person present.

Except for Airlie. From the beginning she had always been different. Maybe that was why she had fascinated me from the moment I first saw her.

She gave me a warm smile, clearly sympathetic, although I didn't deserve it.

"You never know," she said. "You thought you couldn't do this, either, until a situation of high enough stress brought out the ability."

I frowned, her words reminding me of the constant question at the back of my mind. How had I developed a new ability after all these years? And one beyond the strength of Drake, my influencer. It was as impossible as Airlie's own strength.

But I wasn't the first person to experience such growth recently—which meant there had to be an explanation. An explanation I was certain had something to do with the glowing girl beside me.

As soon as we got back to Tarona, I had every intention of insisting Uncle Marius tell us the full truth. After what had happened on the tour, it was clear he knew more than he was sharing on the topic. Zeke might have chosen not to press a foreign king for information, but I was willing to take whatever consequences might ensue from confronting my uncle and demanding answers. I was sick of mysteries.

"Paxton's coming," Airlie called back toward the others, shaking me out of my thoughts.

I tried to hide the wonder on my face. I'd recognized there was a mage coming, but she had been able to identify him. I might have grown stronger, but I hadn't reached her level.

Gia and Mila joined us, followed by Liara. Only a few moments of their conversation drove out all thought of strength and abilities. Liara's assertion that we wouldn't make it back to the city in time to witness the vote on the next nomad monarch filled me with concern.

"Miss the vote?" I asked. "But that's the whole reason for our visit."

What was King Marius going to think when he learned I spent our entire visit in a remote forest with only a handful of people? Would he guess the reason I had been content with the situation and not pushed to return to the city?

I carefully avoided looking in Airle's direction. When had I let the enchantment of this trip overcome me? I was forgetting my responsibilities.

"I'm sorry," Liara repeated. "But guarding the river is too important."

Paxton interrupted, waving enthusiastically as he called a greeting from a distance.

Liara sniggered. "He doesn't want you to mistake him for a raider and attack."

"If raiders are approaching us from the mountains, we've failed our job." Hayes looked as concerned as I felt. "I hope you're right, and we're going back, though. I don't like our delegation being separated for so long."

He glanced at Gia, and I could read my own concern on his face. I wasn't the only one feeling the pinch of responsibilities abandoned.

"What news?" Liara called to Paxton. "Have the reinforcements arrived?"

It was good news he brought, thankfully. Not only were reinforcements taking our place, but we had received permission to be guided back through the tunnels without blindfolds or other disguise.

"That's excellent news!" Liara exclaimed. "We might make it back for the vote after all."

Hope filled me. Maybe I could still complete some of my original mission, at least. If I intended to confront my uncle, it would help to have him favorably disposed toward me first.

Conversation turned to breakfast and news from the capital, something that set Airle strangely on edge.

Her fears proved grounded when Paxton revealed Annora's treachery. She had announced Cadence's power affinity to the entire collection of nomad tribes. Airle reacted as badly as I expected, but she still showed far more restraint than Gia.

Silently I adjured them both to calm down and conceal their emotions. Gia, at least, should know better than to react so unguardedly in such a political situation. She wasn't looking my way to see my warning look, however, too busy glaring down at Liara.

Airlie caught my eye, though, examining my impassive face with a slight crease between her brows. Emotions flitted through her eyes, too fast to track, before her expression smoothed.

“Sit down,” she said to Gia, accompanying the command with a firm look.

Pride filled me. Airlie might not have been raised a princess, but she had a more instinctive grasp of the discipline required for a political role than Gia had ever possessed.

Thankfully Gia responded to the authority in Airlie’s tone, slowly sitting back down.

“So you did already know,” Paxton said. “I thought surely you must, but—”

“Of course Tartora knows.” I cut him off firmly. Annora had put King Marius in a position of weakness, and I needed to do everything possible to retrieve the situation. “And we will take any attempt by the nomads to claim Cadence extremely poorly.”

Paxton held up both hands. “I’m just a junior member of Tribe Callen. Don’t look at me.”

Airlie stood, seeming oblivious to any tension, her thoughts clearly on her sister. “We need to get back to the Hidden City. I’m going to gather my things.”

She strode away from the fire, leaving awkward silence in her wake. After a moment, everyone else scrambled up as well, many still clutching their breakfast, and everyone murmuring about helping us gather our belongings and seeing us on our way.

No one actually followed Airlie, however, and after a moment’s consideration, I strode after her. I found her hidden behind the first row of trees, clearly agitated as she pulled her bag closed.

“Are you all right?” I asked, making her freeze.

She slowly rose, still facing away from me, and I willed her to turn so I could see her face. When she did, her expression clearly showed her perturbation.

“*I’m* fine,” she snapped. “It’s Cadence I’m worried about.”

Of course she was worried about her sister. It was inevitable.

“Why does that not surprise me?” I asked with a shake of my head. “You’re always thinking about someone else, Airlie. But I can tell you’re upset.”

“Of course I’m upset!” she cried. “I thought I could trust Zeke and even Annora. And now...” Anger filled her face. “I feel like a fool, and I hate being a fool.”

“You’re not a fool.” I spoke quickly, compelled by the pain in her eyes. “You just judge people by your own standards, so it’s natural to be disappointed when they let you down.”

I caught and held her gaze, trying to communicate the truth of who she was—the incredible person I saw so clearly.

Her stance softened, and she gave an unconvincing chuckle.

“I do sound a bit insufferable when you put it like that.”

“That’s not what I’m saying!” I moved instinctively toward her. Was she the only one who didn’t see how amazing she was?

I forced myself to halt, the effort of restraining myself from reaching for her almost a physical pain. But I wasn’t helping the situation. My words had produced the opposite effect to the one I intended, only making her feel worse about herself.

“Why is it that I can talk to kings and master mages with ease, but somehow I feel like a fumbling apprentice with you?” I asked, trying to hide my internal frustration behind a humorous facade.

“It’s because I’m so advanced,” she said with perfect seriousness. “I have so much to teach you.”

Her somber expression dissolved into giggles. Even now, she was laughing at herself, her laughter painfully endearing. Despite myself, I took another step forward, my control cracking once again.

“That must definitely be it,” I said, playing along, although her words weren’t far from the truth.

“Not that it’s an accurate picture of your behavior,” she said. “I’ve never seen you fumble in your life.”

I hoped she was speaking the truth. It meant my years of practice at hiding my emotions had paid off. I’d certainly never had as much to keep hidden as I had since Airle came into my life.

She sighed, the sound piercing me as her mood turned bleak again.

“Not like me,” she said. “I keep messing up over and over, and it wouldn’t matter if it wasn’t my sister who keeps—”

Without my permission, my feet carried me all the way to her side. Her pain pierced my resistance, and I placed a hand on her arm. My breath caught at the contact.

She went silent.

Did she feel it too? I desperately hoped so, even as I feared the possibility.

“Cadence will be all right,” I said, speaking almost at random, seeking only Airle’s comfort. “We’ll make sure of it.”

Her eyes met mine, full of uncertainty and fear and pleading. I ached with the need to gather her into my arms and soothe her anxiety.

*She's your apprentice*, I reminded myself, but the words sounded faint and unconvincing compared to her heady beauty and the message in her eyes. Silently they conveyed her need for me, and everything in me responded to the call.

"You'll help me?" she asked. "You'll help Cadence? I know I don't have a right to ask it. You've already done so much for us. But none of this is Cadence's fault, and she needs... You never asked for an apprentice, let alone one responsible for a younger sister, but Cadence at least—"

"Airlie." Her name on my lips pushed me further over the edge, the connection between us deepening. "Of course I'll help your sister. I know how you feel about her. I kept her safe for you this long, and I'm not going to stop now."

It had always been about Airlie. Protecting Cadence had been my duty, but I had never once had to remind myself of that. Everything I had done for her had been done with Airlie's face in my mind.

"Of...of course." A strange, pained look flashed across Airlie's face. "I'm your apprentice, and I know you take that responsibility seriously. It's why I feel bad asking."

She thought I cared for her only as my apprentice. That everything I had done for her had been done to satisfy my responsibilities. It was exactly what she should think—the false impression I had worked for so many months to convey.

But it had never been my intention to make her feel guilty. And there was something else in her expression as well, some deeper pain that swept away the last of my restraint.

"Airlie, no," I whispered. "I don't do it because you're my apprentice."

I knew my emotion showed in my eyes. It was impossible to feel so intensely without conveying at least a shadow of it.

Somewhere, in the back of my mind, my sensible self was screaming at me for the loss of control. But that part of me had finally lost the battle. Even my self-restraint had its limits.

For a breath-taking second, I read desire in Airlie's eyes and thought she meant to throw herself at me. But instead she jerked backward, pulling her arm from beneath my fingers.

"You don't have to tell me you're just as prone to taking responsibility for everything and everyone as I am," she said. "I worked that out in the first few days after you activated me."

Cold reality swept over me, dousing the warmth building inside. Whatever I thought I'd read in Airlie's eyes was now firmly tucked away behind the usual barrier she maintained between us.

I had come so close to acting against the dictates of honor, and the shame of it only amplified the pain of her rejection. Her ability might be stronger than mine, but I had the years and the life experience. I should never have given in to the moment of weakness.

“You overestimate me,” I said, struggling to return to a neutral tone. “But you can count on my aid with your sister.”

It didn’t matter if she would never see me as anything more than her influencer—I would always stand ready to help her.

She met my eyes, her own briefly softening once again. “Thank you,” she murmured.

Fresh pain speared through me. It took all my willpower to wrestle my emotions back under control, a control that was already threatening to crack again as she took a step in my direction.

But something made her freeze and spin toward the river. The crackle of emotion in the air changed so instantly and so completely that I strode to her side without thought of the tension between us.

For the duration of our conversation, my whole world had narrowed to her. Now I reached outward again, drawing in a breath, and was instantly aware of my mistake. I had allowed myself to be distracted at the worst possible moment.

“Did you smell that?” I asked, hoping I was misreading the air.

“It’s them.” She started running. “They’re back.”

The raiders were here.

## Evermund – Tartora

We approached the ford and the main road east to Tarona at a gentle pace as I let the wind driving us downriver die off. Airlie shot me a glance, a cheeky grin on her face and I smiled back. With a tilt of my head, I indicated she was welcome to take the boat in hand for our landing. She took control of the air around us, turning the boat abruptly and shooting it toward the eastern bank with enough force to propel us out of the water and onto dry land.

The others, unprepared for the sudden movement, swayed wildly, lessening the dignity of our arrival. I held back a smile, however. I was glad Airlie still had the energy to play around. Thankfully coming downriver had been a lot less taxing than the journey in the opposite direction.

My smile didn't last long, however. The king had sent us a welcoming party in the form of armed guards, the mounted soldiers waiting silently beside the road, their eyes on us. I suppressed a sigh, bracing myself for whatever storm was ahead.

My gaze flicked to Gia. I just hoped the princess had the good sense not to make the upcoming confrontation at the palace worse by doing something foolish. Unfortunately, I didn't have much faith in that prospect.

Airlie was the first to question the absence of wagons, and Augusta responded by drawing everyone's attention to the guards waiting for us. No surprises that the wily old Master of Plants was as aware of their presence as I was.

Captain Huxley must have already received orders because he signaled the guards who were with us, sending them scurrying to positions at the side of each member of our party. Only Zeke—now prince of the nomad kingdom—was left unguarded.

I suppressed another sigh. I felt no resentment on my own behalf—my actions in hiding the truth about Cadence from the king warranted any piece of showmanship he wanted—but I dreaded how the hot-headed youngsters under my care might react. The best thing we could do right now was submit. We needed to convince Uncle that our actions hadn't been a rebellion against him or the kingdom, and defiance wasn't the way to achieve that.

"What's going on?" Zeke asked me, prompting Nik to speak up in protest as well, just as I'd feared.

Before I could calm the situation, Captain Huxley, who had gone to consult with the mounted guards, sent a signal back to his people. The guards beside us sprang into action, grabbing each of us by an arm and formally speaking the words of arrest.



My eyes flicked to Zeke, relieved to see he was still untouched. Uncle Marius might be angry, but he obviously still retained his usual good sense.

“I don’t think so,” Zeke growled, whipping the clump of trees to our north into a frenzy of movement that produced an unnerving creaking and rustling.

The guards all stirred uneasily, most of them looking toward the trees. Both Captain Huxley and the captain he was conversing with sent Zeke a hard look, however. They were seasoned enough to know where the real threat was coming from, but also senior enough to know that attacking a foreign prince would be a diplomatic disaster.

Zeke’s response was a protest against Cadence’s arrest, and part of me could understand his feelings. The sight of a guard squeezing Airlie’s arm made me want to call down lightning from the clear sky. But the last thing any of us needed was to be fighting each other here at the ford. I had grown up beside my uncle and cousins, and I didn’t for a second believe the king meant any actual harm to his own children.

Airlie spoke in a wounded tone to the guard girl she had grown close with, her voice distracting me for a moment from the tinderbox in the middle of our flammable situation. I only just looked back at Zeke in time to hear him issue a final warning to the guard holding Cadence.

“No,” I commanded sharply, angry with myself more than him.

This sort of distraction was exactly why I had to step down from my position. Lately my emotions had grown too strong, overwhelming my usual control. I couldn’t be trusted as the Royal Mage anymore.

Thankfully everyone went quiet and looked toward me. One pair of eyes, in particular, seemed to burn into the side of my face, but I forced myself to keep my focus on Zeke.

“Until we know what’s happening here, that’s not going to help anything.”

Unsurprisingly, Zeke protested, but I kept my voice firm as I reassured him as to the purpose of the soldiers, my gaze also encompassing Nik and Gia who looked almost as rebellious as the nomad prince.

“I have no doubt their orders are to deliver us directly to the king himself which is where we’re heading anyway,” I said, directing my final question at Captain Huxley. “Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, sir it is.” Captain Huxley maintained his usual air of calm, but I could read his relief that I’d taken control of the situation. “I’m sure it’s a precautionary matter only.”

Gia sighed. “Clearly Father is very angry. We’ve got the message. Are these dramatics really necessary?”

I hid a wince. Sometimes I could understand her repeated insistence that she wasn't suited to ruling. I still believed she was the better choice between the twins, but I hoped she would soon learn the importance of controlling the narrative and appearance of volatile situations. If these *dramatics*, as she coined them, enabled the king to avoid a more serious punishment for our offenses then I was in full support of them.

Thankfully when the carriages appeared from behind the trees, Gia subsided and even pushed her brother into compliance as well. Cadence managed to achieve the same feat with Zeke, her stated trust in me warming my heart. We had dealt well together in Airlie's absence, and I had even found myself wishing I had a younger sister of my own.

The guards all visibly relaxed as I led by example, climbing into the first carriage. I expected Augusta to follow and was amused to see her lingering next to the door, watching with an eagle eye as the younger ones scrambled for the second carriage. Only one of the apprentices broke away to approach us.

As Airlie climbed into the carriage, taking the seat across from me, our eyes met. My heart contracted, my breath catching at her beauty as it did multiple times a day. She had chosen to join me, just as she had trusted me in the clearing and made no effort to defend herself against arrest. Her trust meant even more than Cadence's, and my muscles shifted as I prepared to move to the seat beside her, my hand already reaching for hers.

The carriage dipped as another person climbed in, the movement breaking me from my momentary madness. I sank back against the seat behind me, turning to look out the window. I only hoped my face didn't show the mixture of relief and intense disappointment surging through me. Being alone with Airlie all the way to the capital would have been exquisite torture, and I was glad my restraint wasn't going to be put to such a test.

None of us spoke much as the endless hours rolled by. For all the things I would have liked to say to Airlie, there were a hundred more I had to keep tightly inside, so silence seemed safest. And Augusta had little interest in conversation, her disgruntlement clear. She alone had done nothing to wrong the crown—had in fact returned triumphant with the hoped for alliance—and she must be resenting the rest of us for causing her such an uncomfortable welcome.

I had already apologized to her directly back in the Hidden City, so there was nothing more to be said between us for now. I knew she wouldn't appreciate me making a further apology based on her more advanced years—although I could see how much more uncomfortable she found the long carriage ride than Airlie or me.

Expecting us to sleep in the carriage seemed especially harsh, but the Master of Plants still uttered no complaint, eventually falling asleep in an impossibly upright position. I eyed

the wood around her suspiciously, trying to work out if it looked different than the hard, straight wood beneath and behind me. Had Augusta used her ability to subtly shape her section of the carriage around her form?

A soft thunk drew my attention away, my eyes moving to the girl beside the elderly master. Her head had fallen against the side of the carriage, her eyes closed and form slumped in sleep. My whole body ached with the effort of suppressing my desire to pull Airlie to me and pillow her head against my shoulder. My arm longed to wrap around her and ease the discomfort of our journey. But I could do nothing except watch over her from the other side of the carriage, restrained less by Augusta's sleeping presence than by the knowledge that she was my apprentice and I was her master.

Duty, honor, and respect all demanded I treat Airlie just as I treated Cadence, although in the privacy of my mind, I had never seen her as a younger sister. My jaw clenched with the effort of restraint as I tried not to let my mind swirl through the usual cycle of regret. If only I hadn't been the one to activate Airlie. If only there had been another master there to test her—any other master.

But even as I thought it, I knew I didn't really mean it. Activating Airlie and taking on her apprenticeship had allowed me to stand as her and Cadence's protector for all this time, and I couldn't regret that. Instead I regretted how many long months were still to come before she graduated and was free of me. At least when that day came, I would no longer be Royal Mage and instead we would stand as peers—two of the strongest mages in Tartora.

I could only hope that by the time of her graduation, Airlie's heart remained with Tartora and hadn't been won over by either the nomads or Calista. I would give up my position and power for Airlie in a heartbeat, but I couldn't turn my back on the family and kingdom who had raised me and given me everything, regardless of how angry my uncle might be in this particular moment.

When we finally rolled over the cobblestones of the city and through the gates of the palace, I'd snatched only a few hours of sleep and was exhausted. I climbed down swiftly, however, my attention divided between the closed palace doors and the apprentices piling out of the carriage behind me.

No one had come to greet us, and it was left to Captain Huxley to lead us forward—a formality given that most of us were familiar with the path to the throne room. It was an unnecessarily large and formal meeting place for the number of people in our party, but it was expected. Everything was part of the show being enacted, both for our benefit and for the interested eyes on the road and in the palace.

Instead of intimidation, I felt relief as we entered the throne room to find only Uncle and Aunt and the other two members of the Triumvirate. The lack of guards, except for Captain Huxley who took up a position behind the throne, confirmed my expectation that the king wasn't expecting any formal or permanent breach with any of us. This was a private conversation, and any punishments would be the same.

Augusta shot me a quick look before taking her place at the head of the group. I just had time to read a similar relief in her gaze. For all her annoyance with our actions and with the discomfort of our trip, I suspected she felt a grandmotherly affection for us all. One she would no doubt deny acerbically if ever questioned.

"Master Augusta." The king inclined his head toward her. "Thank you for your report, as well as for the alliance you negotiated on our behalf. Apologies about the discomfort of your journey from the river."

"It is of no consequence, Your Majesty," she said stiffly. "I understand the need for the utmost caution regarding such a serious situation." She sent a forbidding look toward Cadence. "I was terribly shocked by Annora's announcement and the subsequent confirmation from Cadence herself as to her true affinity. I was no less shocked to discover Captain Huxley and myself were the only ones unaware of it."

I kept my back straight and my eyes on the throne as the king, queen, the Master of the Elements, and the Master of Healing all leveled their gazes at me. Augusta's shock had not been at the knowledge possessed by Airlie, Zeke, or the twins. I was the one who had shocked her—my silence an unexpected betrayal to everyone at the front of the room.

Despite my impassive expression, the knowledge of their hurt pierced me. I had never wanted to betray the people who had trusted me with so much. I still didn't want to betray them. I kept my bearing locked, preventing myself from turning instinctively toward the one person who weighed more with me than they did. Once I would never have imagined taking such an action—but that had been before I met Airlie and everything changed.

Colton confirmed the truth of Augusta's words, and she joined the rest of the Triumvirate, becoming accuser rather than accused. I gave her a slight nod when her eyes fell on me, glad she was back in her rightful place, no longer dragged down by me.

Her eyes narrowed, although I couldn't tell what emotion was behind them as she regarded me.

Movement to my right drew my attention as Gia stepped forward, proving my fears grounded. Of course she was absorbed in her own affairs, choosing the worst possible moment for the declaration she seemed determined to make. But maybe it wasn't too late to

stop her. I had a shock announcement of my own, and if I made enough of a stir, she might decide she'd lost her moment.

I took two steps forward, cutting off the beginning of her speech. Ignoring her completely, I kept my gaze forward, my eyes on the king.

"I would like to take this opportunity to apologize for my breach of trust while in the role of Royal Mage. Naturally I will resign, effective immediately."

Shock swept the room, absorbing Gia's angry hiss.

"Excuse me?" Uncle leaned forward, clearly forgetting his daughter for the moment as I had hoped. "You what?"

"I resign," I said, needing all my years of training to keep my face and bearing calm given the weight of my pronouncement. "It is imperative that the person holding the position of Royal Mage enjoy the trust of both the monarch and the Triumvirate. I freely acknowledge my actions have destroyed that trust, and I must therefore resign immediately."

I knew it was necessary—I welcomed it, even, since it was the only thing that would allow me to stay at Airlie's side as she embarked on a dangerous mission—but it still pained me to say the words. I had been so proud the day I received the appointment—the youngest ever Royal Mage.

"And what are your intentions, nephew?" my aunt asked, getting straight to the heart of the matter, as she usually did. "Will you abandon Tartora now when we need you more than ever?"

"Certainly not, Your Majesty." I met her gaze, glad to have the chance to assure them of my loyalty. "I will always seek to serve Tartora. But I cannot do it against my conscience or my responsibilities. I take no joy in this action, but it is the only path forward I can see."

"You are the Royal Mage," Drake thundered. "What responsibilities can you have beyond Tartora?"

He had always been a black and white person, so his reaction didn't surprise me. After my two years as his apprentice, I was long since immune to his storming.

"I'm more than just the Royal Mage, Drake." I met his eyes, trying to convey my sincerity but also the strength of my resolution. He could bring a storm, but he needed to remember that I could bring one of no less severity. "I have responsibilities as a member of the Guild, and as a person. I would never do anything to actively harm this kingdom, but I cannot progress its interests above the well-being of a dependent under my care."

I was the only one who didn't turn to look at Cadence and Airlie. I couldn't risk looking at them in case some of my emotion leaked into my expression. This moment was

bad enough without any of them suspecting the strength of my feelings toward my apprentice.

While I longed to step in front of Airlie, shielding her from their gazes, I also felt a swelling of relief. As I had hoped, my resignation had taken them by surprise, the shock of it displacing the anger that had dominated the room before. They wanted to remind us all of our place, but every one of us was among the strongest mages in the kingdom, and the last thing they wanted was to lose any of us. I had just reminded them that the power in this situation didn't lie all on their side.

Slowly the emotions in the room shifted and faded, thoughtful glances landing on me. My reminder of the true state of the balance of power had done its full job. They had remembered not only that we had power here but also that we had chosen to return, to submit to our arrest. We were here, and that counted for a great deal.

Uncle spoke, his words directed at me. "I'm glad your loyalty to Tartora remains intact." He paused. "While I was deeply disappointed to learn you concealed information of strategic importance from me, I question whether this drastic step is really necessary. Tartora has need of your strength."

"I believe my resignation is necessary," I said. "I am stepping down from the role immediately."

My actions might not make sense to them now, but once we explained the mission in front of us, they would realize why I had to do this. If they wanted to stop me going to Calista with Airlie and Cadence, they would have to imprison me—and they would find that no easy feat.

I met my uncle's eye without flinching, allowing the steel and lightning behind my gaze to show through. I had served the crown loyally for many years and hoped to do so for many more years, but I would not be swayed in this matter.

My uncle made no further objection, instead turning to look at Drake. My gaze narrowed slightly as I watched them. Something was passing between them that I didn't understand, and that ignorance made me uneasy. What reassurance was the king receiving from the Master of the Elements, and what would the consequences be for us?

Uncle turned back to me, unexpected satisfaction in his eyes. "Very well, you leave me with no choice but to accept your resignation. However, I hope you'll continue to make your strength and skills available to us in a less official capacity."

"As to that, Your Majesty..." I hesitated, unable to stop myself looking at Airlie this time. I had intended to use this meeting to explain our mission into Calista, but I didn't like to

show our hand so openly when something of significance was happening that I didn't understand.

"There is another matter that must be dealt with," Drake boomed out, filling me with relief. They meant to deal with this issue—whatever it was—immediately. I could bring up our mission once I knew what they were planning.

"And what matter is that, Master Drake?" I asked, reminding myself to include his title now that I was no longer of equal status.

I met his gaze with my usual confidence, however. If they hoped to find us easy to manipulate, they would soon learn differently.

"There is the matter of your apprentice," Drake said.

His words shot through me with the force of lightning. Airlie? This was about Airlie?

"My apprentice?" Possibilities raced through my mind too fast to be properly grasped.

"Certainly," Drake said smoothly. "Since we were unprepared for this development, we do not have an immediate succession plan for your role. Until such time as a new Royal Mage can be chosen and commissioned, I will take on Airlie's apprenticeship."

"Take on her apprenticeship?" I couldn't seem to understand his words, although they appeared clear enough on the surface. "I don't understand. I am the mage who activated her, legally I am required to complete her apprenticeship."

It was one fact I was certain of, given how many times I had thought it over, wishing there was some way out of the interminable two-year span.

Drake raised an eyebrow. "Certainly not. Airlie apprenticed to the Royal Mage, and her apprenticeship is attached to the role. It will naturally transfer to the new Royal Mage when he or she is selected."

"Really, Evermund? Did you leave your brain behind on that never-ending journey?" Augusta's tone might have hidden her surprise from someone who knew her less well, but it was clear to me. "You know special rules apply to the apprentices of the Triumvirate. Any current apprenticeships always pass to a new affinity head. We must safeguard the best of the next generation. Just because the Royal Mage rarely has an apprentice doesn't mean the rule does not apply."

I listened meekly to her lecture, painful hope blooming inside me. Did they really mean to twist the rules in this way? I didn't want to let the hope in only to have the prospect ripped away again. I needed to be sure.

"Certainly that is usually the case," I said with deceptive calm. "But normally an affinity head only vacates their position due to death or infirmity, so of course they cannot continue to train the strongest among our future mages. But I am not—"

“Airlie’s apprenticeship passes to the next Royal Mage,” Drake cut me off, his tone making it clear they didn’t mean to be swayed on this point.

I froze, my whole body rigid with the effort of keeping the wave of emotion washing through me hidden. I inclined my head slightly, the only sign of agreement I could manage without giving myself away.

Airlie was free of me. Or rather, I was the one who was free. Free of the crippling weight of duty and responsibility that had been so at war with my emotions.

I had never dreamed that my resignation would result in such a development—I would never have let myself have such a dream. Should I feel guilty at the happiness filling me? Guilty that my betrayal had brought the thing I most desired?

My eyes traveled between their faces, carefully focused on the front of the room while I reined in the overwhelming feeling of freedom and joy coursing through me. I couldn’t risk looking at Airlie yet.

Did they think their actions were a punishment? I didn’t think they would do something so major for such a petty reason—not given the state of the kingdom and the threats before us. They would have done this for a greater purpose.

They wanted to control Airlie, and they no longer thought that could be done through me. My joy muted at this sign of their new mistrust, but at the same time, I believed in my ability to win that trust back. Now that I was free of my role of responsibility over her, I would win Airlie, whatever it took. And once they all saw what position she had in my heart, they would understand why she was the one person I put higher than Tartora. They would learn to trust me again—and Airlie with me.

They thought they had just cut Airlie’s ties to me, but I was still tied to her with bonds far stronger than that of master and apprentice. Her apprenticeship would have been for two years, but I was confident my love wouldn’t wane, no matter how many years passed.

Finally I turned to look at her, the sight of her concerned face making me want to sweep her into my arms, despite our audience. I held myself back, however. I would wait until I could steal a moment with her alone. I just hoped that moment wasn’t too long in coming. I wasn’t sure how long I could wait now that I was finally free to speak my heart.



# Evermund – Calista

We were a weary and battered group who limped away from the shattered boats. But there was no point in lingering when what we needed was residual healing power that Cadence could put to use.

As we walked, I found myself keeping a protective eye on the others. I no longer held any particular position of authority in the group, and I had been reveling in my freedom—especially since Airlie had said she liked the new side of me. But responsibility wasn't an easy burden to relinquish, and our new leader was injured.

After monitoring Zeke, Cadence, and Airlie as they fell further and further behind the group, I called for a break. The others responded without protest, either because they were tired or they were used to my leadership. I didn't want to take back the role, but neither could I ignore the needs of the group while two of our number—including Zeke—were injured.

Everyone ate quietly from their own packs, and I allowed myself to drift until I was at Airlie's side. Now that it was only the presence of our companions holding me back, I was constantly drawn to her like a moth to flame.

"I'm actually glad it's so empty around here," she said, seeming to welcome my company. Her welcome warmed me, but her following words doused the feeling. "The clear view in all directions is reassuring given how often I think I hear some new monstrous creature racing toward us. I'm jumping at every sound."

She rolled her eyes as if she was ridiculous, but I knew exactly what she meant. We had managed to save the group from the last attack, but it had been a near thing and had required power that was still new to me. I shuddered to think there might be something worse lurking out there—something I couldn't save them from. Couldn't save her from.

"I know what you mean," I said quietly. "I've been watching for them too." The walk so far had been tense with the fear of it.

"This time we'll let someone else save us, shall we?" Airlie said in a lighter tone, clearly trying to lift my mood. "We wouldn't want them to get jealous that they haven't had a turn."

She grinned as she nudged me with her shoulder, oblivious to the sensation that rushed through me from the brief physical contact. Airlie still seemed unaware of what our change in status meant—or perhaps just unaware of my true feelings. I had clearly succeeded in concealing them despite the struggle it had been at the time. And now that I wanted to display

my love openly—to be honest with her—I hadn't managed to steal a single moment alone with her. But perhaps truly being alone wasn't necessary, perhaps I should—

"Time to get moving," Zeke called, cutting me off and not for the first time.

I shook my head on a soft chuckle, somehow wrestling my irritation into resigned amusement. I couldn't take out my frustration on Zeke when he had a good reason to keep us moving. With such an unnatural injury, his only hope of relief was for Cadence to find healing power.

But at least as we resumed walking, I was able to keep my place at Airlie's side. And as time wore on, the group slowly stretched out, no longer bunched so close together that every murmured word was heard by all.

At first Airlie and my conversation was light and meaningless, but my eyes kept straying sideways to the incredible woman at my side. Before I met her, I had been secure in my power and authority, and yet she had opened the world to me in ways I couldn't have imagined.

I had never dreamed of having an apprentice stronger than myself—it should have been an impossibility. And yet she had turned up and not only been stronger herself but had made me stronger in the process. And now she was no longer my apprentice. At the lake we had acted as a team—as peers—and the feeling had been incredible despite the danger we faced.

"It was incredible what we did back there," I said, unable to stay silent. "I'm not sure they'll believe it at the Guild. No one could doubt now that Cadence has increased my strength. I couldn't have managed it two years ago."

"It's hard to believe more than a year has passed since I became your apprentice," Airlie replied in a soft tone of reminiscence. "And yet at the same time, it feels like another life before you activated me."

While I knew what she meant—my life before Airlie was like a cold and distant dream—I didn't like the way she spoke as if she were still my apprentice.

"You're not my apprentice anymore," I said quickly, earning an exasperated look.

Didn't she understand the importance of that fact? It was all I could think about sometimes.

"Details," she said dismissively, and the word landed like pain.

"Not to me," I murmured before we both fell into silence.

Did she really think the change meant nothing? I knew she felt gratitude for my assistance in the past, but was that the extent of her tie to me? My insides burned with the need to express my feelings and to finally have the chance to ask hers.

If she felt nothing for me now, would she at least allow me a chance to try to win her over? If she spurned me completely, I would—

I cut off the thought. There was no point dwelling on such a painful possibility when it might never come to pass. My eyes lifted to the backs of our companions, walking some distance ahead of us. My frustration rose, burning from my gut up into my throat.

“Do you know the main problem with this mission?” I asked, the words out before I had time to consider them. “We’re all together, all the time. It’s been impossible to get a moment alone with you. And I would very much like a moment alone with you, Airlie.”

Airlie stared at me, wide-eyed, her cheeks turning pink. I felt a flush through my whole body in response. Perhaps Airlie wasn’t as oblivious to my feelings as I had feared.

The possibility only made me more eager to speak.

But before I could say any more, she rushed into speech herself. “Actually, there’s something I need to say to you.”

My eyebrows rose, terrifying possibilities filling my mind. But I gestured for her to speak, the fear on her face pulling at my heart. If my feelings were so unwelcome to her, I would have to find a way to keep my distance—as painful and impossible as that seemed in our current situation.

“I wasn’t truthful about what happened when we met,” she said, the words tumbling out of her. “Even though Hayes and Colton were monitoring me for deception, I still managed to deceive everyone.”

Instant relief filled me, making it hard to hold back my smile. She wasn’t worried about my feelings but about her own past actions. Of course she was. Airlie carried kingdoms on her shoulders.

Given everything that had happened since—and all I knew of her character—I no longer felt anything but admiration for the deft way she had handled us all in our first interactions. She must have been anxious, and she had certainly been inexperienced, but no one would have guessed it from her skillful maneuvering. From the beginning, she had demonstrated her skill, intelligence, and leadership.

“I did notice you let Cadence do a lot of the talking back then,” I said, hoping my light tone would reassure her.

But her voice remained miserable, her thoughts still mired in her guilt.

“Yes that was on purpose,” she said. “I’d kept so many secrets from her that when she said she didn’t know anything, she was telling the truth. But I did know about affinities and activation. And I knew that if you tested me to check my strength, it would activate me. I also

knew that would obligate you to take me on as an apprentice. I tricked you into activating me, and it has ended up destroying your entire life.”

“Has it?” I asked, still working to suppress my smile. I wanted to honor her earnestness—the basic honesty in her nature that led her to reject the deception her father had fostered. But she couldn’t really believe she had destroyed my life, surely?

She stared at me as if she did believe it. “You’re trudging through the fallen kingdom on a potentially suicidal mission—and if you do manage to make it home, you have nothing waiting for you there. You’ve not only lost your position as Royal Mage, but even your rooms! Someone else will be living in your place when you get back.”

I wanted to pull her into my arms and show her just how much I cared about my rooms—which was not at all. But not only were we surrounded by others, she was clearly unaware of my feelings after all. Given our past positions, I had to approach the situation with far more delicacy than my heart was demanding.

“Actually,” I said in the lightest voice I could manage, “I’m hoping I’ve gained something far more valuable than my position. And I couldn’t care less about my rooms. As an elements master, I’m entitled to a small suite in the Guild. And if it came to it, I’m sure my aunt and uncle would rustle up some small corner of the palace for me to lay my head, if necessary.”

“But I lied to you!” she cried, still trying to impress on me the gravity of her wrongdoing. “By omission if not in so many words. And I deceived you! Everything you’ve done for Cadence and me has been out of obligation to me as your apprentice—the whole time believing I was innocently forced into it as you were. But I should never have been your apprentice at all.”

On that at least, we could agree. Although with everything else going on in Airlie’s life in the last year, perhaps it was a good thing I had been forced into patience and restraint, unable to express the feelings growing inside me. But at least I no longer had to pretend that I had aided her and her sister out of nothing more than obligation.

“Have I done it all for that reason?” I asked. “That’s news to me.”

She glared at me, clearly frustrated that I wasn’t turning on her in horror and betrayal. I kept my arms firmly at my sides to stop me from gathering her into them. I wanted to hold her tight and reassure her, but I would have to use my words instead.

“My dear girl, you can’t really believe I’m so easily deceived. I might have thought it an innocent mistake initially, but I’ve spent far too much time with you and Cadence since then not to guess there was more going on. Have you been thinking I would hold it against you? I’m well aware of the pressures your father forced on you—and just how little life

experience you had back then. You were desperate and worried for your sister, and you did what you believed you had to—what your father had instructed you to do, was it not?”

She nodded, and I pressed on.

“You’re not a villain, Airlie, and I’ve never thought you one. In fact—” I hesitated, trying to work out how much to say. “I haven’t once regretted you coming into my life, however it happened. So it would be churlish of me to quibble about the method now.”

“I...” Her words faltered. Apparently I had finally broken through the mantle of guilt she had been wearing.

“Thank you, Evermund,” she finally said, my name on her lips giving me a thrill as it always did. “Not just for understanding, but for everything you’ve done for me. And I’m sorry for thinking the worst of you. I can see now it was insulting for me to assume you would take it so badly.”

I couldn’t help chuckling at that. Of course she would find a new way to blame herself, although her words weren’t entirely without merit. Her assumptions had been a little insulting to both my character and my intelligence. But I knew the fault lay with her tendency to take on responsibility, not her perception of me. At least, I hoped that was the case.

“It was rather,” I said lightly. “But if you like, I can freely forgive you that wrong as well.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Now you’re just mocking me.”

“Never,” I said as seriously as I could manage, the temptation for some gentle teasing too overwhelming to resist. It would do Airlie good to take herself a little less seriously and to realize she wasn’t always the one at fault.

The thought quickly doused my amusement. How heavy had this burden been for her? I should have realized she would be castigating herself for it and cleared the air sooner.

“I’m sorry you’ve been stressing about this in silence for so long,” I said. “I hope you know you can always talk to me about anything.”

Her face turned pink for the second time, destroying my remaining self-restraint. A groan slipped out before I could stop it. It was impossible to continue the conversation without being honest about my feelings and my desire to wrap her in my arms.

“Perhaps this is private enough, after all,” I murmured. “I don’t know if I can keep—”

“Look!” Gia’s voice called out, cutting through my confession. “There’s a farmhouse up ahead. It looks reasonably unscathed, and I think I can even see the city walls in the distance.”

I groaned again, even deeper. How was it possible that I still hadn’t managed a single moment alone with Airlie? I vaguely remembered how concerned I had been for both Zeke

and Gia earlier, but in that moment I could have happily seen them both disappear into the ground.

“It’s starting to get dark,” Zeke said. “So let’s check out the house. It might be a good place to spend the night. I don’t like the idea of coming into the city in darkness.”

I closed my eyes briefly and then opened them again, drawing a deep breath as I did so. The moment between Airlie and I was gone, and both Gia and Zeke were right. We needed to rest and regroup, and the farmhouse looked like a good option. I would just have to hold onto my self-restraint a little longer.

But I vowed that at the first possible opportunity, I would find a way for a truly private conversation with Airlie.