

# PILLARS OF ETERNITY



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SCREAMING



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# UNTIL HE STARTED SCREAMING

Aloth Corfiser didn't consider himself a violent man, but he had his limits, and Targun was dangerously close to crossing them.

This wasn't the first time. That had been a few years ago, when he was still learning to navigate the towers and terraces of Bragganhyl Academy. Targun had inquired with uncommon fervor about Aloth's patron, which he must have known to be the Erl of Cythwood.

What Targun couldn't have known was that Aloth's memories of the erl's estate were so colored by violence and terror that prolonged discussion of the place filled his nostrils with his father's liquor-soured breath and his limbs with *her* defiant ferocity.

And though he'd tried to communicate this through all of the subtle deflections and demurs that good manners allowed, the young Lord of Dafmund was accustomed to neither.

When it had gotten to the point where Aloth could see nothing but the dark tunneling around him, could hear nothing but the roar of blood in his ears, he'd slapped Targun.

Rather, *she* had.

But that wasn't a distinction he could explain, and when he'd recovered himself and seen Targun and the other students in the library staring at him in wonder, all he could do was slink away quietly.

But he hadn't forgotten, and neither had Targun.

That was how Aloth had ended up copying notes for Targun. It wasn't that he feared Targun's bullying—whatever the young aristocrat might think—but rather that he feared *her* retaliation to the same. Complying with Targun's petty impositions just seemed easier, especially when it helped Aloth in his own studies that much more.

Unfortunately, *she* had begun to bristle at these demands of late.

So, one Folcsdag morning, he politely informed Targun that he considered any debt to the noble's wounded pride long past paid. While he regretted any inconvenience he might cause the young lord, he'd no longer be in a position to furnish his notes.

Targun flinched and found the same thin smile Aloth felt on his own face.

"You know, Corfiser, I've tried to be congenial with you."

Aloth held his smile in place and silently counted to ten.

"I've even tried to include you in some of the more selective groups at the academy."

Aloth let the tiniest of sighs escape his nose. He was almost through this.

"And still you reject my every effort," Targun said.

She would have told him where to shove his effort. Aloth smiled again, and this time, it felt natural.

"Something funny, Corfiser?"

Aloth bit his lip, but he couldn't stop himself from grinning now. "It's not that I don't appreciate it."

"But you keep other company. Of course."

A low insult, and not an especially original one, either. Aloth's mother, an elf, had been in a ceremonial marriage to a folk thain since Aloth was a child. Never mind that the imperial fercönyng and mecwyn ruled the country under such an alliance, some people—usually elves with long memories and old pedigrees—still disapproved. Nevertheless, Aloth had thought he'd left most of those attitudes behind in the Cythwood.

"I really should be going," Aloth said. He didn't pay much mind to barbs about his mother these days, but *she* was another matter.

"Ah, yes. It's been, what, three days? You must be desperate."

Aloth froze. That stuffed-up lordling couldn't possibly know what he was talking about.

Targun's eyes narrowed. "You think I haven't noticed the way you disappear from the grounds every few days?"

But he obviously knew something.

Targun looked like a cat toying with prey. "Perhaps it's a svef addiction. Or maybe you've formed a sordid liaison of your own." The young noble paused just long enough to show what he thought of *that* idea.

Targun was fishing, but even so, Aloth was getting antsy. Worse, so was she.

"Everyone has secrets, Corfiser. After I find yours, perhaps you'll find yourself in a more cooperative mood."

Aloth mumbled an excuse and headed toward the dormitory. He needed to be alone. The walls of the academy felt like they were closing around him, but he couldn't very well leave now, not after that conversation.

He found his room and shut the door behind him. He was alone, but he could already feel her scratching behind his eyeballs, looking for a way out.

He needed calm. Fortunately, he knew where to find it.

Calm lived in the familiar contours of routine. It inhabited the splash of cool water from the basin on his bedside table and the soft kiss of the towel as he dried his face with one, two, three gentle pats.

He'd spent years cultivating his habits, and they served him well enough. But he'd felt *her* stir more of late. It had gotten so bad that he'd stopped retuning home to the Cythwood during festival weeks for fear that his father's drunken rages and constant prodding would bring her out in a way he couldn't hide.

But once he'd gotten the letter—the one from Mother's thayne—everything would be fine.

Aloth spent a few more minutes getting his bearings. When he found the grooves that separated his self from hers, he left his room for the breezy halls of Bragganhyl Academy.

It was still early, and the easterly carried the scent of saltwater even though the bay was fifteen miles away. The academy had been a hill fort centuries ago, and the views it commanded of the surrounding jungle were impressive, if no longer tactically relevant.

In the morning light, the sea was a broad slick of oil next to the breadcrumbs of a bayside village. And there, halfway to the village, was the familiar patch of blood-red foliage. Aloth let his gaze rest on it for half a minute, finding calm there, too.

It was still his, and as long as he was careful, it would continue to be.

The morning classes brought their own sort of calm in the familiar shapes and sounds of runes and incantations. But when he sat in the feast hall at lunch, soothing his nerves and his stomach with cream of pepperleaf soup, he saw a young page waiting in the corridor outside, wearing the gray and gold stripes of the proctor's office and fidgeting with a wax-sealed letter.

His letter. It had to be.

The soup suddenly tasted sour, and anyway, he couldn't find it in himself to care about lunch when his future lay in a thirteen-year-old's sweating hands.

He abandoned the rest of his meal and approached the page in the corridor. The boy had been mannerly enough to leave him to eat his lunch in peace, yet he looked relieved to see his vigil coming to an end.

"Novice Corfiser," the boy said. "A letter for you."

"Duty and devotion," Aloth said, taking the scroll while the boy scampered toward the kitchen. It was rolled into a tight cylinder, addressed to him in his mother's flowing hand and sealed in the blue wax emblem of her thayn.

He felt an urge to tear it open and end the weeks of worrying, and he nearly did, but he also felt a host of other urges that weren't his, that he didn't think were his, but it was getting rather hard to tell.

His calm was crumbling.

He had to get away from all of the students, proctors, and respectable folk as soon as possible.

When he was certain no one was watching—not Targun or his cronies—he hurried away from the halls and towers that were already teeming with people and made his way down twisting stairs, descending beneath the jungle canopy to solid ground.

Rushing toward the copse of crimson foliage, he left the academy behind.

The mounting panic was a bittersweet reminder that his mind and fears were still his. That the trees closing around him and the heavy air clogging his lungs were part of another routine, and he could probably hold himself together just long enough to see it through.

At last he reached the corpsefruit trees. He'd never encountered a dead body—before embalming, anyway—but he always imagined that they got to smelling like corpsefruit after a couple of days.

The eponymous fruits were already a week past ripe, and the boughs of the trees drooped beneath the weight of the purple, fist-shaped lumps. In the afternoon light, the veins showed through the crimson leaves, making them look like ragged flaps of flesh.

Unpleasant as they were, they kept people away from the cottage.

It was a small building with a thatched roof stained and scabbed by the trees' gory sap. The windows had been boarded up by a previous owner, and while the place got as hot and sticky as the inside of a toffee bun, it was nearly soundproof.

Aloth shoved through the door and barred it behind him. He lit a candle with shaking hands and inspected all of his usual signs—the rattan mat on the threshold with its corner folded up, the three-legged table with its particular tableau of abandoned cookware, the ever-thicker layer of dust in the cupboard.

Everything was just as he'd left it.

With a quick prayer to Berath, Aloth peeled the wax seal from the scroll and unrolled it.

“Dearest son,” he read, “Know first that that the fault lies not with you.”

He read on, absorbing his mother’s sincerest regrets, her most heartfelt encouragements, and the news that her thayn was in no position to hire any arcane knights at this time.

He crumpled the letter and surrendered his last vestiges of calm.

He noticed the pain in his head first. It began as a growing pressure accompanied by sudden stabs that always felt like something trying to cut its way out of him. The pain spread along his arms, torso, and legs, building and sharpening until he thought he might burst.

He wasn’t aware of screaming, but by the time the pain faded to a dull throb, his throat was raw.

He had never figured out whether this was an inevitable part of her emergence or whether she did this to spite him.

Her laughter jangled like a set of rusty keys in his aching skull.

*An’ here I thought Ma was working her tongue with that thayn.*

“She did what she could,” Aloth panted, too drained to argue.

*Aye, but ye ever puzzle on where she’s applyin’ it?*

On a different day, he might have conceded that Iselmyr, illiterate harridan that she was, nevertheless had a certain wit. Yet all he could think about was his own foolishness in letting other connections to possible patronages wither while he’d focused on this one prospect.

*Get hold o’ yerself, scholar-lad. Always warm ale and a cold bed for ye back home in Cythwood.*

“No. Never.” He’d sooner turn to mucking stables at the academy.

*Then ye best turn over a few more stones and see what wriggles beneath.*

He’d finally caught his breath, but he let it all out in one great sigh.

“I’m an arcane knight.”

*In training, ye stripling.*

“Poisonous curses and burning hexes won’t count for much in a healer’s den or a charm-weaver’s shop.”

*Cheer! Ye can always try ‘em on your auld man.*

She had her moments of brilliance.

Of course, there were other lords, erls, and thayns, many of whom employed arcane knights in their personal guard. But they tended to offer patronages to the children of their retainers, confederates, and tenants.

As his father’s employer, the Erl of Cythwood, had done.

His mother’s thayn had been his best option. But he wasn’t hiring, or so she’d written. Then again, there was another possibility.

Iselmyr noted it, too.

*Coxfither. Ass-nibbling mite of a man. Ye think—*

“The erl used his not-inconsiderable influence to deter other would-be patrons? Perhaps.”

*Ye’re scuppered, lad.*

Something cold filled those raw, empty places where the pain had been. It didn’t feel good, but at least it was his.



The advantage—if there were such a thing—to growing up with a violent and temperamental alcoholic was that Aloth had learned early to read people. And as he broached the subject of patronages with his peers and instructors, he read rejection in their thoughtful musings and polite digressions.

Iselmyr, at least, had been mercifully quiet since the afternoon at the cottage. She stayed close, prickling and buzzing under his skin as he tried to salvage his routines, but she said little until luncheon in the feast hall two days later. By that point, he’d exhausted every avenue he

could think of—every open gilde, every peer with noble family, every instructor he'd ever impressed.

*Dinna go clappin' yer own back yet. What've them?*

He raised his eyes over his dish of stewed palm squash and scanned the room.

The trouble with trying to talk with Iselmyr was that he never knew when he was doing it aloud. This had nearly proved disastrous more than once.

*Them quiet ones on the terrace. Ye hain't jawed with them.*

And there was a good reason for that.

“That’s the Spellwrights’ Gilde,” he muttered into his spoon.

Gildes were born of the rigors of national etiquette and the demands of academy life. As student groups, they allowed novices to study and rub elbows without breaking any of the delicate taboos about mixing work and leisure.

They also connected their members with patronages.

Most numbered anywhere from a dozen to a few score. But the spellwrights were a small, intimate group—he doubted there were more than ten.

He sighed. “Spellwrights are—”

Pain seared the backs of his eyes.

*A pox on your nethers, I know what they are! They're the ones what make all them spelly-scrolls.*

She was correct, but that wasn't the problem.

“They're also Targun's people.”

Sure enough, the next lord of Dafmund crossed the atrium and joined the other spellwrights at their table.

*I'm no scholar-lass, but I'm figuring there's one o' him and nine o' them.*

He gritted his teeth. “And none of them have highborn connections.”

*Then ye’ll just have to oil that tongue o’ yers.*



Aloth rarely crossed paths with the spellwrights, but he’d heard they met evenings in the south tower laboratory to practice their calligraphy, so he shifted his schedule accordingly.

Yet when he arrived, it was clear something was amiss. The tower was too quiet. As he crept closer to the laboratory door, he didn’t hear the scratch of quills or the drone of voices, but rather, a sudden crash of metal.

Followed by urgent whispers.

“Idiot! You’ll break that stuff before we even get out of here!”

“Then *you* carry the rest.”

“Quiet, both of you.”

Aloth pushed the door open and found a handful of spellwrights staring back at him, looking almost as startled as he felt. Only Targun, standing at the back of the group, scowled.

They were carrying gears, flasks, and armfuls of copper cables.

“This isn’t what it looks like,” said a pretty redhead whose name Aloth didn’t know.

He could feel the tips of his ears burning. This was a mistake, he should have minded his own business, should never have listened to Iselmyr.

“Enough,” said Esmey, a tall girl with almond eyes. “What’re you doing here, Corfiser?” She managed to make it sound like he’d done something wrong, and a part of him felt like he had.

“I was just— well, I...” The words dammed in his throat, and his mouth felt dry with confusion and embarrassment at the kind of awkward situation that no cultured person wanted any part of.

Esmey held up a hand. “What’ll it take for you to forget about all of this?”

Aloth was at a loss for words, but Iselmyr wasn’t.

“*Lemme join you,*” he blurted.

The others blinked at him in surprise. Even he couldn’t believe he’d said it, but he had been looking for an in with the spellwrights. With anyone.

“Absolutely not,” Targun said.

The other spellwrights—except for Esmey—flinched and looked back at Targun like scolded hounds.

Targun pointed at Aloth. “You want to risk everything we’ve worked for on him? He’s not going to give us anything more than a temporary silence.”

All eyes swiveled back in his direction. The gauntlet had been thrown.

Aloth took in their furtive glances, their satchels stuffed with stolen equipment they couldn’t hide for long.

“I can give you a place to hide this stuff.” He’d said it before he’d given himself much time to think about it.

But it was working. They were looking at him and at one another with cautious hope.

“Outside the academy?” Esmey asked.

“*And nye in its shadow,*” Aloth heard himself say. The thought was his, but the words weren’t.

All the same, the spellwrights were too excited to register the change in his voice. Only Targun was watching him, though it was hard to distinguish suspicion from hostility.

“Curious,” Targun said. “I wonder what use you have for such a place.”

“Peace and quiet,” Aloth snapped before anyone else had time to ponder the matter.

Esmey and the others seemed to come to some kind of agreement. “Where is this place?”

“A cottage in the corpsefruit grove,” Aloth said. Mostly, he was just grateful conversation had moved on before Targun had a chance to probe him further. “Halfway to the village.”

The spellwrights—except for Targun, of course—exchanged nods and whispers.

“Fine,” Esmey said. “Meet us there tomorrow night.”

“Very good,” Aloth said. He hurried away and toward the steps, feeling Targun’s hostile gaze on his back and wondering if he’d made a mistake.



Iselmyr was quiet all night, not that it did any good. Between the hope that he’d finally found an escape from his patronage and the terror at having surrendered his only refuge, Aloth was wound too taut for sleep.

Morning came as slowly as long-dreaded news. Aloth shuffled from one lecture to the next, reeling the hours from the day. When classes adjourned for the evening meal, he slunk out of the towers and toward the corpsefruit grove.

Spectral light shimmered at the edges of the cottage’s boarded-up windows, and the muffled sounds of voices carried under the door. A cart lay half-hidden in the undergrowth, its wheels rimmed with mud.

He pushed the door open, feeling like an intruder.

Nine students and a strange, sprawling contraption had colonized his sanctuary.

It spread from one end of the cottage to the other, a tangled mass of copper cables, adra nodes, and ring magnets. Five or six students fussed over it, taking measurements and tightening connections.

It looked complicated. Expensive. Like it wasn't going anywhere soon.

"We're just getting it set up tonight," Esmey said, suddenly over his shoulder.

He hadn't even begun to wonder what "it" was, but Esmey smiled and told him anyway.

"A soul scale. One of only a dozen in the country, I'd wager."

Something didn't add up. They were spellwrights. Bookworms. And yet, the device they were cobbling together in his cottage...

"What is this?" he asked.

Esmey tilted her head. "You're familiar with animancy?"

It wasn't really a question. It was experimental and illegal, so everyone was familiar with it. Nefarious, soul-twisting scientists (invariably sly Vailians or buck-toothed Dyrwoodans) appeared in opera houses across the country. Sensationalist accounts of expeditions in the Eastern Reach nearly always featured some mad animancer's hall of horrors—men and women clawing off their own skin, infused with the souls of beasts, or rotting corpses fed with the spirit essence of children. Even the normally reserved clergy of Berath had begun sermonizing on the evils of soul-science and the natural order of death and rebirth according to the Wheel.

It was dangerous. It was illegal. But he'd seen them stealing equipment, and he'd made an alliance with them anyway. What right did he have to complain now?

Esmey waved a hand. "It's a science like any other. Only, instead of studying the body's humors or the patterns of the seasons, we study the condition of the soul."

It sounded reasonable enough.

"And there's a demand for this kind of thing, yes?" Aloth asked.

"All over. Our patrons want to know which lord's son is the best match for their daughter. Whether to pass the family business to the

eldest child or the youngest. How to cure infirmities that run deeper than blood.”

Like Awakened souls from a past life. Like Iselmyr.

His mouth went dry. “What kind of infirmities?” He tried to keep his words even and measured despite his tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth.

Iselmyr’s voice sounded like a warning bell. *Don’t be foolish, lad.*

Esmey shrugged. “Any that plague the soul. Heard of one animancer who cured a sailor of a wasting sickness caused by a fractured soul. Another in the Republics who treated a merchant for a pain in her hand. Turned out she’d lost it in a past life. Something specific you’re wondering about?”

Aloth found his bland, placid smile even while his heart hammered in his chest. “Merely curious. This is hardly the picture of animancy I’ve heard elsewhere.”

Esmey smiled. “You’ll see soon enough.”

“Beg your pardon?”

“We’ll be running our experiment next week.”

“What experiment?”

On anyone else, her smile would have looked amused. “You don’t think we’re setting this up for show, do you? A soul scale measures a person’s essence. Shows us where it’s weak or strong. If it’s got any unusual characteristics.”

Aloth felt cold all over. In Aedyran society, people shunned the Awakened the same way they did criminals and madmen. If that machine worked the way the spellwrights thought it would, if they found Iselmyr, he’d lose more than his patronage.

“What’s that, Corfiser? I could have sworn I heard you say something.” Targun had appeared next to Esmey and was looking at him with a big, toothy grin.

So he *had* noticed. Aloth was so lost in his terror that he didn't see Esmeý trying to give him a wrench until she pressed it into his hands.

"Go help Giamina and Aedelmoer connect those cables. If we finish this tonight, we won't have to come back until we run the first test."

Aloth took the wrench and helped out, keeping his face carefully neutral.

All the same, he felt Targun's eyes on him throughout the night, and he avoided the man as best he could in the tiny cottage.



When the spellwrights disbanded for the night, they set off alone or in pairs, and on the walk back to the academy, Aloth finally had a moment of solitude. Relatively speaking, anyway.

He mopped his brow and took a few deep breaths. Esmeý had announced that they would attempt their first test in three days. He couldn't possibly join them again and risk Iselmyr's discovery. This had all been a mistake. He should have walked away the moment he caught them stealing, and he might have if it hadn't been for—

*Enow o' this. Ye're workin' yerself into a boil over mayhaps and could-bes.*

He crossed his arms as he pushed through the thick undergrowth and back to the road. "I can't go back. They'll find me out."

*Aye, and ye think disappearin' won't raise any eyebrows? Grit yer teeth and finish what ye started.*

"What you started. They have a machine, Iselmyr! A machine that—"

*That mayhap works and mayhap don't! And if'n they pick ye come testin' time, ye can tell 'em to get scuppered. But nice-like.*

"And that won't raise eyebrows."

*It shakes like this, lad—ye stick around, and mayhap they sniff us out. But ye quit now and go back to yer auld man, and we'll come out for sure.*

For once, she was right.



The days passed at the pace of cold treacle. And while Aloth argued with Iselmyr, he continued to wonder at the new company he'd found himself in. He'd never told anyone—except Mother, of course—about his Awakening, but the spellwrights certainly held more progressive ideas than most. Time would tell if their abilities matched their aspirations.

Three days later, Aloth and the spellwrights reconvened at the hut. He'd barely slept, and he hoped the dark circles under his eyes might excuse him from more than the minimum participation in the evening's experiment.

Esmey and a couple of the others were poring over pages of calculations. Four or five novices were looking over the device, testing connections.

That meant that when Targun caught sight of Aloth, there was no one free to distract him.

"Corfiser." Targun clapped him on the back a little harder than necessary. "You're looking peaky. Something the matter?"

"A few late nights is all."

Targun pushed his lower lip into a pout. "Perhaps we should keep an eye on you tonight."

Aloth mumbled an excuse and busied himself with examining the magnets until Esmey cleared her throat.

The other spellwrights clumped around her. Aloth stood at the back of the group, trying to make himself as small as possible.

"We've all worked hard for the last year, and with the support of our patrons and the special assistance of Aloth Corfiser—" Esmey gestured to him, and he felt his ears lower. "We've been able to build something that will allow us to prove ourselves as animancers."

The rest of the novices clapped and nodded politely.

"Which brings us to the next stage of the project."

Esmey's eyes rested on Aloth for just a moment, and his heart stopped.

She continued. "Targun's been studying the operation of this machine, and now that we're finally ready to put it to the test, he'll ensure that it runs smoothly."

After another round of soft applause, Targun turned to face the others, grinning broadly.

And looking right at Aloth, no question.

"Our Esmey is too kind. The real credit tonight goes to our first test subject. Aloth Corfiser."

Aloth suddenly felt cold all over. The others clapped and cheered, but it felt like his ears were stuffed with cotton. He'd known this was going to happen. It was all her—

*By the ricket'n Wheel, do something!*

He swallowed. "Targun is too kind to do me such an honor, but it's an honor I must decline." He bowed politely.

Of course that couldn't be the end of it.

Targun feigned shock. "My dear Aloth, you've made this possible. We're all here thanks to you." He grinned. "You must indulge us."

"But I haven't the slightest idea how this thing works." Aloth waved his hand at the device. "Surely this role would be better suited to someone more familiar with the work."

Targun clasped his hands in front of himself. "Never fear, I've been studying this design for weeks. All you've got to do is lie there and—"

"Then why don't you show us?" Aloth asked.

Targun was frozen, his mouth still hanging open.

"I'm sure the whole thing will run much more smoothly with you on the table. So why don't you do it?" He waited a beat. "Unless you've got something to hide."

The young lord was trying to keep his composure, but Aloth could see his fury in the tightness around his eyes and the twitching corners of his mouth. The other students were looking between them both, heads swiveling and eyes roving.

“Unless you’re afraid will find you’re no lord’s son, but a stablehand’s spawn,” Aloth added, though the inspiration seemed to come from somewhere else.

That pushed the others over the edge. The novices erupted in laughter, and Targun’s face flushed red behind his rictus grin.

“Very well,” Targun finally said. “I’ll go first.” He stressed that word, still watching Aloth.

While Targun and the others busied themselves with their preparations, Aloth gulped deep breaths. It was a reprieve, if a brief one. Still, maybe the machine wouldn’t work. Maybe this whole exercise would be pointless after all.

It was a worthy hope, but then again, there were ways to secure it.

So, while all of the other spellwrights were busy—either checking Targun or checking the machine—Aloth made a few adjustments of his own. A loosened bolt here, a crossed wire there. Nothing damning, just enough to prevent the machine from working.

Or so he prayed.

By the time Aloth circled back to the rest of the group, Targun had been stripped to the waist and bedecked with copper bands and adra nodes, all connected to the device with twisting, snaking wires. Aloth slunk over to Esmey, who stood over the old cupboard. A sheet of parchment lay on top of it, and above that was an apparatus of weights with four charcoal sticks suspended on wires as fine as spider silk.

“How does this work?” Aloth asked, as much to distract himself as anything.

“Once the experiment starts, the soul scale will measure Targun’s essence. The adra will amplify those measurements into patterns and pulses, which will be recorded here on the parchment.”

He rubbed at an itch between his fingers. “And then?”

Before Esmey could answer, Giamina hurried over, all brisk urgency. “He’s ready.”

Targun lay on the splintery old table, from which he gave Aloth a final cool look before turning his face to the thatched ceiling.

“Give him space, everyone,” Esmey said. She nodded to a blond dwarf, and he flipped a lever on the side of the machine.

Aloth held his breath along with the other spellwrights. He glanced at the charcoal sticks hanging in front of Esmey. Nothing yet.

Targun closed his eyes and knitted his brow. Sweat beads glistened on his perfect skin.

Still nothing from the charcoal sticks, but the tension in the room was palpable. The air buzzed with the combined hopes and fears of the spellwrights, and Aloth almost regretted that he couldn’t share in this brief, beautiful moment of unity.

Targun gasped.

The charcoal sticks twitched. It might have been a stray draft, but no, they were swaying, swinging, tracing grand, looping circles across the parchment.

The other spellwrights cheered.

Aloth stood frozen, filled with a terror and fury he’d never known before, not at the hand of his volatile father or his relentless tutors. He hated Iselmyr for dragging him into this, hated himself for playing the fool. But most of all, he hated Targun for his pettiness and status, for the way he’d trapped him and now lay there—

Screaming. Targun’s back was arched, his muscles were locked, and his mouth was wide with the force of a silent scream.

The others were still laughing and embracing, too caught up in their success to notice the disaster it had become.

Aloth knocked the dwarf aside and dove for the lever, yanking it back down.

Targun fell limp. The other novices blinked at him, still too confused to feel horror.

“What’s he doing?”

“Targun, it’s over.”

“Unless you want to try again.”

“Look, we won’t tell about your mother and that stable boy.” Laughter followed, but it was halfhearted.

Aloth strode toward the table.

Targun’s body was slack, and a line of spittle dangled from the corner of his mouth. The smell of shit rose from him. His skin had taken on a waxy pallor, as if something essential had been leached from it.

Targun opened his eyes and stared up at Aloth.

“Hrnnngufurrrr,” he said. That’s what it sounded like, anyway.

The temperature in the room seemed to drop. Tense murmurs rose from the crowd behind Aloth.

“What did you do?”

“Don’t look at me! I just pulled the lever.”

“*You* were supposed to watch the magnets.”

“No, that was her! And if there was a problem, it had to be the cables!”

Aloth looked back into Targun’s spiteful green eyes and saw nothing left to hate.

“He needs help,” Aloth said.

But the squabbling had drowned him out.

“He needs—” Aloth turned and saw the others raising their arms and pointing their fingers at one another. It should have been funny,

the way they'd managed to cast blame on everyone but him, but the burbling noises coming from the table made him sick to his stomach.

Only Esmey was quiet, and she was looking at him. "Aloth," she said, "there's nothing we can do."

"But that's..." He felt his throat seizing up and clawed at his collar. "No, we can..."

"Do what?"

"Tell the proctors. They'll know what to do." The room was getting smaller. The others felt like they were disappearing into the cottage's filthy walls. He couldn't hear Iselmyr, and that scared him most of all.

Esmey shook her head. "This can't be fixed."

"We'll just tell them—"

"That we were performing an illegal animancy experiment? With stolen laboratory equipment?" She shook her head. "At best, we'll be sacked. And he'll still be like this." She said "like this" with a kind of airy finality, the way people said "gone soft" or "passed on." As if the implications were clear.

Only they weren't. "What do you mean to do with him?"

Esmey frowned like he'd just asked something indelicate. "The village isn't far. I'll make sure someone finds him out here. He'll be made as comfortable as is possible." Her eyes flashed around the room at the others. "And we'll reconvene once this has blown over."

"What about the patrons?" asked Aloth.

"What about them? They pay us to test and experiment."

"Won't they want to know—"

"If they did, they wouldn't assign these tests to a gilde of novices halfway across the country." The others went quiet, looking relieved to be distracted by someone else's argument. Esmey nodded as if coming to an agreement with herself. "We discuss this with no one. Not with each other, not with the proctors, and not with the patrons."

Aloth looked back at Targun, drooling and twitching on the table. He thought he saw a plea in those empty green eyes, but they couldn't have held more than a reflection.



The walk back felt interminable. He was alone again, and faintly hoped for some jungle cat to leap from the trees and swallow him in punishment for what he'd done.

But no, the real punishment was living with this.

He was halfway back to the academy before Iselmyr piped up.

*Ye've got to screw yer head on straight, lad.*

"But I'm responsible for what happened back there! I—" He couldn't bring himself to put a name to what he'd done. He wasn't even certain what it was.

She shushed him.

*Ye cannae know that. All ye did was twiddle a few bits. Like as not, the thing was bust already.*

"And I'm the reason he got into it."

*Aye, an' he were the one tryin' to force ye into it first.*

His face felt cold. Wet. "That can't—"

*Ye survived, lad. No shame in that.*

He knew she was right, but that didn't make it feel any better.

*Jes' breathe deep an' hold tight. The feelin'll pass, and when we're fixed in a patronage far from Cythwood—*

"I can't stay with them."

*No choosin' t'be done, lad.*

But there she was wrong.

She could feel his mind changing as surely as he could feel her growing uneasy.

*Gie it a few days. Ye don't know what ye're thinkin'.*

But he did, and he wanted to go through with it while he still felt brave and reckless.

*Ye'll lose any chance o' this patronage. Ye'll be lucky to keep the one ye got back home.*

She was right, of course. But a prison cell would've felt freer than the guilt he was trapped in right then.

He walked faster before he could change his mind.



The moon was already on its downward swing, but the torches were still burning in Proctor Langulf's study on the top floor of the west tower.

As Aloth started up the tower, Iselmyr began to panic.

*Ye've gone mad, boy!*

"I've been talking to a woman in my head for years."

*They'll lock ye up with the rest o' them.*

"I expect so."

He took the steps two at a time. He didn't want to lose his nerve now.

*What will ye do? No patron, no prospect, no—*

He stopped, whirling on no one in particular. "I don't know! But I'm going to do what I should have done in the first place. I'll have to figure the rest out from there."

Iselmyr went quiet. One minute passed. Then two. Aloth was sure she'd gone, but then he felt her buzzing in his chest.

*For once, lad, I think we can agree.*

The conversation with Proctor Langulf was easier than Aloth had expected. Each confession followed the last, like knots on a rope, and when he'd drawn them all out of himself, he felt lighter even as he awaited his sentence.

Langulf adjusted his spectacles. "And you admit that you cooperated with a gilde dedicated to animancy even after you knew they'd stolen equipment and planned to conduct an illegal experiment with it?"

An evening breeze blew through the tower room, carrying the sweet scents of honeyvine and bay palm. The setting sun threw a rosy blanket over the jungle canopy below.

"Yes," Aloth said.

"Why?"

"I needed a patron. Sir. And at first, I thought the spellwrights could offer one."

Langulf's hoary eyebrows rose. Yet beneath them Aloth saw no anger, only keen interest. "Hm. And what did you learn of their patrons?"

"Nothing, sir."

Langulf's throat made a rumbling noise that could have been displeasure, contemplation, or indigestion. At last, he sat forward in his chair. "Then you'd best go before they realize you've come here."

"Sir?"

"You will continue to meet with them, and you'll report back to me on a monthly basis."

"But the disaster—Targun—"

"Was a damn fool who knew well enough what he was getting himself into." Langulf's brow furrowed. "What matters is catching the people financing these experiments."

"You—you're going to let them continue?"

"For now. You think I care about a few academy novices?"

Aloth licked his lips. That didn't say much for his own status, either.

Langulf's hand went to the open book on his desk. "I need someone who can follow orders without asking too many questions."

"And I need a patron."

Langulf's laugh was the sound of dried leaves underfoot. He adjusted a chain hanging around his neck, and Aloth caught a glimpse of a medallion embossed with a key. "You'll have more than that, I promise."