

Emryn looked conspiratorially across the large and ancient table that dominated the center of the apprentices’ study, the candlelight shadowing her face in a way that struck Amaric as both erotic and sinister, like one of the Aenyr. “But don’t you think we could?”

“We could, maybe, but that doesn’t make it a good idea,” Amaric said, his quill scratching an idle doodle on the parchment where he had been taking notes from a mildew-scented copy of Délathtë’s *Thaumaturgical Theorems and Postulates*.

“It’s simply a matter of doing it right. If we’re careful and we do the research, where’s the danger?” She closed the heavy tome before her as she spoke, a cloud of dust rising from between the pages.

“Remember what the archmagus says? ‘Fates worse than death.’ I like my soul in my body, thank you.”

“Amaric,” she began, looking to ensure that the door was closed before she reached across the table and grasped his hand, “you’re being over-dramatic. We could do this. We’ve been studying under Magus Albrith for two years and we’ve never seen a summoning! How are we going to learn conjury if he doesn’t teach us? I don’t think they let apprentices who don’t know their conjury into university.”

He wasn’t listening. When Emryn leaned over, Amaric found himself staring down the front of her dress now that her breasts had become suddenly more apparent. The smell of almonds wafted over him and his fingers warmed in the remembrance of her skin. At the edge of his vision, he noticed her looking down, her nose an arrow to the cleavage that had captured his imagination. As she looked back up, he followed the movement of her face until their eyes met. He blushed, first for gawking, then for blushing. A coy smile passed across Emryn’s lips as she returned herself to her chair, kindly removing the distraction.

After collecting himself, Amaric struggled to return to the conversation. Unable to recall what Emryn had just said, he started afresh. “This is going to be like our first attempts at evocation all over again,” he muttered.

“Psh. First, it was only a small fire. Second, that one was *your* idea. This is completely different.”

They both laughed at that. She twirled her auburn hair in her finger, a gesture that always managed to stir Amaric’s heart, though he never quite understood why.

“Well, we might learn something from a spirit that’s more useful than the nonsense in this book,” Amaric said, wiping the quill and his fingers with a vaguely damp and ink-stained cloth before returning the writing instrument to its rest. “But we’ve got to choose carefully. Something safe. Maybe one of the *Ninvenai* or the *Qalenëdhai*...”

“Or the *Unëdhai*,” Emryn said, her eyes twinkling with innuendo.

Despite himself, Amaric laughed softly. “Okay, we’ll see, but we’re not doing anything until we have more information about what all is involved.

“Deal.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“We’ll need to know about the theory and practice of conjury—I’ve got that covered,” she said, standing and walking into her adjoining room without a further word. Rather than questioning her, Amaric simply watched the crewel-work dolphins—her family’s symbol—on her dress swim back and forth with her hips as she walked. She returned with a small stack of books, some of them in terrible condition. “I’ve been collecting these for the past few weeks while in the library. Doesn’t seem that Magus Albrith thinks much of them, but they’re what I could find.”

“Busy girl,” Amaric said, his mouth a thin slit of tension between amusement at her resourcefulness and unease about how real the thought of performing a summoning had suddenly become. “So, do you have a formula for a specific spirit in any of that? We’ll need a true name to make sure that whatever we summon is really under our control.”

“Unfortunately, no. These are guidebooks to the Practice, but they either never had any lists of spirits or what they had has been lost to time and decay.”

“So, step two, find the true name and instructions for a particular spirit.”

“Right. After we make sure that we understand these,” she said, passing one of the books to Amaric.

“Studying, sure,” he said, making eyes at her.

“Yes, studying—for now, at least.” The corner of her mouth turned up with the hint of suggestion.

They had grown close over the past two years, whether by real attraction to one another or simply because there were no other adolescents to be found in Albrith’s manse neither knew. Learning the arcane necessarily meant their seclusion from broader society, and the manse occupied an isolated valley in the foothills of the *Engmaic Amisnoth* north of Asterfaen.

Emryn had always been kind to Amaric despite his low birth; she treated him as an equal. She had been plain when she arrived, and Amaric had first grown fond of her wit and unabashed playfulness. About a year ago, Emryn emerged from her rooms one morning recognizable but made beautiful; reshaped by some arcane working.

Amaric had heard rumors that all arcanists became beautiful like the Aenyr, but mostly the Temple priest had told the village children this as a warning against the corruption of thaumaturges. Later experience told Amaric both that this was not entirely true and that a working of that kind of permanency required sacrifice—symbolic or literal. What Emryn had sacrificed for her beauty he knew not and dared not ask.

Both apprentices steadily approached adulthood during their studies, and thus it was perhaps inevitable that their friendship might accrue some amount of the romantic and erotic in the midst of adolescence. Albrith either did not care or pretended not to notice the attraction between them—he revealed little in his demeanor.

The two apprentices spent weeks in furtive preparation, studying the tomes Emryn had collected in the late evenings between the work their master had assigned them and the trysts that often occupy young lovers. Finally, they felt ready to move forward and agreed one night that Amaric would make his way to the library to find the name of a suitable spirit while Emryn collected the sympathetic components necessary to the working.

* * *

The library lay within a broad and squat tower at the corner of Albrith’s manse, a base floor ringed with shelves full of books menacingly surrounding a few ornate desks, the shadows of light from the smokeless everlamps playing the dance macabre across the reading space while their smoky essence mingled with the smells of mold and material entropy. Three balconies of tomes, scrolls, stone tablets and other questionable pieces claiming to be writings looked down upon that central area, pronouncing the judgment of wisdom lost and the thoughts of long dead men upon those who stood below.

Throld, Magus Albrith’s librarian and scribe, perched upon a high stool before a scrivener’s desk near the first story’s wall, where he busied himself with the copying of a tome fully intent on

crumbling to dust without notice, his seat creaking in protestation as his weight shifted back and forth in scratching out each line of text.

When the magus had first shown his new apprentices the library, Emryn had matter-of-factly informed her master that the printing press could make far more copies of his books in far less time, and without all the cramped hands. Albrith had turned her suddenly to face him, his cold eyes looking deep into hers; she had feared he would work a sorcery upon her in angry response. Instead, with a subtle smile and a voice stern but not unkind, Albrith had merely stated, “There are some books that ought to be difficult to share.”

As he entered, Amaric made no sound but nodded respectfully to his master’s servant, receiving a warm smile in return as Throld emerged for a brief respite before diving back into his work.

From a pouch at his belt Amaric drew a piece of folded parchment, stretching it open for review. Upon the skin he and Emryn had listed the names of known conjurers whose notes, journals or publications might contain a specific formula for the conjuration of a spirit. He searched, aimlessly at first, for texts written by someone on his list. Many of the works had no information on their spines or covers, forcing him to search book by book, pulling each delicately from its place, careful not to disturb his neighbors, blowing free the accumulated dust and slowly opening each in hope of success. Only the smell of old vellum and leather, sneezes and the brief excitement of opening old tomes that threatened to crumble in his hands rewarded him.

Amaric had often wondered why Albrith had not organized his library like those in Asterfaen; this search brought him understanding: the chaos provided a defense against something the master wished to remain occulted. No locks, no chains, only the more effective defense of drudgery protected the most important works. Unless some enchantment lay upon the library. Amaric dared not test this possibility—the magus had told them of protective ensorcelments that alerted their creator when prodded with the slightest amount of thaumaturgical Power.

After several hours of searching the shelves and cabinets, the deep, rich scent of hawthorn and wine indicated the presence of someone behind Amaric just before a hand fell upon his shoulder, firm but not aggressive. He turned to see Throld smiling at him. “On one of Albrith’s goose chases, eh? You’re not the first set of apprentices he’s condemned to such.”

“Yep,” Amaric replied, staring bashfully at his toes, his hand slightly outstretched and holding his list. “We’re to find anything by any of these people.”

Throld looked over the list, adjusting the hinged spectacles that clung to his broad nose. “Hmm. Yes, this one.” He pointed to a name on the list, one “Cadessia eld Caithra”. “I seem to remember copying something out of this one a few months ago, but—” he dropped off.

Amaric cocked his head to the side by way of response, the way a curious puppy might.

“Not a book for apprentices, I’m afraid.”

“What does that mean, Throld?”

“Young master Amaric—”

“Please don’t call me ‘master’, Throld.”

“Yes, sorry, Amaric. What I mean to say is that this particular tome is full of what the Magus would call ‘dangerous knowledge.’”

“Can you elaborate?”

“Suffice to say that Lady eld Caithra met an unfortunate end.”

“How unfortunate?”

“Fates worse than death.” It was a favorite of Albrith’s phrases when warning his students about the dangers of well-practiced thaumaturgy, much less careless sorcery or magic. Albrith

never offered specific examples of fates worse than death, but the nature of their discussions of metaphysics gave Amaric much to imagine, none of it remotely pleasant.

“So you won’t help me find it?”

“No, my friend. I cannot. I would suffer a fate worse than death at the Magus’ hands if I did,” Throld said, no exaggeration in his voice, only the statement of fact.

“I understand, Throld. Thanks for the warning.”

Throld made a face that was as much a frown as a smile before returning to his copyist’s table—the kind of expression that desperately wanted to be one thing but could not help but be something entirely different.

Amaric smirked slyly at Throld’s back; he had just what he needed. Within the hour, he held in his hands a copy of Cadessia eld Caithra’s *A Practical Guide to Deep Conjury, including detailed descriptions of many spirits*. Not merely a casual and oblique reference to her conjury, a textbook.

Flipping through the pages made his head throb and spin. Complex diagrams and charts surrounded by tightly scribbled text danced before his vision as the pages spun from front to back. As they turned, they revealed unpleasant pictures of many things, things to which Albrith had alluded in his lessons or things about which Amaric had heard songs, legends and rumors back in his village.

He closed the book decisively, the thump of the pages slamming together echoing loudly through the library; Amaric cringed. He looked over the railing of the balcony toward the scrivener’s station and found Throld dutifully scribbling away. He held the book in one hand and began to make small gestures with the other, whispering words as he drew Power and formed the working. In a short moment, the book disappeared—in its place, a bundle of loose papers. So disguised, he walked nonchalantly past the scribe and through the door.

* * *

Amaric set the book down on the grand table. Within seconds, Emryn’s fingers were on both his shoulders, her cheek pressed against his, the wisps of her loose hairs tickling the back of his neck, her body swelling against his back with each breath, almond perfume in his nostrils.

“What’d you find?”

“Cadessia eld Caithra’s *Practical Guide to Deep Conjury*.”

“Oooh, how’d you find that?”

“Throld told me he’d made a copy not long back, so I just looked for books without so much dust on them. Came across it eventually. But, Emryn, this isn’t a good idea.”

“Explain.”

“There are true names and seals in here to be sure, but for nothing good. There’s nothing remotely safe in this book. Only beings from the Abyss.”

“Hmmm,” she said, to herself more than him. “Could we find something else, maybe?”

“I’m not sure there is anything else.”

“You don’t think the magus has more books with the names and seals of spirits? Surely he does.”

“I don’t doubt that, but I don’t think they’re in the library.”

“You think he has a *secret* library?”

“Seems fitting, I suppose. But, even if he does, there’s no way we’re getting into it. It’s gotta have wards and abjurations beyond anything we’ve seen so far.”

“True,” she frowned, conceding the point. “Mind if I spend some time looking in the library? Just in case there is something else?” She pecked his cheek as punctuation, an indication she meant no offense.

“I don’t mind. What did you end up with?”

“Salt, chalk, sage, athad dust, summerbride, beggar’s buttons.”

“All useful things for conjury. So, what’s the plan now?”

“I’ll check the library for alternatives; you study Lady eld Caithra’s book here to determine whether there is anything in there that we could reasonably summon. I know you’re concerned, so I’ll leave that judgment to you.”

* * *

Archmagus Albrith sat tentatively against one of the stone planters in the garden as he spoke softly and gracefully, his voice lilting as he expounded upon the arcane, the only indication of his passion and excitement for the subject emanating from his wizened and tired frame. A long wild beard masked the many creases and folds of the lower half of his face, drawing Amaric and Emryn to look him in the eyes as he spoke. Those eyes. They flashed with acuity, twinkled with delight in instruction, but also maintained a somberness that belied the serious demeanor with which Albrith always lectured.

“And so, today, my apprentices, we discuss the Law of the Soul and its pertinence to the magus. I trust you have finished chapter fourteen of Decambion’s *Essence and Ephemera: A Book of the Law*. Amaric, tell me, what is the Law of the Soul?”

“Yes, archmagus,” he said, the formality meant more to purchase time to formulate his answer than to show respect. “Um, the Law of the Soul postulates that no working can ultimately change the soul of any creature; that is, it’s True Self.”

“And from whence does the Law derive?”

“It’s a consequence of the Law of Essence, archmagus, which states that, though the existential aspects of a thing might be altered through an arcane working, the essence of that thing may not be.”

“Why, then, has your fellow apprentice Emryn proved able to change her appearance permanently, as I find you so often noticing?”

“I, uh—the appearance of her body is an existential aspect and not an essential aspect of her being.”

“Is it? Are her body and soul the same? The practice of conjury would prove otherwise, would it not?” An unfair question—Albrith had rarely mentioned conjury before, much less taught them anything of it.

“It would, archmagus.”

“Would it? Why?”

Emryn stepped in to assist. “Because the existence of disembodied spirits indicates that a material body and a spiritual self are not the same.”

Albrith’s eyes flashed as he turned his gaze to her. Not with anger, but with a kind of joy at the game they played. “Are you the same thing as a spirit or a demon, that what is true of them might be true also of you?”

“Not necessarily,” Amaric interjected. The two apprentices had become accustomed to working together to navigate Albrith’s mysteries, one buying time for the other. “But a working like Emryn performed required a sacrifice of sorts to maintain it. This requirement seems to

indicate a need for maintenance of the effect, so the essence of her body is resisting the existential change to its appearance. If her body has an essence separate from her soul, then the two must logically be separate entities.”

The archmagus smiled. “Why does this matter?”

Neither spoke. They fumbled for the answer he sought amongst so many possible responses. While waiting, the archmage drew a pipe from a pouch at his belt, tamped a pinch of pipegrass within it, and snapped his fingers near the bowl of the pipe to produce the first wisp of smoke. A faint glow emanated from the pipe as he drew his first breath from it, allowing the silence to expand and fill the entire void around them.

Dressed in modest robes, Albrith could have easily been mistaken for a village cunning man rather than a full archmagus of the Thaumaturgical Conclave. Even the lower-ranked magi of the Conclave tended to dress in a fashion that made clear the importance of their position and profession. Neither Amaric nor Emryn understood the point of Albrith’s sartorial humility, though they often speculated.

“First,” Albrith said finally, “it means that all the Art in the Avar will not change a person’s soul from what it is, not for long at least. You may fool a person with illusions of perception, you may force their body to act against their will, you may even influence their emotions for a time, but you will not change who they are. Only a soul can change its own essence in any permanent manner, and this without the Art. The theological implications of this may be discussed with the learned men of the Temple some time; it is not my concern.

“Second—since we’re discussing conjury—the disembodied spirit, for purposes of this discussion, at least, is the same as a soul when it comes to the Laws of Soul and Essence. You may capture a spirit, you may bind it to your service, but you will not change what it is. You can no more change an elemental of water into an elemental of fire than you can yourself become either. A demon is always a demon, and it will seek to ruin you even as it serves you. Note well that I say ‘ruin’ and not ‘destroy’ as the common folk would suggest. The Law of the Soul prevents a demon from truly destroying you just as it prevents you from destroying it. But there are many things a demon may do with a soul in its thrall that do not infringe upon the Law of Essence. This. This is why I tell you that there are fates worse than death.

“When you understand this, only then are you ready to become a magus.”

* * *

Another week passed before they broached the subject again; Emryn spending her evenings methodically sweeping the library and Amaric comparing *Deep Conjury* to the works Emryn had first collected for them. When together during that time, they focused either on the work Albrith had assigned them or on their more amorous passions.

Emryn began the long-awaited conference. “Well, Amaric, what’d you find?”

“You first, Em.”

“I found...nothing. A lot of nothing. I think you’re right; whatever else Albrith has that might be of use to us isn’t in the library. Which makes it important what you’ve decided.”

“Have you ever read the Conclave laws?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“They have some pretty specific things to say about the summoning of Abyssal spirits. As in ‘Don’t. Or else.’”

“No, I haven’t read them.”

“The penalties severe, to say the least. They’re severe to prevent exactly the kind of thing we’re thinking about doing.”

“Lot of good they’re doing, huh?” she smiled mischievously. “Besides, *we’re* not subject to Conclave law. As apprentices, we’re not full thaumaturges subject to the Conclave, but neither are we unlicensed practitioners—we’re under the tutelage of a magus. Albrith is the complete authority over us, and the Conclave stands behind him. Whatever he says goes for us. He’s spent two years training us already, you think he’d just give that up because we did some experimenting? Especially given some of the things we’ve heard about *his* youth?”

Amaric looked to his feet, but they had no guidance for him. She was right, of course, but after hearing what Throld had said he lacked Emryn’s confidence in Albrith’s leniency. He pressed a new argument: “The stuff in this book, it makes my head spin just to look at it. We know a bit of theory and some parlor tricks; this is way beyond us.”

“You remember when I...changed?”

Amaric’s face indicated the foolishness of asking the question at all. “Of course I do. Albrith made you clean and organize the alchemy laboratory for months after that, made you read the dullest books and write about them for pages, made you spend all of your free time tending the plants in the garden.”

“But he didn’t make me change back,” she said, triumphant. “He was proud, I think, to have so apt a pupil. Our lessons became more complex after that.”

“Yes, Em, but—”

“You’re welcome. Maybe we ought to think of this the same way. Maybe Archmagus Albrith is waiting for us to prove that we’re ready for more.”

She had a point. Albrith had proved a demanding master, one who expected his apprentices to prove themselves without his holding their hands. They saw him only a few hours each morning, when he lectured them or asked them questions until he found the point at which they could no longer make reasonable answer. Assignments for reading or for practice followed. This routine was punctuated by the days on which Albrith guided them through the performance of workings, demanding strict adherence to his teachings and perfection of form—on these days they worked from sun-up until exhaustion. There had been few of days of practical exercises in the last month, far fewer than they had become accustomed, and it did seem that Albrith was waiting for something. For what, exactly, Amaric had no idea.

“So?” Emryn asked, expectantly.

His nerves welled up within him. He had something to prove now, to Albrith, to Emryn. There was no turning back.

“Balsephon,” he said, shocked himself that the name had come from his lips.

“Who, now?” Emryn blurted.

“Balsephon. Eld Caithra puts him low in the Abyssal hierarchy, so we have as good a chance of binding him as we’re going to get.”

“A demon? Whatever happened to a lesser spirit, an Avaradh or something like that? Something that’s not *dangerous*.”

“There’s nothing in here about them, it’s all about Abyssal beings. It is the *Deep Conjury* after all.”

“And it’s why Eld Caithra suffered a fate worse than death!”

“Emryn, you’re the one who wanted to do this in the first place!”

“But not a demon!”

“Did you find anything else we could try?”

“No. Apparently that’s the only grimoire in the whole library with information on specific spirits.”

“You said yourself you thought this was a test. That adds up, then.”

“You think Albrith *wants* us to conjure something from this book?”

Amaric paused. “I don’t know. It sounds crazy when you say it.”

“Well, what do you think?” Emryn said, resting her head on her hands as she leaned against the heavy table.

“What do you think?” Amaric repeated.

“I asked you first. Besides, this was supposed to be *your* decision, remember?”

“Let’s do it, then.”

“Really?”

“You don’t want to?”

“I didn’t say that. I just didn’t expect you to.”

* * *

Preparation began with the drawing of the ritual space, a set of circles within and around which were arranged arcane symbols of power and protection. Amaric had the steadier hand, so Emryn held the grimoire and guided his movements while he carefully applied chalk and vermilion to the stone floor in imitation of the patterns described by eld Caithra. On several occasions, Emryn caused him to stop, to erase what he had drawn and to start again, demanding an exact replication of the designs drawn by their guide.

When at last they completed the circle, they followed by preparing a ritual triangle in which to summon their spirit, proceeding in the same manner, inscribing the triangle with Balsephon’s sigil. Before they moved on, Amaric remembered a warding he had come across in their research; he had drawn the runes on scraps from the library and hung them on each wall and the study’s door, a final protection in case their working failed utterly—a protection not for the two of them, but for the rest of the world. They wanted to be responsible, at least. Amaric summoned and bound Power into the runes, leaving them dormant until they became necessary, which he hoped would not be the case at all.

The two added athad dust to the lamps, revealing the contours of the Veil without the use of the Sight, burnt sage in a brazier to dampen the spirit’s power, chewed summerbride to clear their minds. They sat for a time in silence with their eyes closed, holding hands, centering themselves. Or, trying at least, Amaric found himself distracted by the smell of her, the soft sound of her breathing, every ridge and valley of her hands. He thought of other nights when they had diverted themselves from study, of the fun they’d had together, when they’d talking about their lives before coming to Albrith’s manor or tangled themselves in the lustful passions of the young.

“Ready?” Emryn asked.

“Huh, um, yeah,” Amaric returned, shaking his head clear of its musings, feeling his center a little off-center.

She leaned forward and kissed him, a long kiss, meant to calm rather than to incite passion. Then she led him by the hand and they stepped into the circle delicately, taking great pains not to disturb any of the drawings. Together, they drew Power into the circle, slowly so as not to fumble their working with an excess of Flux from its very inception. When they could feel the comforting buzz of the protective circle, they set to the real task.

They moved about within the circle, incanting together the words of conjuration, feeling the air become heavy with Power, the room around them seeming to shift and bend, reluctantly flexing to make room for some foreign intrusion, the lamps flickering irregularly, as if the very air of the study had changed. They continued until memory threatened to fade, leaving one to misspeak a protective word or to forget a binding command. Time fled from all perception, or at least became irrelevant. Amaric began to wonder whether they had botched the whole thing.

Suddenly a noise echoed at the limits of consciousness, a sound like a curtain tearing. Within the triangle slowly rose an irregular mist, condensing into a fog before becoming a pillar of thick smoke, illuminated from within by sudden red flashes, as a storm cloud by lightning, revealing an obscured face in the midst of the plumes, malevolent and haughty; a demon.

Amaric thought he could make out shifting forms throughout the smog, miniature bodies twisting and writhing in agony as they flew tornado-like about the face within the smoke. The souls of those who had bargained with the thing or merely an illusion?

The demon did not speak. It waited, watching with unblinking eyes and a mouth that seemed to curl impossibly on both sides into a knowing and self-satisfied sneer. Amaric looked nervously to Emryn, hoping he had obfuscated his anxiety from the summoned spirit. Before either of them could say anything, a voice intruded upon Amaric’s mind, seeming to well up from within rather than spoken aloud. The voice whispered loudly, a sibilant and raspy sound that pulled at the nerves like a dull headache: *Astavaten ghistoleem pertar. Saaberis tusumel.*

“What?” Amaric asked in a voice too loud for the heavy silence within the room.

“I didn’t say anything,” Emryn responded.

“You don’t hear that?”

“What do you hear? Is it talking to you?”

“I think so.”

“What is it saying?”

“I don’t know, I can’t understand it.”

“Is it speaking Vessewar?”

“Probably.”

Pity, the whispering replied in Amaric’s head. *I thought I might have been summoned by someone with real power to exchange for my services. Seems I’ve been called by too-clever children, hmm? Fortunately for you, I speak Ealthebad well enough.*

Emryn’s face twitched, her eyes becoming large as she swung them back to the demon-smoke, pricking up her ears, her left hand tugging aimlessly at the braid in her dark hair. “It can’t hurt us while it’s in its space and we’re in ours,” she said in a whisper directed at no one.

The face in the smoke seemed to grin further, into absurdity, upon hearing her words.

“Normally,” it said, this time the voice coming from the manifestation before the apprentices and then echoing from within their minds, “I don’t like to be disturbed without getting something for my trouble. You’ve used the stick when you should have used the honey, hmm?”

After a pause to let the last syllable float in the air awhile, the demon continued. “I suppose I could make you decide between yourselves who I should take and who I should spare. That would be mildly entertaining, at least.” At this, the purgatorial spirits circulating the edges of the swirling cloud seemed to open their mouths at once, a cacophony of distant screams erupting from the multitude of orifices.

“You have no power over us,” Amaric said.

“No, young one? Would you care to wager on that?”

“You’re a liar.”

“Yes, I am. But not always. Do you think your drawings in the mud will protect you from the likes of me? You are my playthings; it cannot be the other way around, hmm?”

Emryn stepped forward within the circle, her face set in determination. “Balsephon, I bind you by the Name of the One, by Their servants the Eradhai, and by the Power of Creation. I call you by name and bind you to my service, that you may do no harm but only that which I command.”

The demon’s expression changed at the sound of the name. The cloud of red lightning condensed into the shape of a man, pale with dark hair, naked and handsome. The man’s face wore a mask of fear; he knelt within the triangle and clasped his hands together. “Please, no, mistress. Let me go back to my dwelling-place and I shall leave you in perfect peace. But do not bind me to service, do not make me your slave!”

A grin curled at the edge of Emryn’s mouth, her confidence complete. Amaric let out a sigh of relief and Emryn repeated the words of binding.

“Mistress, no! I can show you such wondrous secrets, give you such power, if you will but let me go!”

She spoke the binding a third time and there sounded a crack like thunder. The demon-man began to float in the air, arms and legs pulled back as if bound by invisible chains. He tried to cry out, but his voice was stopped by unseen force.

“Balsephon, I permit you to speak,” Emryn said.

“What shall I do for you, mistress?” the demon’s voice rasped. “Shall I show you the pleasures of the Beyond that are unknown in this world? Teach you thaumaturgies that have not been practiced in the Avar in centuries? Spy on your enemies?”

“No, Balsephon, you shall dance for me.”

Once she spoke the words, the spirit returned his feet to the floor, moving them with infernal speed in a jig of sorts, his face contorted with displeasure that made it clear he could do naught but obey. Emryn laughed. “You may stop,” she giggled. The spirit floated again, moored to the ground as a tethered airship.

“What shall we do next?” she asked Amaric.

“Let him go. We’ve done what set to do. Let’s not push our luck.”

“It’s perfectly fine, don’t you see.” She turned back to the demon. “If I let you go, do you promise that you will seek no revenge upon us, no matter the opportunity?”

“Yes,” the spirit let out in a long, soft groan.

“Do you swear it?”

“Yes.”

With that, Emryn stepped through the protective circle, its power collapsing in on itself and leaving only the thrum of the demon’s presence as a disturbance in the still air.

As she moved toward the demon, it returned again to her feet. She hesitated for a moment, and the pale man grinned at her. “But I have bound you by name!” she said, terror rising in her voice.

Amaric opened his mouth to yell a warning, but it was too late. The demon moved to Emryn with devastating speed, wrapping her in his arms and pressing his mouth to hers in a lascivious and obscene kiss. As their lips met, the demon’s form began to blur, and then to shift, to become smoky again; her mouth drew the foul smoke into her until she was left standing alone. But it was not her.

“Yes,” said the demon’s voice from within Emryn’s body, her eyes now ablaze and no longer her own. “Let’s do play the game I mentioned.”

“But you swore,” Amaric pleaded.

“I told you I am a liar,” the demon sighed, Emryn’s face twisting with delight.

“What game?”

“The one where the two of you decide who lives and who dies, hmm?” At this, arcs of red lightning began to crackle at Emryn’s fingertips and she rose from the ground, her legs hanging limply beneath her.

Though he would regret it for the rest of his life, Amaric did what all sense within him told him to do; he ran. Quick as he could, he turned for the door to the study, opened it just wide enough to squeeze his thin body through, and pulled it shut behind him, uttering the words to activate the dormant warding. The sound of sizzling lightning and thunder crashed against the ward just as it formed; a thumping at the door followed.

“Amaric? Amaric help me!” came Emryn’s voice from within. The young apprentice put his hand back to the door but resolved himself not to open it and break the ward he had created.

* * *

He ran, sprinted, through the cold hallways of the manor to Albrith’s apartments. He shouldered into the door without knocking, finding it unlocked and barely latched; the wooden door slammed into the wall with a crash.

Albrith sat in a chair facing the door, smoking his pipe. His expression lacked all surprise; his eyes brimmed with expectation.

“It has not gone well, I take it,” Albrith inquired as if asking about the weather. The old archmagus stroked his short grey beard as he spoke.

“Y-you knew?” Amaric mumbled.

“Of course I knew, boy. What kind of negligent master do you think me to be?” There was no anger in his voice; he spoke calmly and flatly. Amaric would have preferred yelling. The soft voice threw him off his guard and made him fumble for understanding. “Your ward is holding; that is good. A fortunate thing you are clever. But now, how do we go about resolving this tragedy?”

“A lesson?” Amaric began, his face scrunched up in bewilderment. He flashed with anger. **A LESSON!**

“Calm yourself, boy, you have much work to do and not much time to do it in. That ward will not hold forever.”

Amaric felt a wave pass over him and his rage subsided. The magus had used a subtle sorcery to calm him. He wanted to be angry about it but could not muster the emotion.

“Tell me what happened. Every detail. Leave nothing out,” Albrith commanded.

The apprentice did as bidden.

“So what went wrong, Amaric?”

“I don’t know.”

“You do. Think.”

“We made a mistake in drawing the circle,” the apprentice chanced.

“But the demon did not make his move until Emryn stepped out of the circle.”

“Then the binding failed?”

“Good. Why? Speak the words Emryn used, exactly as she used them.”

Amaric tried to match the intonation and rhythm of Emryn’s words as he uttered them: “Balsephon, I bind you by the Name of the One, by Their servants the Eradhai, and by the Power

of Creation. I call you by name and bind you to my service, that you may do no harm but only that which I command.”

“The words are good. What went wrong?”

“Something about the name.”

“Yes, Amaric. Good. What about the name?”

“She said it wrong. It’s not enough to simply say the spirit’s name, it must be pronounced true.”

“That is true. But the name was said well.”

Amaric thought for a moment, his nerves calmed but the evening’s events still racing distractingly through his mind. He searched for some clue. Finally, he spoke.

“It’s not Balsephon.”

Albrith smiled and puffed from his pipe. “Very good. There is some hope for you yet. How can we know this for sure?”

“I don’t know.”

“The spirit is trapped within the warding of your study, yes?”

“Yes.”

“And a manifested spirit cannot be two places at once, yes?”

“Yes.”

“So?”

Amaric said the words slowly, buying time as he tried to think on them before saying them. “We try to summon Balsephon somewhere else. If the demon in the ward is Balsephon, he will not appear when summoned. If it is not Balsephon, then he will appear when properly conjured.”

“Precisely, boy. And now it is time you witness a proper conjuration. Come.” Albrith rose from his chair.

“But what about Emryn?”

“We will discuss Emryn when we know who we’re dealing with. Be patient.”

* * *

Albrith’s ritual room connected to his apartments, a large space with high-vaulted ceilings and a large two-story window at the far end of the room, pointed East. There were no chalk drawings here; Albrith’s protective circle had been inlaid into the stone, made of gold, copper, silver and other metals Amaric could not readily identify. A private library of grimoires occupied the room’s southwest corner, while the northern wall held shelves of reagents, magical tools, and shallow stone slabs inlaid similarly to those on the floor. Amaric looked again to the protective circle and saw that the tiles were interchangeable—a sort of arcane moveable type. Albrith had already laid out the tiles to match the designs that Amaric had drawn by hand.

Near the ritual circle stood a small lectern on which an open book displayed the pages of old Caithra’s notes on Balsephon in young ink, the pages and binding still fresh and new. Everything lay ready.

“Step into the circle, boy.” Albrith ordered. “You will do nothing; you will say nothing. You will watch. And learn.”

He did exactly that. Albrith never even looked at the grimoire; he had committed the entirety of the ritual to memory. His movements were precise and subtle, his words exquisitely formed, intoxicating in their rhythm and timbre. Again Amaric lost track of time, but this time Albrith’s mastery of technique and not his own exertion caused the effect.

A form appeared in the summoning triangle, as if raised to the stage from a lift below. Amaric shuddered to look upon the thing before him, a blasphemous contortion of bodies both human and animal in an amorphous conglomerate. Briefly, Amaric pitied the creature, but his fury at Emryn’s condition quickly pushed aside any sympathy. As if sensing the emotions, Albrith held his hand behind him as if to silence Amaric before he even began.

Albrith said the words of binding in quick succession—still beautiful in their performance but marked by a cold efficiency that flows from dispassionate determination. There was no melodrama this time, the demon simply cocked its head in response to the words.

With a wave of his hand, Albrith released the power of the summoning triangle, but Amaric could still feel the protective circle like a warm blanket on a cold night. The spirit did not move; it stood blinking at Albrith in motionless expectation.

“Speak your name true, demon,” Albrith admonished.

“I am called Balsephon, magus. But you already know that, for you have bound me by that name.”

“Indeed. Now begone from me.” The old magus waived his hand dismissively as a king or a rich man might do. The demon shrank into nothingness and the circle of protection dissipated as well. “As we suspected...”

“Now what, master?”

“Since we do not know the spirit’s name, we cannot bind it. We must instead banish it.”

“How do we do that?”

“A demon who has the power possesses a mortal to gain protection from banishment—while the spirit occupies Emryn’s body, we cannot remove him from the Avar.”

“And how do we get him out of Emryn’s body?”

“We destroy it.”

“What? No!”

Albrith grabbed his apprentice by the shoulder and stared into his eyes. “There is no other way, boy. Emryn is already gone; a demon such as this will not share flesh with another spirit. Look at me, Amaric! What is done is done. You have made a mistake and it has cost Emryn dearly. You must do what you can to make it right. Who else might suffer if the demon is allowed to roam free?”

“You do it, master. I cannot.”

“You can and you will. This shall be done by the two of us together or not at all.” With that, Albrith walked to the northern wall and pulled a long, thin blade from one of the shelves. He pushed it into his apprentice’s hand, delicately seizing the blade with three fingers and pulling Amaric’s arm forward into a thrust. “Through the heart, boy. You will make it quick.”

* * *

Amaric rushed into the study behind Albrith, who entered with staff readied, a shimmering sorcerous shield raised before them. Emryn floated several feet above the ground, slinging ruby lightning and laughing as master and apprentice barged in.

The apprentice cringed behind the shield with each burst of energy that cracked against it; he had never witnessed such raw sorcery before. He quickly decided that he would not mind if he never did again.

Albrith went to the offensive, sending a long gout of blue fire at the Emryn’s body. The lights flickered and died, leaving the flames to illuminate the darkened room. The demon seemed

to push the flames away from itself as if by raw will, but the magus slammed his staff to the floor and the apprentice’s body fell to the ground with a thud. “Go,” Albrith whispered to his apprentice.

Feeling again the dulling of his emotions by Albrith’s sorceries, Amaric pressed forward, the fear welling within his stomach but confined to a bodily discomfort rather than a mind-crushing force. As he neared Emryn her body lifted into the air again, not high, her toes dragging the ground.

A dull halo surrounded her now, pink or red. Amaric pulled back the blade, but when he met her eyes he found not the raging flames he had seen before but the deep blue pools in which he had so often lost himself. “Please...no...Amaric,” came Emryn’s voice, her eyes beginning to water, a tear running down her beautiful cheek.

He hesitated. “Destroy it!” came Albrith’s command from behind him. He loosened and tightened his fingers on the blade, wondering why the demon had not attacked him.

Emryn continued to stare at him through the flickering light of Albrith’s sorceries. She was in there, somewhere. Albrith was wrong; Amaric knew it. He turned to look at Albrith. “I—”

“Now!”

When he turned back to his companion of these two past years, he saw her true. Not as the young woman who had crafted herself with the Power, but the lovely plainness she had arrived with. Tears streamed down her cheeks now, and he found that they ran down his face as well.

“Please!” she sobbed.

But Amaric opened his eyes with the Sight, and he could see only the demon within Emryn’s body. He screamed in pain and rage and fear, thrusting the blade into her chest. It slid in with a sickening ease, as if he were only sheathing it. Red blossomed across her dress as he pushed the blade to the hilt. Still yelling, he pushed the body off of the sword with his left hand, watching Emryn’s eyes go wide and flash with red flames before her body crumpled, the demon rising out of it.

“Get out of the way!” shouted Albrith behind him.

Amaric leapt to the side as the spirit slashed at him with long talons. He hit the stone floor hard, knocking the breath out of him. Rolling over, he looked back to the demon and his master, now locked in deadly combat.

Albrith kept the pale man at bay with his staff, all the while speaking the harsh words of Vessewar. The demon tried to keep pace, incanting black words of his own, but Albrith was too precise, too focused, too practiced. The pale man changed back into the flashing, malevolent face within the dark cloud, surrounded by the miniature spirit-bodies caught within the storm. Just before it disappeared altogether, Amaric thought he saw Emryn among those poor souls, screaming and writhing alongside them. He screamed again, feeling the pain of the sight throughout his whole being.

And then it was over. Albrith, sweating and fatigued, came to his apprentice and offered his hand, helping him up from the stones. “What have you learned?”

Amaric wiped the tears from his face, but they did not stop. He stared blankly at his master, incredulous. “But, Emryn—”

“We will speak of Emryn no more. You will not have time to mourn her. Tomorrow our work begins in earnest. What have you learned?”

“I’ve learned that I don’t want to be a thaumaturge anymore,” the apprentice gasped between sobs.

“Then you are ready to be one. Now you respect the Power and what it means to meddle in things you do not understand. I can safely teach you what wielding the Power truly means. I am sorry the cost has proved so dear.”

“Bastard!” Amaric spat.

“I am, but the Power is a harsher master than I; I will not have you wielding it unprepared. I will have Throld bring you something to help you sleep. Give him Lady eld Caithra’s book when he comes. We begin at sunrise, which is not far off.” With that, Albrith left unceremoniously.

As long as he lived, this night would weigh heavy upon him, the guilt of it a thorn over which the skin had already healed and that could not be pulled free. But Emryn, he feared, would suffer far worse. For both of them, a fate worse than death.