

Chapter One

“And, just where do you think you are going?” Neshya asked.

Regnaryn turned, surprised that anyone was out at such an early hour.

“Um, I was just going for a walk.”

“Bah!” the cat-like yekcal said. “First of all, it is far too early for you to be up and about. And, more importantly, if you were just going for a walk, why would you be carrying a pack?”

“Please tell me you were not trying to leave me again,” Graeden said as he approached from behind. “Do you not remember what happened the last time we were separated?”

Regnaryn turned to face her mate and was surprised by the expression of intense hurt on his face. “I am sorry. I was not thinking about that.”

“Why do you feel you have to leave at all, sister?” Neshya asked.

“You know why. It was all my fault. All the death. All the suffering. All of it because of me,” she said turning back to the yekcal who she had been brought up with. “Look at yourself, even after all these months since the attack, you are not fully healed and Immic is still unable to fly. And, what of Mama and Papa and all the others here in Reisseem Grove that continue to mourn the loss of their children or siblings or mates. I cannot bear to think that if the Master returns, he will rain down even worse horrors upon us.”

Graeden put his arm around her and she pulled away.

“I am the reason that Reisseem Grove was attacked. Had I not returned, none of this would have occurred. If I am gone, you will all be safe.”

“Perhaps,” Neshya said.

Graeden glared at him.

“But, you are the only one who sees it that way,” Neshya continued. “No one else blames

you. Surely you must know that.”

“So they say, but, how can they not?”

“Because we know you. Know you and love you,” Neshya said. “There is no reason for you to run away.”

“I am not running away, I am merely leaving. To protect you.”

Neshya shook his head.

“But what if he comes back?”

“We will be ready for him,” Neshya said.

Regnaryn just looked at the yekcal.

“So, now that we have settled that, let us head home. I am starving and Mama will have enough food for you two as well.”

Neshya turned and walked down the path toward home. Regnaryn and Graeden followed.

Chapter Two

“Why are you waking me so early?” Graeden asked. “The sun has barely risen, unless...”

He reached for her and tried to pull her back into bed with him.

Regnaryn laughed. “Sorry, my love, but now is not the time for that. Do you not remember that we are to meet with the others this morning?”

Graeden sat up and ran his fingers through his sleep matted hair. “Why does everyone insist on being up at the crack of dawn around here?”

“Just hurry up and get ready. You do not want to make Papa and the others wait, do you?”

She turned and left the room, calling over her shoulder, “The tea is almost ready.”

Graeden got up and dressed, happy to see she was content in her life in Reisseem Grove again.

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“Good morning,” Regnaryn called as she and Graeden entered her parents’ house.

“Morning? It is closer to evening than morning,” Ayirak grumbled.

“Oh, stop being dramatic, it is no such thing,” Trebeh replied. “Come through to the garden, children. Everyone is here and we were just about to get started. Can I get you something?”

Before they could reply, she handed them cups of tea and gave Graeden a plate of meat filled pies.

“Really, Mama? You feed him and not me,” Neshya said, throwing his hands up in the air in mock dismay.

“You, young man, have already eaten two, or was it three, helpings. I think you have been well-fed,” Trebeh replied.

“Overfed, if you ask me,” Immic added.

“I do not recall anyone asking you, feather-brain,” Neshya said trying to be serious but unable to pull it off.

“Enough!” Ayirak snapped. “We are not here to listen to you two play games. We have serious matters to discuss, and if you two younglings wish to be part of this...”

The elder yekcal did not need to finish.

“Sorry,” both replied.

Regnaryn and Graeden nodded greetings to all and sat down beside Ellyss.

“Now, on to the business at hand,” Varlama said in her usual matter of fact tone. “We need to find the Master. Find him and end him.”

“That is just like a tazzamira to state the obvious and do so as if it was as simple as breathing. If it were that easy, we would have already done it,” Phrynia replied shaking her head.

“And, leave it to a drageal to jump to that conclusion,” Varlama chuckled. “I did not say it was easy. But look at the talent we have assembled here. There are few who can match the feline ferocity of the yekcal or deal with an aerial attack from the drageals, the most feared of all the dragons. Add to that the tenacity of humans and there is no way we will not be able to accomplish our task.”

“And even one tazzamira in battle is a force to be reckoned with,” Phrynia added.

Varlama nodded.

“Be that as it may, before we can find him, we need to know who he is,” Ellyss said.

“Surely ‘The Master’ is not his given name.”

“I agree,” Varlama said. “But, we know little of him other than that name.”

“I am not sure that is so,” Phrynia said. “He may have given us more clues than he meant to.”

“You may have a point there. I think we know more than we realize, we just need to put it all together,” Trebeh said

“Then, that is where we need to begin,” Ayirak said, “although I think most of us here in I Grove know nothing more of him than hearing his voice before the last of those vile beasts died.”

“I believe Trebeh and I heard his voice before that,” Phrynia said. “During the incident when he tried to take over Regnaryn’s mind and body. Remember, Trebeh?”

“Now that you mention it, yes, I do recall a voice. From its tone it seemed to be cursing, but I did not recognize the tongue,” Trebeh replied.

“Nor did I. Though, even at the time, I thought it sounded vaguely familiar. Since his attack I have been thinking more about it and I believe that once, long ago, I heard similar sounding words spoken by Grenwald.”

“My father?” Regnaryn sputtered, nearly spitting out the tea she had just sipped.

“Yes,” Phrynia replied.

“Surely you cannot believe my father and the Master are connected. Can you?”

“It would make sense,” Graeden added. “Think about how many times he mentioned your father’s death to you. Why would he do that if there was no connection between them?”

“He attacked you as well, Graeden,” Regnaryn snapped. “Does that mean he is connected to your family as well?”

“That is not what we are saying, child,” Trebeh replied. “But, you must admit he did speak of your father a great deal and his tone seems to suggest a personal relationship, of some sort. As if he knew him.”

“And, we must explore every possibility. We know so little, even the tiniest morsel of information could be key,” Phrynia added.

“Graeden, what do you recall about your encounter with the Master at the inn?” Varlama asked.

“Pain. A great deal of pain. And, an overwhelming feeling that I was losing myself, that my essence was being devoured.” Graeden squirmed in his seat and looked down at his hands.

“That voice...it badgered and belittled me with every phrase...every word...as if I were less than nothing.”

Regnaryn squeezed his hand.

“Do you remember the exact words?” Varlama continued.

He took a deep breath. “All I can recall is he kept demanding to know why I was going to *her*.” Graeden looked at the tazsamira and then at the others. “I had no idea what he meant. No idea who he was talking about. I mean I did not have a destination in mind when I left home, but every time I told him that, he called me a liar and...” He faltered, remembering the pain that followed.

“Did he ever call you by name? Seem to know who you were? Where you came from?” Phrynia asked.

Graeden looked into the drageal’s face and thought a moment. “No. Come to think of it, he never did. He never addressed me at all, just demanded answers to his questions, questions that made no sense.”

“So, he may not actually know who you are,” Phrynia said.

“But then how did he know where he was and where he was going?” Ayirak asked.

“And of his relation to Regnaryn?” Neshya added.

“If he is a seer, or employs the services of one, he could have become aware that a person would be at a particular place on his way to his final destination. If that was the case, that may be all he knows of Graeden,” Trebeh said.

“The way Jucara knew to send Aloysius and myself to aid him,” Ellyss said.

“But you knew who I was,” Graeden said to Ellyss.

“Yes,” Phrynia said, “because, you had contact with Jucara before that, did you not?”

Graeden smiled. “Yes, though at the time I thought her merely a childhood dream. It was not until I met her, in the flesh, so to speak, after Regnaryn’s return, that I realized she was real.”

“And, she did tell us to keep an eye on you because there was more to you than we thought,” Trebeh added.

“So, you are saying, if Jucara knew me—who I was, where I came from—the Master could know the same,” Graeden said.

“Did you not say that the glass window in Hammarsh Keep has a likeness of Jucara along with your ancestor and a golden drageal?” Regnaryn asked.

Graeden nodded.

“She may have known your family, so, it could still be possible that the Master has no idea who you really are,” Phrynia said.

“Even if that is true, that he does not know who I am, what of the people at the inn,” Graeden said. “I made no secret of my identity to them. And he took over their minds, would he not find out the information in that way?”

“Maybe, but, I doubt he cares who you are, only what you can do for him,” Regnaryn replied. “In all the times, I encountered him, my feeling was he considers everyone beneath him, only he is of any consequence. Only he matters, the rest of us are of no value.”

“Yes, from all we have seen of him so far, I am of the same mind as Regnaryn,” Varlama added.

“Can we afford to assume that?” Ellyss asked.

“Do we have a choice?” Phrynia said.

“If we are wrong in our assessment of the Master and he does know who Graeden is,” Ellyss said, “and where he came from, that could be a problem for Graeden’s family.”

Graeden paled. “I had not thought of my family. How would they cope with that monster?” He jumped up. “I must go to them immediately. Warn them. Protect them.”

“Just wait a moment, son,” Ayirak said as he gently grabbed Graeden’s arm stopping him. “First of all, we do not know if they are in danger. And, secondly, and I mean no disrespect, but what will you be able to do to defend them. Your newly acquired skill summoning fireballs is erratic at best, and...”

Graeden pulled free and glared at the massive yekcal. “I do not care. I will do whatever I can to protect them, be it by fireball or arrow or anything else. I will not leave them to him.”

“We are not saying that you should,” Trebeh replied.

“Then what are you saying?” Graeden snapped.

“If I may,” Ellyss said, “I believe I have a solution. Allow me to go to your home. I am already known to your family, at least your parents, so I am sure they will accept me into their home and heed my warning.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Phrynia added.

“Just a moment,” Neshya began, “while it may be all well and good for someone, be it Ellyss or Graeden or any of us to travel to Graeden’s homeland, what good will that do? The distance between here and there is too great for us to communicate. And, even if they could, how long would it take for any of us, even the fastest drageal, to get there? And what can you as one man do anyway? Or are we going to send an army?”

Immic chuckled. “I do not mean to make light of the situation, I am only thinking of how Graeden’s kin would react to the sight of us arriving on their doorstep.”

The others smiled at the thought.

“No, an army would not do,” Ellyss replied. “And, you make some very good points, Neshya. However, I do have some skills both in physical and magical combat...”

Ayirak snickered and some of the others smiled at their friend’s words.

:Some skills, eh? Since when did modesty become part of your character?: Ayirak

mindspoke to Ellyss.

“As I was saying,” Ellyss continued, ignoring the outward reactions and the words in his head, “if worse comes to worse, I think the people of Hammarsh Keep and I will be able to fend off the enemy.”

“Even if that is so, it will take you months to get there,” Graeden cried, “what are they to do in the meantime?”

“He can leave at dawn and be there within three days,” Phrynia said. “Maybe sooner.”

Everyone, save Ellyss and Varlama, turned towards the drageal, surprised at her remark.

“I did not think it my place to ask for such a privilege, Phrynia,” Ellyss replied.

“What are you two talking about?” Graeden asked. “How can he get there in three days?”

“He will fly.”

The drageal’s matter of fact statement was met with shock around the garden.

“Do not act so surprised, there was a time, long ago when man and drageal flew together,” Phrynia added.

“Then I will take my leave to prepare,” Ellyss said, leaving the others still pondering Phrynia’s remarks.

##

“So, back to what we know about the Master,” Varlama said. “It seems to me there must indeed be a link between him and Grenwald and I think finding that will help us figure out who and where he is.”

“And how do we do that?” Trebeh asked.

“I am afraid I spent far too much time isolated on my mountain taking no notice of what

was developing in the world outside,” Varlama replied, “to be of much assistance in that.”

“As have we,” Ayirak added.

“Well, we can no longer remain isolated, we must go out and find him or else who knows what havoc he might rain down on others,” Phrynia said.

“Grenwald was a Prince, was he not?” Graeden asked.

“Yes, before he went to Karaleena’s homeland he was, though he never said what the name of his kingdom was,” Ayirak replied.

“He rarely spoke of his past and, when he did, he always seemed sad. No, not sad, troubled. Almost as if he harbored some deep regret or guilt,” Trebeh added. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, I am far from being a royal and just barely considered a noble, and I am not sure if the same would hold true for Grenwald’s homeland...” Graeden hesitated.

“Get to the point, boy,” Ayirak interrupted.

“Sorry,” Graeden said, his face reddening. “Where I come from the higher nobility, and especially the royals, are encouraged to keep journals documenting their daily lives—what they do, what they think, everything. So, I was wondering if perhaps Grenwald followed the same practice.”

“I never heard him speak of nor saw any such things,” Ayirak said.

“He might not be open with them. They are probably hidden somewhere.”

“The house you are living in was his and Karaleena’s,” Trebeh said. “And after their deaths nothing was touched until you moved in. Did you find any such journals?”

“No, but they still may be there, possibly in a hidden alcove or such.”

“If there were such a thing, I am sure we would have found it by now,” Ayirak said. “No, I do not believe you will find any such hidden areas in that house.”

:I do not think we should be so quick to dismiss your idea, love,: Regnaryn mindspoke to Graeden. *:Regardless of what Papa says I think we should explore the house more thoroughly.:*

Graeden nodded and squeezed her hand.

“Shall we move on?” Ayirak asked.

##

“There is something about the Master that does not seem quite right,” Varlama said.

“Oh, so you are saying there are things that seem right about him?” Neshya said with a laugh.

The tazsamira paid no attention to the young yekcal’s snide remark and continued. “If the Master is so powerful and so evil, why, how have we not heard about him before?”

“Our first encounter with him was Regnaryn’s first dream,” Trebeh replied.

“But at that time we did not know it was him, we thought it was just a bad dream,” Regnaryn added.

“The people at the inn called him by that name,” Graeden said, physically shuddering at the memories of his ordeal.

“There was of course the next dream, where he tried to take over Regnaryn’s mind and body,” Phrynia said.

“And the battle outside Reisseem Grove,” Ayirak added.

“There were a few others,” Regnaryn said.

“Others?” Trebeh asked.

Regnaryn nodded.

“There was another dream, on the road, before I met Jucara,” Regnaryn said and then lowered both her eyes and her voice. “And, those vile, lizard-like gawara. They spoke of him as

the Master as well.”

“Has anyone considered that the Master may have been involved in the illness that befell the humans here in Reissem Grove?” Varlama asked.

A look of shock and disbelief crossed the faces of all those gathered.

“That sounds a bit far-fetched. Why would you think that?” Phrynia asked.

“I am merely stating a possibility. Think about it, we have heard of no other such plague or illness anywhere else in the world. Do you not find that to be the least bit odd?”

“And,” Graeden added, “he continually refers to Grenwald’s death.”

“Exactly,” Varlama said.

“Do you really think he has that kind of power, that reach?” Ayirak asked.

Varlama shook her head, “I am not sure. But, I think we need to consider it, to keep an open mind to anything that might be his work.”

“Even if he was responsible for that tragedy,” Ayirak said, “does knowing that bring us any closer to him? We still do not have any idea who he is, or for that matter, what he is. Is he human or some other race of being?”

“I know you disagree, Ayirak,” Graeden began, “but I still feel there is some merit in trying to find if there were any journals left by Grenwald, especially with as many references the Master made to him.”

“And the level of hatred in his voice when he did,” Regnaryn added.

Graeden nodded and continued, “Surely, there must be some connection between the two.”

“Has anyone considered the possibility that Karaleena may have seen something in one of her readings?” Trebeh asked. “Grenwald was a major part of her life, after all.”

“Also, we cannot forget the prophecy she made concerning Regnaryn,” Phrynia added. “I am sure she saw more than she revealed to us.”

“And, any seer worth her salt, and Karaleena was well worth that and more,” Trebeh said, “always keeps a log of her readings. Wherever her books are is likely where Grenwald’s are, if they exist.”

Ayirak shook his head. “I see I am outnumbered in the thought that there are secret journals and writings hidden somewhere in the house. We shall mount a search tomorrow.”