

Sevale's shoreline along Lake Elinore gave it the reputation of being the most beautiful city in Sevalia, and at this time of year, during early summer, the breeze from the lake kept the weather as close to perfection as possible. The capital city teemed with visitors, but not just with people who wished to take in the sights. Two of the country's main roads and the Sevalia river had brought trade to Sevale for centuries. That day the sunshine promised good business to those selling their wares at market, but it was still early enough that Sevale's largest spice merchant didn't mind seeing his brother-in-law stop by for a chat.

"Brother, news from the palace?" asked the merchant.

"Not the palace this time, the inn."

"Oh?" The merchant smiled. His brother-in-law, being the innkeeper's son, often had an interesting tale or two of important people coming to town.

"We had a surprise arrival in the middle of the night."

"From the north?"

"No, south."

"Bah." The merchant shook his head. "Plenty of traffic from the south. What we really want to know is when the Crown is going to open trade with the north again, with this... republic." The merchant referred to the recent overthrow of the northern kingdom of Tenarra's government by commoners. At first Sevalia feared the new government would be hostile, but the Crown wanted to engage in trade talks.

The innkeeper's son smiled. "I know we all await news about trade, but this man's arrival is still raising eyebrows."

"Name?"

"Father was tight-lipped about that, but it seems his carriage has been recognized."

"A nobleman?"

"No, but apparently the same carriage was seen when the new knight trainees and Queen's

Ladies arrived last year.”

“Mmmm...” That stirred some thoughts in the merchant’s brain. Only one family had sent children to court the past year that had no noble blood, and everyone knew they came from the south.

“The man stormed off this morning, headed to the palace apparently, and he looked none too happy. But here is the most interesting part.” The innkeeper’s son leaned in closer. “He rented two adjoining rooms: one for himself and one for his daughter. He expects her to arrive today and that they will depart early tomorrow.”

The merchant smirked. “So, the Mallory witch may be leaving us for home.”

“Witch?” The innkeeper’s son raised his eyebrow. “You think so little of the girl after she stopped the war?”

“War is bad for business, but my grandfather always said you can never trust a mind mage.”

The innkeeper’s son shrugged. “Well, since I would have had two brothers called to fight, I guess I cut the girl some slack. She can hardly help her heritage.”

The merchant merely grunted.

“Excuse me.” The two men turned their heads expecting to see a customer. Instead they found themselves face-to-face with a girl with dark skin and black hair. That would be unusual enough, but she was also dressed in men’s riding leathers. “I’m sorry. I was just doing some shopping across the road, but I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation.” The merchant began to turn red, but the innkeeper’s son smiled. “Do you happen to know if this carriage you spoke of is made of mahogany wood?”

“Yes.”

“With mother-of-pearl inlay?”

The innkeeper’s son continued to nod.

“Damn.” With barely a thank you, she quickly turned around and darted down the road.

The merchant made a sign requesting the gods’ protection, but the innkeeper’s son could not

help but burst into laughter.

Distressed by the innkeeper's tale, Jenna wove through the market streets toward her brother, Peter. The siblings had written their father weeks ago about the events at the palace, how Jenna had stopped a plot against the King and was offered a chance to become a knight in return. They anxiously awaited any word from him, but none came. Their mother had explained that he had been in Khazaran when the initial news arrived, and so it would take some time, but as the days passed, Jenna began to worry. It seemed her worst fears had been realized.

"Peter!" Jenna caught sight of her brother near the leather workers. He and his friend Vincent quickly turned around.

"Jenna, what's wrong?" Peter gently pushed others aside to let his sister through.

"It's Father."

"What?"

"He's here." Jenna quickly recounted the news she had overheard.

Peter's dark skin went nearly white. "Let's get the horses." He turned to his friend. "V, I'm sorry about leaving like this."

Vincent shook his head. "It's no problem. I can pick up your things and meet you back at the palace later."

"Thanks. I owe you one." He then grabbed his sister's arm, and the two ran to where their horses were tied up waiting. Both skilled riders, they mounted easily and headed straight to the palace.

Jenna said a silent prayer of thanks that she had ridden Kedar that day. His desert blood increased their top speed as they passed through the palace gate. Apparently the guardsmen knew of their father's arrival as they directed the pair straight to the West Wing. The two were therefore not surprised to find servants waiting to take their horses, but they were a bit surprised when the King's steward himself greeted them.

“He arrived two hours ago. Did the runner I sent find you?” he asked.

“No. We overheard talk in the marketplace.”

The steward sighed. “How gossip manages to spread so quickly I will never understand, but nevertheless, I’m glad you came. He has refused all attempts at hospitality.” Peter and Jenna just looked at each other. “Follow me.”

*Jenna, what’s wrong?* She nearly stumbled as she strode through the palace corridor, but quickly regained her composure. It was natural for her magic instructor, Lord Harcourt, to be concerned given how upset she was, so she responded through their mind-link.

*My father is here at court. I think he means for me to go back home with him.*

*I see. Don’t worry; I’ll get help.*

With that, he severed their link. Jenna hoped he would go to the Queen, given the two were close.

The steward paused outside a door. Both she and Peter took a deep breath as he then opened it. Jenna had a vague sense that the steward announced them as he did so, but the man in front of her immediately drew all her attention.

Alexander Mallory stood alone inside the receiving room, hands clasped behind his back as if he had been pacing. Jenna hadn’t seen or even had a letter from him in nearly a year. He looked much as she remembered, although she had never seen his jaw so taugth, and new lines creased his face.

Once Peter and Jenna were fully inside the room, the door clicked shut, and the ticking clock on the mantel was so deafening that Jenna thought the entire palace could hear it. All of the words that she envisioned saying quickly left her. She merely gulped.

Then he spoke. “Good. You’re here.” His voice was so calm that she thought they may have been overreacting, but those thoughts were short-lived. “Peter, please stay; I want to discuss trade negotiations. Jenna, go get ready. We leave within the hour.”

“But, Papa, I...” Words still escaped her.

“This is not a matter for discussion.”

Peter finally spoke. “But, Father, this is crazy; you must have read our letters. You know—”

“Oh, yes I received your letters, which is why I am here. I will not hear anymore nonsense of Jenna being trained in combat. I told everyone that would never happen, and I will keep my word.”

“But, Father.” Peter’s voice quavered in desperation. “You know she has the talent—”

“Enough!” Mallory glared at his children. “If I must speak plainly then I must.” He looked directly at his daughter. “When you left my house a year ago I gave you two simple instructions: stay out of trouble, and do not speak of your magic to anyone. These things you agreed to. Do you deny it?”

“No,” she whispered.

“And yet within days the entire palace knew you carried powerful magic, and within weeks they knew of my true heritage. Hardly a day went by when I did not hear of one of your gaffes at court. Since you arrived here you have done nothing but bring shame to yourself and our family. Of course I am not blameless in this. You have always been a reckless, disobedient hoyden. How I managed to convince myself you could pass for any kind of lady, I have no idea. Would that I had refused the court summons to begin with and saved us the trouble.”

Jenna couldn’t help it. His words stung, and tears came to her eyes. She very nearly fled the room right then to go pack her bags and leave, but Peter merely gripped her arm tight and responded.

“And if you had, the King would have been assassinated, Sevalia would be at war under false pretenses, and I would be fighting for my life in it.” Mallory quickly returned his gaze to his son, and Peter for the first time was tall enough to meet it straight on, unflinching. “Jenna has brought shame to no one. She has made allies of some of the most powerful people in the entire Kingdom. If she is guilty of any crime, it is only being herself.” Mallory scoffed and attempted to turn away, but Peter grabbed his father’s arm to meet his gaze again. “No, Father. You will listen because I know what this is really about. For years Mother and Uncle Rafid have attempted to make you see reason and

convince you that Jenna, with her magic, needed training.” Jenna knew he referred not to her mind magic, but the magic she inherited from her mother’s side of the family. She had only recently learned its full extent, that she would become a desert warrior mage among the Rahtani people, a *gharzir*. “You have done everything in your power to stop it, but this has to happen. Alex knew—”

“Do not even speak his name!” Mallory wrenched his arm from his son’s grip. Peter spoke of their half-brother, who fell out of favor with their father when he left home to join the northern rebellion.

“Oh, I will speak it. He knew this day would come. Before he left he had me swear that when it did I would stand by Jenna, and so I will.”

“I see.” Mallory turned back to his daughter. “And so what will you, Jenna?”

“I..” She swallowed to clear her voice and finally looked into her father’s face. “The Crown bids me to stay and be trained. Would you defy even that?”

Mallory grunted. “Oh, ‘the Crown’ is it? Yes, our dear Crown, which is incompetent enough with trade negotiations that it relies on the advice of a teenage boy, then stupid enough to give refuge to Tenarran nobility and be nearly led into a war that even my thoughtless eldest daughter could see was a set up. Forgive me if I have little respect for the Crown.”

“You are forgiven.”

The three had been so wrapped up in their argument that they did not realize the door had opened. They each turned, and Jenna’s eyes went wide as she saw the King himself with the high mage not two steps behind.

“Your Majesty. My Lord Harcourt,” exclaimed Peter. Both children bowed, but Mallory stared straight ahead. Jenna began to tremble as she saw her father face the King defiantly. It seemed odd to her how they were both about the same age and height, both with broad shoulders and blue eyes. She was relieved at how calm the King sounded despite the grave insult her father gave not only with his words, but his lack of acknowledgment of the presence of royalty.

The King moved fully into the room so Lord Harcourt could close the door before he spoke. “Mr. Mallory, I fully respect every Sevalian’s legal right to criticize the government. If you have words to say to the Crown, I would appreciate you sharing them.”

Mallory let out a long breath. “I believe you have already heard my most serious complaint.”

“I see.” The King sighed. “I would like to discuss more with you, but you have traveled a long distance. Will you not accept an invitation to stay here for a day? My wife and many others would enjoy meeting you. We could discuss more of all this business tomorrow.”

“No. I have made up my mind, and I will not be persuaded otherwise.”

The King paused. “Very well, if we must discuss it now, so be it. What Miss Mallory said is true. I would prefer that she stay here to complete her training. In that sentiment I am joined not only by my entire family, but the high mage, here, and Lord Fyrian, who oversees the training of all the knights. Indeed, I have nothing but the utmost respect for both of your children and the parents who raised them.”

Jenna’s father’s voice seemed slightly calmer, but his jaw remained taugth and his fists clenched. “If you are truly grateful, then you will finally grant me my right to take my daughter home.”

“That I am afraid I cannot allow for many reasons. Her magical training here with Lord Harcourt is vital, for instance, but most importantly Miss Mallory wishes to stay. And she and her brother will always be welcome in my house for as long as they like, under any circumstances.”

Jenna sighed. Her heart ached for her father to listen to the King, or to Peter, or to anyone, but she knew better.

“I see.” Mallory turned to Jenna. “And you wish to stay?”

“I do,” she replied quietly.

“And you stand by this?” he asked Peter.

“Yes.” Jenna heard nothing but weariness in her brother’s voice.

“Then so be it. You are both hereby disinherited. You will receive no further financial support. Your personal effects will be returned to me, and should you seek succor with my household you will not find it.”

With that he turned to grab his coat as if to leave, but the King stopped him. “Mr. Mallory, I am afraid I cannot allow all of what you said to occur.”

Jenna had never seen her father’s face get so red as he turned back to face the King. “And why not?”

“Peter Mallory was made a squire earlier this year, a bit hastily, true, but a squire nonetheless. Under Sevalian law, squires are given title to their personal property. You may not take it.”

“That is ridiculous. He is fifteen years old.”

“Indeed, it is not. It is the law, and my interpretation of the law is final.”

Mallory’s jaw somehow managed to clench even tighter. “And Jenna’s effects?”

“Those, I am sorry to say, are yours to take.”

“Very well. Then I will take my leave of you, and my servants will see to the collection of my property.” After one last glare at the King, Mallory turned to exit the room, but before he fully opened the door he paused. He turned around once more, his face almost purple as he looked over at the high mage who returned his gaze with the blank stare Jenna was used to seeing from her teacher. She held her breath again, wondering if her father would start on another tirade, but he said nothing and merely turned around, letting the door slam shut behind him.

“Well,” said the King with a sigh. He turned to face the two siblings. “I am sorry. Truly, I hoped the man would finally see reason once he got here. Apparently not.”

Jenna brushed a tear from her eye while Peter put his arm around her. “So you had some expectation this would happen?” he asked the King.

Her brother’s words made her brow furrow in confusion. She had no idea how anyone else would have expected this.

The King gestured to some chairs and a sofa. “Please sit. There are a few things we should talk about.” Peter kept his arm around Jenna as they sat together facing the others. “Lord Harcourt, perhaps you could explain best.”

Jenna focused her attention on her teacher. His violet eyes stared down at the floor. “This is not the first request for Jenna’s return we have received from your father.”

“What?” said Jenna. “When? Why weren’t we informed?”

“The requests came several months ago, shortly after the revelations regarding Jenna’s mind magic. He was not pleased about how Jenna’s stay was going.”

Peter shook his head and rolled his eyes. “That’s putting it mildly, My Lord. But I didn’t know he directly asked for her return. Why not tell us?”

Lord Harcourt took a deep breath before responding. “I wanted to, but...” He looked at the King.

“I ordered him not to,” the King continued. “It was mostly my wife’s plan. I apologize if it pains you now, but she wanted to protect you, Miss Mallory. There were differing opinions about what to do about your mind magic.”

Jenna frowned. “You mean there were many who wanted me to enter Harcourt Tower immediately.” Earlier that year Jenna learned of a law demanding all mind mages enter the mage Towers. But Lord Harcourt, a mind mage himself, shielded her from it.

“Yes,” said the high mage. “You forced me to admit that much. The Queen hoped if you were protected from others’ opinions you would naturally see how the Towers provided the best place for you and avoid any conflict. But once the full extent of your desert magic became apparent I knew this was impossible.”

“Did Father know about the discussions about me entering a Tower?” she asked.

“No,” Harcourt continued. “Just that your magical training was too important for you to leave the palace and that no correspondence demanding your return, Miss Mallory, would be allowed to

reach you.”

“You read my letters?” Jenna’s face heated.

“No,” said Lord Harcourt, his own cheeks going red. “Well, not exactly.”

“How could you even attempt it?” asked Peter. “Can you translate the Rahtani tongue?”

“You misunderstand.” The high mage sighed. “Letters have a certain emotional imprint attached to them. A Tower heart mage screened the letters for anything that was suspicious. Such letters were returned unopened, but it became apparent that the only person attempting to demand your return was—”

“Father,” said Jenna.

“Yes.”

Jenna’s jaw clenched, but she asked no more questions, hoping to talk to Lord Harcourt about it later in private. Peter leaned back on the sofa. “No wonder he is so angry,” he said. “So why finally tell us?”

The King responded. “After the Tenarran incident,” he nearly spat the word Tenarran, “when you contacted your father, as I said, I hoped he would see reason, but I knew some kind of confrontation was inevitable. I encouraged him to write to you, but apparently he felt a direct confrontation in order after his previous treatment. In fact, seeing his reaction today, I am now surprised he didn’t do it sooner.”

“The Rahtani magic was not involved, and he wanted to secure the lumber trade with Khazaran,” said Peter.

“Business first, I see,” continued the King. “Well, in any case, it has occurred, and you have made your choice, Miss Mallory.” He stared at her. “You are to become a knight, as are you, Mr. Mallory. As such you deserve the truth if I am to expect your continued loyalty. And though from this conversation it may appear we hold Miss Mallory an ignorant prisoner, I assure you that is not true. If you wished, Miss Mallory, you could accelerate your mind mage lessons and leave court to pursue your

other training in the desert. But as I said before, you are welcome here for as long as you wish.”

“Thank you, Majesty,” Jenna replied as her pulse finally began to slow.

“And I thank you as well, Sire,” continued Peter, “especially for allowing me to keep my possessions.”

“That is only fair and in accordance with the law. I only wish I could do the same for you, Miss Mallory.” Jenna inwardly cringed at the thought of everything being stripped from her, all her clothing and personal effects, but at least she had Kedar and would retain the use of her desert weapons. Since the weapons were magically keyed to her, no one could take them from her. But even with that, she was well short of the normal equipment needed to be properly outfitted for her training. Perhaps noticing the dread on Jenna’s face, the King continued his reassurances. “The Crown also maintains adequate gear for your training, Miss Mallory. You have the most important things anyway: your sword and horse. We will easily provide you with uniforms to wear, and I can also waive the normal boarding fees for both of you.”

That provided Jenna significant relief, and she smiled slightly.

“However, I am afraid I can do little about any spending money for much else. The Crown has restrictions on how it can spend tax dollars, and my own funds are strained by the need for the palace restorations. Could your grandfather help?”

The King referred to the siblings’ maternal grandfather, who was an important Rahtani tribal leader and also a warrior mage himself. “I’m not sure,” said Peter. “If so, it will take time to reach him.”

“Yes. Well, hopefully your father will calm down and begin to see reason soon. I simply cannot believe he would disinherit his only son and eldest daughter.” While Peter began to explain that the rest of their family would most likely challenge their father’s decision, Jenna thought of her younger sister. She had become her father’s favorite after Alex left. Ana would probably love to be the sole heir.

Then a sense of anger in the back of her mind flared, distracting her. “Bree!” she said, suddenly standing up. “My apologies, Majesty, My Lord. I have to go.” Without further discussion she turned to leave the room. Although her brother called out to her, she ignored him and ran out toward the stables near the East Wing where her horse, Bree, was kept. Bree was her first horse, the only one her father had ever given her, and with her Rahtani magic, she sensed that Bree did not like the idea of leaving the palace.

Once at the stables, she found Bree struggling as she was led out of her stall. Her father wasn’t there, but she recognized two men. “Connor! Durand?” She was not entirely surprised to find Connor there, as he was the man in charge of overseeing her father’s horse trading business, but she had not expected to find her riding instructor, Master Durand, who would also oversee her knight training.

“Jenna.” Connor turned around. “I wish we met under better circumstances.”

“Papa dragged you out here?” She came to a stop slightly out of breath and began to pat Bree on her neck to calm her down.

“I wanted to. I had hoped to talk sense into him along the way. No luck. I also wanted to see my cousin.” He nodded at Durand.

“Cousin?”

“On my mother’s side,” Durand replied. Jenna then remembered he was the bastard son of Count Doros. His mother was a commoner. As she looked closely, she could see a resemblance between the two men, something in the auburn hair and line of the jaw.

“Must Papa take Bree?”

Connor sighed. “He’s sold her.”

“What! If he means to harm to her—”

Connor put his hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry. She’s been sold to Gregory Whitestone for his ward’s riding lessons. Bree will be fine.” The Whitestones were another wealthy merchant family and close friends of the Mallorys.

Jenna sighed and using her desert magic that allowed her to communicate with horses sent Bree an image of Melanie Whitestone taking lessons with her at the Salara riding school. Bree recognized the place, but still didn't want to leave Jenna. "I know. I will miss you." She sent a final image of herself riding Kedar to visit. "I will come when I can; I promise." Bree still snorted in protest, but had calmed enough to let a palace servant lead her away. Jenna fought back tears as she watched.

Durand broke the silence. "Connor, I need to get back to work, but I'll see you in town later." Then he looked over at Jenna. "Sorry about Bree, Trainee, but trust me, you'll have your hands full with Kedar." With that, he left.

"I saw Kedar earlier," said Connor. "He's a fine horse."

"I know." But for Jenna nothing could replace Bree.

"Connor!" Jenna recognized her brother's voice and saw him jog over to her. "He's taking Bree, then?"

"Yes. She goes to the Whitestones."

"I'm sorry, Jenna." She hugged her brother then as her tears started to flow freely.

"Don't worry," said Connor. "The rest of your family and I will keep trying to talk sense into the Old Man. He'll see reason eventually."

"Thank you," Peter replied. Then Connor took his leave to follow Bree out of the stables.

Jenna continued to cry while Peter attempted to comfort her. "Sis, don't distress yourself too much. Papa will come around. He always does."

She stopped crying long enough to smile weakly, thinking of all her past conflicts with her father. She prayed Peter was right.