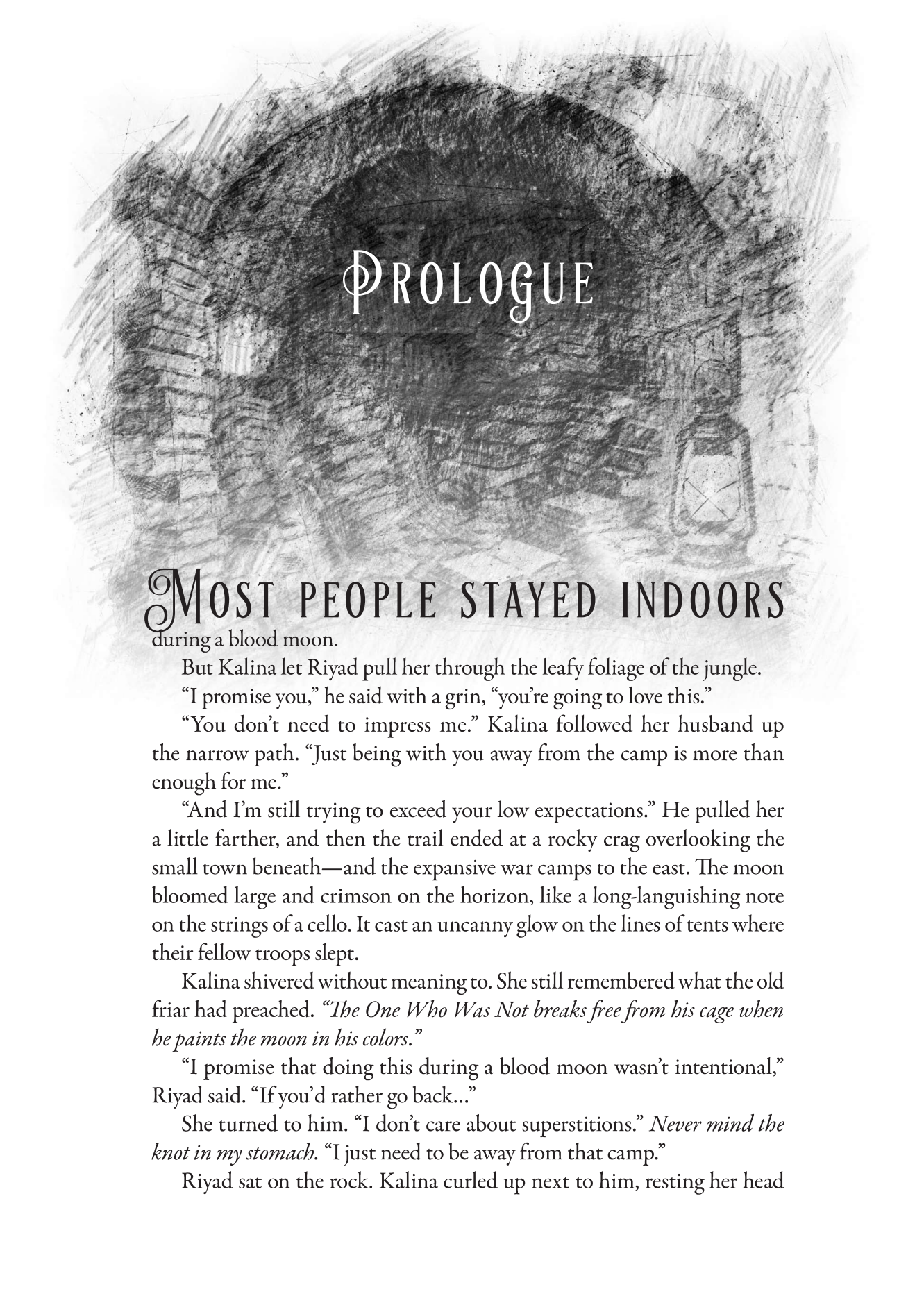




PROLOGUE

MOST PEOPLE STAYED INDOORS during a blood moon.

But Kalina let Riyad pull her through the leafy foliage of the jungle.

“I promise you,” he said with a grin, “you’re going to love this.”

“You don’t need to impress me.” Kalina followed her husband up the narrow path. “Just being with you away from the camp is more than enough for me.”

“And I’m still trying to exceed your low expectations.” He pulled her a little farther, and then the trail ended at a rocky crag overlooking the small town beneath—and the expansive war camps to the east. The moon bloomed large and crimson on the horizon, like a long-languishing note on the strings of a cello. It cast an uncanny glow on the lines of tents where their fellow troops slept.

Kalina shivered without meaning to. She still remembered what the old friar had preached. “*The One Who Was Not breaks free from his cage when he paints the moon in his colors.*”

“I promise that doing this during a blood moon wasn’t intentional,” Riyad said. “If you’d rather go back...”

She turned to him. “I don’t care about superstitions.” *Never mind the knot in my stomach.* “I just need to be away from that camp.”

Riyad sat on the rock. Kalina curled up next to him, resting her head

underneath his scraggly beard. They stayed there a long while, watching the moon rise while nocturnal creatures began to awake in the jungle behind them. She tried to shut out the images of gleaming arrows that squirmed into her mind.

“You still thinking about Caldera?” Riyad asked.

Kalina swallowed. “She would have gone on leave today. She was so excited to see her family again.”

“I know.” His wheatish-brown hand closed around hers. “This war has taken a lot from us.”

“I keep replaying that battle.” Her heart thudded. “I was so close to synergizing with you.”

He squeezed her hand. “You played beautifully. It’s not your fault.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t be up here. I should be down there practicing for tomorrow’s battle.”

“Have you ever heard of the dangers that come from practicing too much?”

“That’s a schoolkid myth.”

“I don’t know. I think the two of us being together up here does far more for your inner peace and ability to play well than spending a fifth hour practicing.”

Kalina pulled at a blade of grass. “I just need to figure out how to synergize before we lose any more friends.”

“Hmm.” His beard tickled as he turned his head to kiss her hair. “Do you need me to remind you again that you’re only human? We’re attempting to do something no other mage has done before.”

A tear slipped out. “What if Padini is next?”

“The Kaldian archers won’t hit her too.” He hugged her tighter. “And even if we lose again, we’ll work through those challenges together. Because you’re not responsible for everyone.”

“I know,” she lied. “I just can’t help but feel uneasy, like something terrible is going to happen again.”

“You sure that’s not the blood moon talking?”

“It’s a bad omen for a reason.”

“Well, we’re going to prove it wrong. Just a few more weeks of practicing this new way of synergizing, and we’ll change the scope of this war. You can’t rush innovations like this. Isn’t that what you used to tell me?”

“I did.” Kalina rested her head on his shoulder. “And I know you’re

right. I'm sorry for bringing this up. I really do want to enjoy this moment with you."

Riyad chuckled. "One of these days, I'll get my optimism to rub off on you."

"Sounds wonderful."

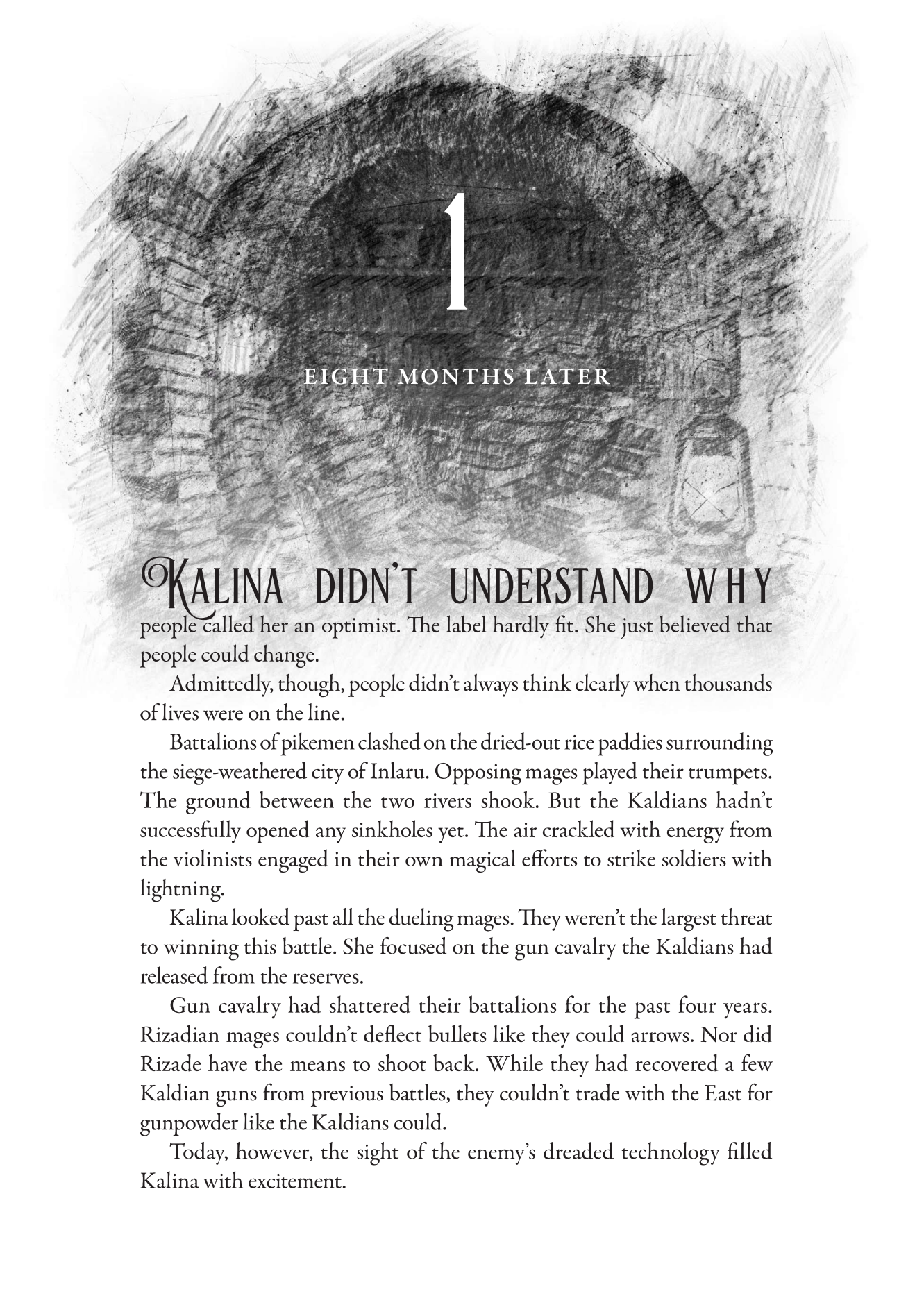
"Just watch. You and me together...our magic will be unstoppable."

She exhaled and tried to pretend she could hold on to his optimism. Their magic would sweep away the Kaldian forces. He could go back to teaching, and she to researching. She just had to do a little bit better, and she'd finally master synergizing with him.

Tomorrow.

The blood moon appeared to darken. *Must be a trick of the eyes. I've told myself for years it's just a superstition.*

Her gut told her, though, that this blood moon was trying to warn her. There would be a cost to ignoring it.



1

EIGHT MONTHS LATER

KALINA DIDN'T UNDERSTAND WHY people called her an optimist. The label hardly fit. She just believed that people could change.

Admittedly, though, people didn't always think clearly when thousands of lives were on the line.

Battalions of pikemen clashed on the dried-out rice paddies surrounding the siege-weathered city of Inlaru. Opposing mages played their trumpets. The ground between the two rivers shook. But the Kaldians hadn't successfully opened any sinkholes yet. The air crackled with energy from the violinists engaged in their own magical efforts to strike soldiers with lightning.

Kalina looked past all the dueling mages. They weren't the largest threat to winning this battle. She focused on the gun cavalry the Kaldians had released from the reserves.

Gun cavalry had shattered their battalions for the past four years. Rizadian mages couldn't deflect bullets like they could arrows. Nor did Rizade have the means to shoot back. While they had recovered a few Kaldian guns from previous battles, they couldn't trade with the East for gunpowder like the Kaldians could.

Today, however, the sight of the enemy's dreaded technology filled Kalina with excitement.

Commander Kay had stared in shock when she'd told him their rigid general had actually agreed to try something new. *Will General Mahd follow through on it? His track record raises questions.*

But so far, she hadn't regretted her optimism. *And I won't let what happened eight months ago happen again.*

Kalina dashed around the pods of mages standing with her on the hill. Her brown tunic, only partially secured by the fabric band encircling her waist, flapped around her thighs. She tried to ignore the cacophony around her as the mages unleashed the powers of the universe with their instruments. If only the competing melodies didn't sound so ugly. *But if ugly is what it takes, I'll direct music repulsive enough to scare off livestock. Anything to save lives.*

Kalina slid to a stop by one of her drummers. His quick notes pounded in her ears. She concentrated her magical sensing skills. The otherwise-invisible energy he channeled from the drum to control the Substance of Fire sprang into her vision. If not for him, the Kaldians would have ignited an inferno among their ranks.

"Signal General Mahd!" she shouted into his ear. "The gun cavalry are coming."

A quick nod from him and a moment later, a bright red light erupted from his drums. It didn't last longer than a couple of seconds. But it would alert the general to the gun cavalry if he hadn't seen them yet.

Now to see if he will reward my trust.

For years, Mahd had insisted they could only stop the gun cavalry by directing all the mages' efforts toward them—a textbook approach to handling threats. But the textbooks hadn't prepared for bullets, and the Kaldian mages knew how to defend their cavalry. Ever since the accident eight months ago and her subsequent promotion to mage commander, she'd been itching for the chance to do something different. *Something to make up for my failure to synergize when it counted.*

Kay's words rang in her ears. "Your career will be on the chopping block if this fails!"

A red light flashed from the command tent. *Mahd plans on following through.* Kalina ran a hand through her hair. *This should excite me.* But instead, her breath came out quick and tight.

Because now, it's all on me to show how even older tactics can become new again.

She scanned the battlefield. The gun cavalry were galloping toward Rizade's northern flank—where Commander Kay's battalion fought. She could sense most of the Kaldian mages focusing their efforts on shielding the cavalry. They expected her mages to attack them, as they'd done for years.

But the Kaldians had left the rest of the battlefield wide open and ripe for attack.

She ran to one of her flutists. Quick arpeggios up and down rolled into her ears. "When you get an opening, help our southern battalion against the river," she said into his ear. "Just a small wave breaking over the enemy to disrupt their formation."

A quick nod from him, and she ran to the violinists. "We're sending a small wave over the Kaldians next to the southern river," she whispered into an aged violinist's ear. "If you have the chance to send lightning through it, do so."

The Kaldians had drained the rice paddies three months ago when they began the siege to ensure Rizade's violinists couldn't electrocute soldiers in the paddy waters. But they couldn't move the rivers.

Kalina pivoted toward the north. The gun cavalry had almost reached Commander Kay's battalion. A few of her mages feinted to attack them, but the rest focused on the unprotected battlefield.

Where are our cavalry? Her entire plan rested on bringing back the traditional cavalry charge to counter the Kaldians' guns with steed and spear instead of magic.

Worry knotted her stomach. She and her husband had loved joining Kay's soldiers around their campfires before the accident. Their optimism and laughter in the midst of this Ternion-forsaken war had been refreshing.

If my plan leaves them open to attack from the Kaldian guns...

She ran back to the drummer. "Send the signal again!" she yelled. "We need our cavalry!"

Mahd wouldn't have reverted to his old ways and changed his mind about following my plan...would he?

In the south, everything worked as planned. A boulder propelled by one of her brass players smashed into a battalion. And, just as she'd coordinated, a small wave sprang out from the southern river and cascaded into the enemy ranks. A flash of lightning electrified the water.

Yes!

She almost leapt for joy as scores of Kaldians fell.

Then the gun cavalry arrived in the north.

The Kaldian battalion opposing Kay's pulled back so the gun cavalry could fill their place beyond the range of the pikes. Guns roared. Bullets tore into Kay's flanks as the Kaldians executed their familiar maneuver. She knew it by heart. Each frontline horseman discharged both of his pistols before falling back to reload while another freshly loaded horseman took his place.

The rotating circle of death.

Kay's battalion haltingly moved forward. *An attempt to charge the cavalry?* But few men had the courage to run toward blazing guns. Dozens of frontline soldiers dropped.

Where are our cavalry?

She scanned the battlefield one last time. And then she saw them. Down at the *southern end* of the field.

Why are they there?

The cavalry charged the Kaldian battalion that the boulder had fractured.

No. Her hands leapt to her mouth. *What are they doing?*

Rizade's opposing battalion had pulled back to give the cavalry room to move in. But the cavalry's spears couldn't reach far enough. They slammed into the wall of pikes.

She could hear the horses' screams all the way in the back reserves.

Her mouth went dry. Rizade had still won the ground closest to the river where they'd used the wave attack. But they wouldn't easily take the battalion north of it with all the horses' bodies barring the way.

The Kaldians had caught on to her new strategy and shifted their magic to protect their troops.

Now Kay's men had no support. His battalion fell apart amid the barrage of the guns. And the gun cavalry made for another Rizadian battalion while the Kaldian pikemen surged in to mop up the survivors.

Purple light began streaming from behind her—the retreat signal from Mahd's drummers.

No. Her head spun. *We still have a chance in the south. There's more to this battle than cavalry.*

Try telling that to Mahd, though. His obsession lost them most of their battles. The king should have dismissed him long ago.

But after a prophet representing the Divine Council had declared

Mahd's son would save their nation from disaster, there was no removing his military rank. *Even when he has no imagination or foresight.*

Fighting in the north caught her eye. Kay's men still faced grave danger. She could mourn today's failure once she'd protected everyone here.

"Get Kay's battalion a land bridge over the northern river," she ordered a nearby trumpeter. "Destroy it after they cross."

The other mages marched down the slopes of the mountain, playing as they went to protect against enemy attacks. But Kalina remained on the hill with the trumpeter, watching him as he focused his concentration on the nearby river.

Her chest tightened. Kay had lost so many men already. Did he still live? She knew he wouldn't blame her for the loss. Mahd's decision to send the cavalry south had caused that.

But he would have lost so many men. *Today's losses pile up by the minute.* She kicked the ground.

Notes rang out from the trumpet, and earth shot over the river, creating an improvised escape route. The Kaldians hadn't expected that move. *Knew it.* Successful maneuvers relied on three pillars: the commander's speed, the men's courage, and the enemy's strategy.

Unlike the traditional mage commander—a random noble without magic training—Kalina had actually used magic before, which meant she knew how enemy mages thought. Her prediction abilities had made her the best mage commander Mahd had ever had, even if her healed hands couldn't work magic anymore.

Kay's soldiers began to cross the bridge.

"Okay," Kalina said. "Quell their magic so they don't destroy the bridge yet, and let's move." They'd stayed alone on the hill long enough. Even if she preferred this to the dressing down she'd receive at the camp.

They marched down the hill. She lowered her head. Today should have ended in a victory.

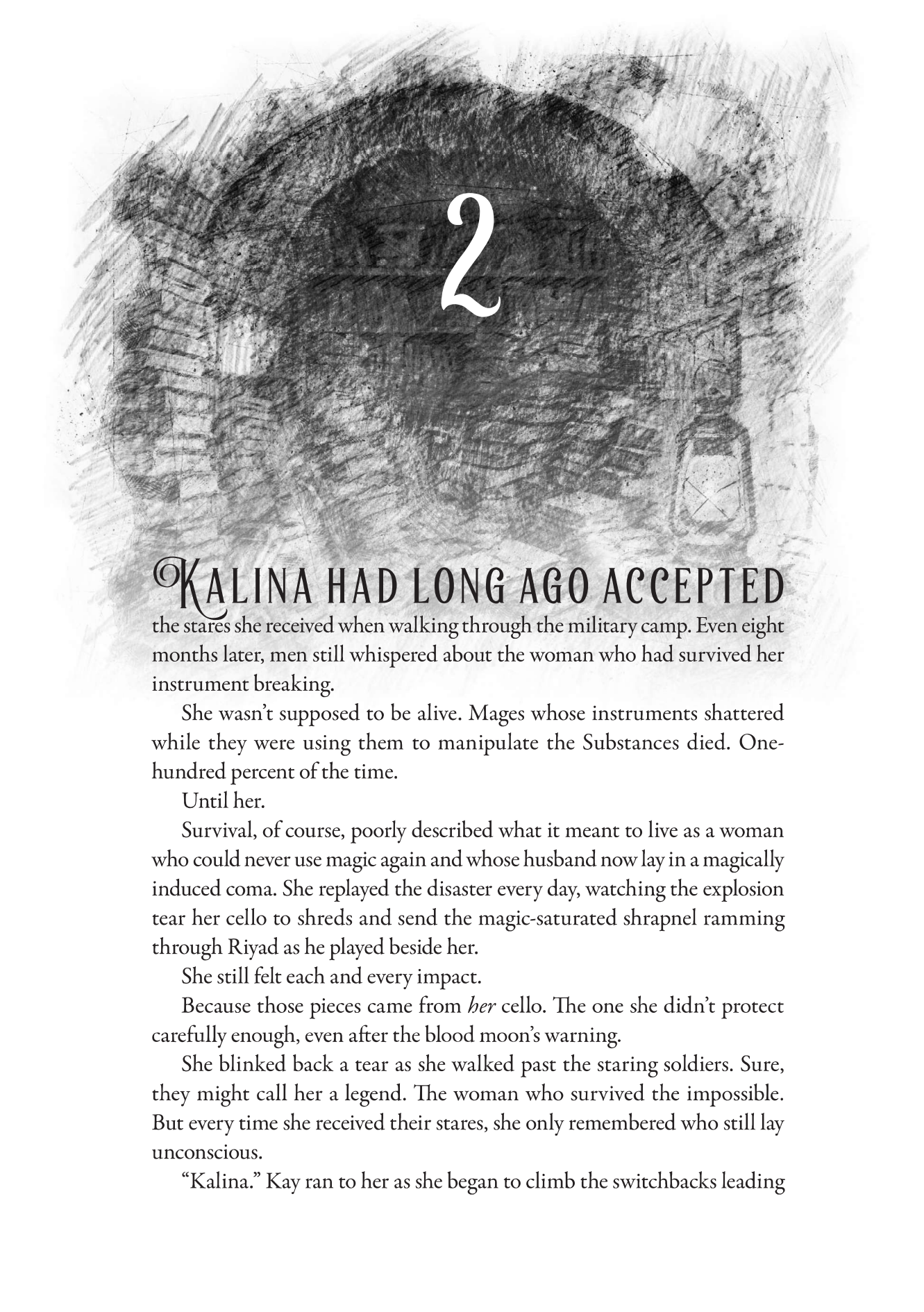
Instead, they fell back again.

Another loss they couldn't afford against the blossoming Kaldian empire.

Kalina remembered Kay's warnings about whom Mahd would blame for the loss. *The one who proposed this new plan in the first place.*

It would have worked if the cavalry went where they should have.

But unless Mahd had changed his habit of blame shifting, he'd make her the target of his wrath.



2

KALINA HAD LONG AGO ACCEPTED the stares she received when walking through the military camp. Even eight months later, men still whispered about the woman who had survived her instrument breaking.

She wasn't supposed to be alive. Mages whose instruments shattered while they were using them to manipulate the Substances died. One-hundred percent of the time.

Until her.

Survival, of course, poorly described what it meant to live as a woman who could never use magic again and whose husband now lay in a magically induced coma. She replayed the disaster every day, watching the explosion tear her cello to shreds and send the magic-saturated shrapnel ramming through Riyadh as he played beside her.

She still felt each and every impact.

Because those pieces came from *her* cello. The one she didn't protect carefully enough, even after the blood moon's warning.

She blinked back a tear as she walked past the staring soldiers. Sure, they might call her a legend. The woman who survived the impossible. But every time she received their stares, she only remembered who still lay unconscious.

"Kalina." Kay ran to her as she began to climb the switchbacks leading

to the upper portions of the camps. Jungle trees loomed high over them. “Why the *klyte* did Mahd not send the cavalry?”

“Oh, he sent them.” She stopped and turned toward Kay. “The cavalry threw themselves into the southern battalions instead of charging the gun cavalry.”

Kay stared at her. He always stared—it was some tic or something of his. But he *really* stared at her now while blood trickled down his forehead.

“Get out,” he said. “A few men shared that rumor...but that’s actually where they went?”

“I’m so sorry.”

Kay started ascending the switchbacks. “I lost nearly a third of my men. But we all know who he’s going to blame.”

“Maybe he’ll blame the cavalry. He *did* listen to my plan when you said he never would.”

“And look what he did—he sabotaged it. Because people don’t change. They just glut their own lust for glory, follow outdated textbooks, and resist innovation because it wasn’t their idea. And if we lose—well, that must be because of providence.”

Kalina looked around. “Keep your voice down.” Commanders had been discharged for less. She turned around the rubber tree at the switchback.

“I don’t care if Mahd hears me.”

She turned to meet Kay’s stare. “You know as well as I do how he deals with commanders who openly disagree with his actions.”

“I know. I hate it.” He sniffed and looked back at the battlefield. “I have dead friends there. And you’re the *only one* willing to brainstorm solutions for their gun cavalry.”

A group of twenty despondent soldiers trudged up the switchback now, and it looked like they carried some wounded men.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m not giving up hope in Mahd yet. But if I’m dismissed...well, I guess I should have known better than to persuade him to change.” She spun, swatted away the fruit flies, and continued up the switchbacks. Kay didn’t follow.

Kalina was panting by the time she reached the top of the hill. She should have directed the mages to create a more gradual slope on this hill. The ridge dividing the sprawling lower camps from the upper camps made medical runs like the one coming up behind her difficult. Perhaps she

should have put the mage camp in the lower camps. But that went against centuries of pride and honor.

She kept along the edge of the ridge as she walked toward her destination. Large white tents along her right blocked out the rest of the command camp. On the left, the bodies of a few deserters hung on gallows. They didn't have many deserters, all things considered. Mahd's caution meant they lost fewer men, even if it also meant they rarely won.

The sun glistened as it broke through the leafy foliage on her left. The way it scattered its rays through the trees almost reminded her of the slow rhythm of a fugue. You could feel the power breaking through as its melodies blended together. Even so, the bent rays of the sun. In another time and place, she would have loved to lie in the grass beside Riyad and whisper about life.

Instead, the narrow tree line she walked in stood as the last remnant of the once-beautiful hillside their mages had leveled for the camps. Over the ridge, mass graves awaited the fallen soldiers. Who knew how many in Inlaru had already starved because of the siege? All this because another nation insisted on spreading its religious cult by force.

The shift from the white tents of the upper nobility to the golden ones of the mages signaled her arrival. She ducked into the medical tent. A dense maze of operating tables filled the spacious area. Several smaller tents jutted out from it to form small rooms. She passed a violinist and trumpeter playing next to a man with a severed arm. From the looks of it, they sought to reattach it.

She'd be better prepared to face General Mahd if she could "talk" to her comatose husband first. Kalina wound her way around the operating tables toward the far side tent where he lay.

She had almost got there when Mahd marched right through the other entrance of the main tent.

The gaunt general's bushy white mustache looked tense enough to win a battle with a porcupine when his eyes lit upon her. "Commander Kalina." His tone oozed everything about his current state of mind.

He's going to discharge me.

"General Mahd." She fumbled a salute. "We did break through the southern battalions."

His eyes flashed. "We're not getting into that now. Come with me." He spun on his heel and left the tent.

He always *had* been a man of few words. But did he not want to get into this *here*? Or did he not want to get into this *now*? Kalina's stomach roiled as she strode after him. She caught up about a dozen paces out. He was making a beeline for the command tent.

"I should have never listened to your plan in the first place," he said.

"It would have worked if the cavalry had shown up."

"And that's why I should have never approved your cavalry scheme. They're useless troops who don't know how to hear orders correctly. Which is why we should have stuck to proven tactics. If the Ternion had wanted this to work, it would have caused it to work."

The failure had all been due to miscommunication? She opened her mouth to try to keep the blame pinned on Mahd. *But that sometimes happens on the battlefield. Chaos undoes our best plans.* Her original words died in her mouth.

"General Mahd," she finally said. "If we try this again with a clearer understanding, it *will* work. Of course cavalry are useless against pikemen. But they *should* have what it takes to slice through gun cavalry."

"And look where this plan led us." His lip curled. "Riyad should have been the one who survived."

Color rose to her cheeks. "What?"

"You heard me right. He would have taken out those cavalry."

Kalina winced. They'd *never* successfully taken down more than a few cavalry. But...Riyad *had* always been better than she had.

"I should give you a dishonorable discharge for manipulating me," Mahd said. "Of course, you'd lose the pay that's covering medical care for Riyad, and I'd like to see that man live. But maybe that's what you get for tricking me into changing tactics. An eye for an eye."

She froze. That made no sense. She had not manipulated him. *But if he wants a scapegoat...*

Mahd stood at the crimson command tent now. "Now stop trembling like I'm some Kaldian who wants to kill your husband. He's in there."

"Who?"

"The man who came here today asking for you. I haven't told him about your failure. Be smart and maybe I'll keep that to myself. I'll have some words with you later." And with that, he turned on his heel and stalked off.

Kalina dug a fingernail into her thumb as she watched Mahd leave. He had definitely threatened Riyad's life, no matter how much he denied it.

But he...wasn't discharging her immediately? And who wanted to talk? Mahd might act like he was doing her a favor by leading her here, but she'd sooner trust a weather prediction.

The Ternion's grace be with me.

She slowly pushed through the curtain.

A great wooden table filled the large circular tent. A trumpeter had molded the table into the topography of the surrounding terrain. Little figurines and objects symbolized the various troops. During prebattle exercises, officials crowded the tent to review plans.

Now, one older man sat by himself on a stool opposite her.

He had a broad chin and unwaveringly bright eyes. He stood and smiled. She hadn't seen teeth so pristine and white in a while. *Certainly not something soldiers have.* But as he walked toward her, his eyes seemed to sparkle with joy.

"Commander Kalina, I'm so glad to meet you." Both his hands wrapped around her right one.

His giddiness unsettled her. "Thank you. And you are...?"

"My name is Bren. Head Mage Bren of Chintor Academy, the finest school in the nation."

Chintor Academy. Neither Riyad nor Kalina had even tried to get one of its coveted spots, electing for Baylin Academy as the more realistic option. Why had their Head Mage come *here*, of all places?

He laughed the kind laugh that spoke of amusement and perhaps a hint of an apology. "I take it you didn't expect a visit."

This was too jarring. "Forgive me, Head Mage. I'm sure I ought to follow customs here, but today's battle won't stop replaying in my head." *That and Mahd's threats.* "Can I help you?"

The man nodded. "Please don't apologize. I admire the work you're doing here. I have heard a lot about you."

From whom? Kalina eyed Bren closely. "Okay?"

"As you know, because of the premier education we offer, Chintor Academy has had the distinct privilege of training your general's son these past five years—the boy chosen by the elven prophet to save our country from the brink of disaster."

"Yes, Mahd may have mentioned the prophecy on occasion." She could recite it.

Emil, son of Mahd. Your choices will shape the course of this nation. For in

the days of your time on earth, a great force will rise up against this nation and against the Ternion that no man will be able to vanquish. But the Ternion shall gift you with fantastic artistry with the Fabric to bend the world to your will. On the great day when you enter the battlefield, whether your nation rises or falls will depend on your mastery of war.

Depending on whom you asked, it was either the most comforting or the most terrifying prophecy in the world. Comforting because it meant they could still win. Terrifying because the prophecy suggested they *could* fail if he wasn't good enough. Perhaps that's why the Divine Council sent their prophet to them. As a warning.

Bren continued. "This is Emil's last year at school, and if he's going to save our nation, we need to provide him with the best training possible. And so I came here to see if you would consider joining our school to tutor him, along with his classmates."

Kalina's head spun. She put a hand on the table. "Does General Mahd know why you're here?"

The Head Mage nodded. "I spoke with him an hour or two ago, and he approved my proposal."

Was this Mahd's attempt to get rid of her? But that meant training his *son*.

She laughed without meaning to. "I'm sorry, but you should know that after an accident, I can't work magic anymore." She raised her hands. "I'm afraid I wouldn't be a helpful teacher."

Bren nodded and sat on the chair next to the table. "I heard about the instrument breakage." His gaze softened. "And I'm so sorry to hear about what happened to you, and especially your husband. You have shown incredible resilience. I'm sure you're not thrilled that I only know about you because of your accident. But I do know there's a lot more to you than what you've suffered."

Kalina stepped back, caught off guard by what Bren had said. "Thank... thank you?"

"I'm not here because of your injury," he continued. "I'm here because I also heard stories about what you've done as a commander. It doesn't matter whether you can work magic or not. You have the experience and skills that I know would make you an excellent teacher."

"I...I mean, I don't have any experience teaching magic." Kalina glanced toward the figures lining the topographical map. *I only know how to fight these days.* A minor tune wove through her mind.

“Your husband could teach.”

She furrowed her brow. “The ability to teach isn’t passed from husband to wife.”

Bren chuckled. “Of course not. But you’d have some idea about what to expect. You already have far more practical battlefield experience than any of our other teachers.”

“You do know I graduated nine years ago, right? I’m not even thirty.”

“We’ve hired younger teachers before.”

“What would you even want me to teach?” Not that she wanted to take this job.

“A violin magic class for our Year Threes, a battlefield tactics class for our Year Sixes, and some solo lessons for a few of our Year Sixes, including Emil.”

Kalina thought about the prospect of teaching a bunch of Year Three students how to coax magic out of a violin. It sounded terrifying.

And that wasn’t even considering the prophesied hero she’d need to train.

Kalina turned from the war table toward Bren. “I’m sorry. I don’t think I’m cut out for that kind of work. If you’re looking for mages with battlefield experience, though, there’s a couple other people who may—”

“Wait.” Bren stood again. “Forgive me, Kalina. I know we don’t have a relationship yet, but I want to challenge your decision.”

She blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“Let me lay my cards on the table. We’re on track to losing this war now that Arditen is gone. The generals in the south lose ground every month. And Inlaru doesn’t have much time either. Mages have used magic the same way for centuries, and our prophesied hero needs to innovate. Ever since I began looking, you’re the only person I have found who has done so on the battlefield.”

Kalina’s heart beat faster than their drums when they were summoning flames. “You know about what my husband and I tried to do?”

Bren nodded. “You pushed the boundaries of magic further than anyone else living. And while I know our nation doesn’t like change, that’s what Emil needs. I’ve been a Head Mage for twenty years; I know what kind of person we can shape into an excellent teacher.”

She cocked her head. *How can he know that?* But his earnestness was genuine.

“Come, and we’ll give you everything you need to succeed,” Bren said.

“Your in-laws Raz and Chineya have already agreed to provide lodging for you both. They’ll take care of your husband while you’re gone. And we have a committed team of mage healers to help keep him stable as well. Because we’re committed to making this work.”

She had forgotten that Riyad’s sister and her family lived in Chintor. She hadn’t seen them in years. But she remembered them as good people.

“The Ternion works in strange ways,” Bren said.

Guess I didn’t do a good job of hiding my surprise. She opened her mouth to again express concern. Then her gaze caught on General Mahd’s banners hanging behind Bren.

“I’ll have some words with you later.”

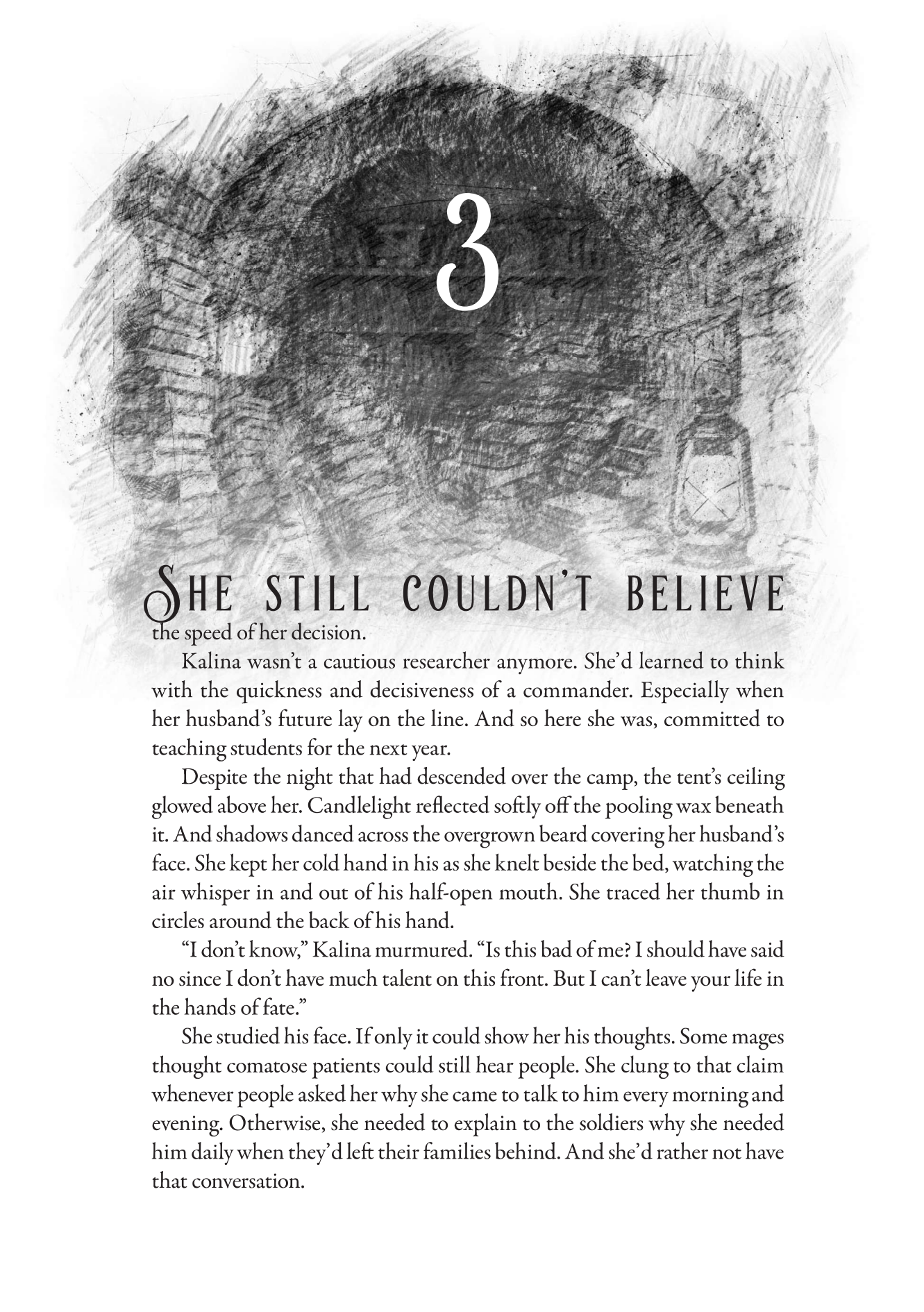
Her days as a commander were over. But she couldn’t stand on the sidelines. A memory danced into her mind. Those days of walking into that small kitchen with the chipped clay walls and seeing Riyad grinning at the table with the eggs he’d fried for the two of them. She had a reason to fight.

You’re not qualified.

That thought rammed through the memory. Because she knew Bren was flattering her. But who else in this country would teach this prophesied boy how to innovate on the battlefield? Only this inventor-turned-commander had successfully done so.

She’d seen how many graves they’d dug when commanders wouldn’t change.

Kalina spoke before she could second-guess herself. “I’m in.”



3

SHE STILL COULDN'T BELIEVE the speed of her decision.

Kalina wasn't a cautious researcher anymore. She'd learned to think with the quickness and decisiveness of a commander. Especially when her husband's future lay on the line. And so here she was, committed to teaching students for the next year.

Despite the night that had descended over the camp, the tent's ceiling glowed above her. Candlelight reflected softly off the pooling wax beneath it. And shadows danced across the overgrown beard covering her husband's face. She kept her cold hand in his as she knelt beside the bed, watching the air whisper in and out of his half-open mouth. She traced her thumb in circles around the back of his hand.

"I don't know," Kalina murmured. "Is this bad of me? I should have said no since I don't have much talent on this front. But I can't leave your life in the hands of fate."

She studied his face. If only it could show her his thoughts. Some mages thought comatose patients could still hear people. She clung to that claim whenever people asked her why she came to talk to him every morning and evening. Otherwise, she needed to explain to the soldiers why she needed him daily when they'd left their families behind. And she'd rather not have that conversation.

"You should have been the one who survived." Her voice choked, and she tightened her hand around his. "You were the teacher always encouraging students, inspiring them, and making an impact. I just played around with making lightning-based artificial lights in a guild. And I know what you would say: We adjusted to life on the battlefield, so of course I can learn this too...but it's easier to kill Kaldians than to connect with kids." Pressure built up within her chest. "You should have taught Mahd's son."

She stared at the ground. Getting along with other kids had never been her strong suit as a student. She had some weird habits, and her retorts weren't quick enough. Riyadh had always told her that teaching was built on relationships. But if she had trouble building those as a kid, how could she do so as an adult?

Kalina's stomach churned. *Why did I agree to this?*

"I...I can't lose you," she whispered. "We're losing this war, and I try not to say that publicly, but everyone knows it, Riyadh." Wind whistled overhead. She rested her head against his forearm. "All my hopes depend on this boy."

Rizade didn't have a tradition of cultivating expert mage healers. They had healers who could feed Riyadh and keep his muscles from atrophying. But specializing had been Arditen's tradition. After the explosion, she had pulled every string possible to get one of the elite Arditen mage healers to cure him. But they had all gone to their besieged capital city. And after the Kaldians ran over Arditen's capital and conquered them four months ago...

She had spent weeks begging others to pray that the Ternion had let at least one of them escape. Then she learned that the Kaldians had conscripted them all. The only way to revive her husband was to beat them so they could free those enslaved mages.

And so, here she was. Becoming a teacher at the best mage school in the nation. *Flattery and stupid hopes have gotten the better of me.*

But Head Mage Bren's endorsement had to mean something, right?

And she knew what Riyadh would tell her if he could speak.

"You're so much more than you think you are, human. And if the Ternion has put something in front of you, it's a sign that it wants you to take it."

"Human" had been his favorite nickname for her ever since their childhood days when he'd played an elf in their mock fights. And then later, a way to remind her that she couldn't do everything. *He always believed in me.*

Well, she had taken an opportunity now.
Let's hope I don't regret it.



Light rain fell around the camp. *A welcome relief for the dry season.* Kalina maneuvered around the healer's tent while a couple of soldiers carried her husband's stretcher outside. A flutist had already fed him that morning by using her magic to direct soup down his throat. Now, the one side of his mouth was turned up in that classic grin of his.

Even in a coma, you still know how to smirk, huh?

She'd have to make sure she mentioned that to him whenever he awoke.

Men with crates and belongings trudged around trying to prepare the whole camp for departure in the midst of the rain. Turned out Kalina wasn't leaving alone. The entire army was retreating.

She could see the hopelessness written on the brown faces of the soldiers who walked by.

A large crate floated through the air nearby as a lute strummed in the distance. Toward the end of the cleared plateau, pillars of earth rose out of the ground and resettled. The trumpeters were creating sinkholes and other weaknesses that would trap the Kaldians if they tried to make a camp here.

Kalina walked past the rickety outpost towering over the retreating camp. Colored lights blinked from above as the drummers in the outpost sent coded messages toward the next outposts in the Light Network.

Ahead, Commander Kay exchanged words with Padini. His head jutted forward in his trademark stare as they talked.

The moment Kay noticed her, he said one last word to Padini and then jogged over. "So, he did it. Mahd found a way to get rid of you."

"Wish I could tell you otherwise. But I guess my 'obnoxious optimism' only works some of the time." Kalina shook her head. "I'm sorry about whatever lapdog Mahd replaces me with."

Kay's lip curled. Rain dripped from the ends of his hair. "It wasn't your decision. At least you have a good job. I may not be a mage, but I've certainly heard of Chintor's reputation."

"Who hasn't?" Padini's family had paid a year's salary as a bribe to get her into Chintor Academy.

Kay glanced at some men walking by with a folded tent. "I can't believe

this. Look at us. We're retreating from a winnable battle—and Mahd is sacking the best mage commander we've had." He shook his head. "I can't believe he wants you to tutor his son."

She choked back a laugh. "You're telling me."

"And you *know* how puffed up Mahd can get about his son. I would love to know what hearing that kind of propaganda day in and day out does to a kid. You know why I think this Head Mage wants you?"

"Why?"

"Because he knows this boy is as incompetent as his father. And because he's this prophesied hero or whatever, no one knows what to do with that. Just like no one knows what to do with an incompetent general who keeps the king's favor because of who his son is."

Kay still didn't get it. Mahd didn't need the prophecy. Rizade had boasted about its six-hundred-year ruling dynasty and the permanence of their appointees too long to revoke someone's position for anything less than treachery.

There is a reason one of our best-sung heroes of legend is a man who obeyed a corrupt general for years without objecting because he patiently waited for the Ternion to stop the general's evil. Kalina found the legend disturbing. Yet this was Rizadian culture.

She shrugged in response. "Maybe he'll improve. I mean, he did manage to win that border battle a few months ago."

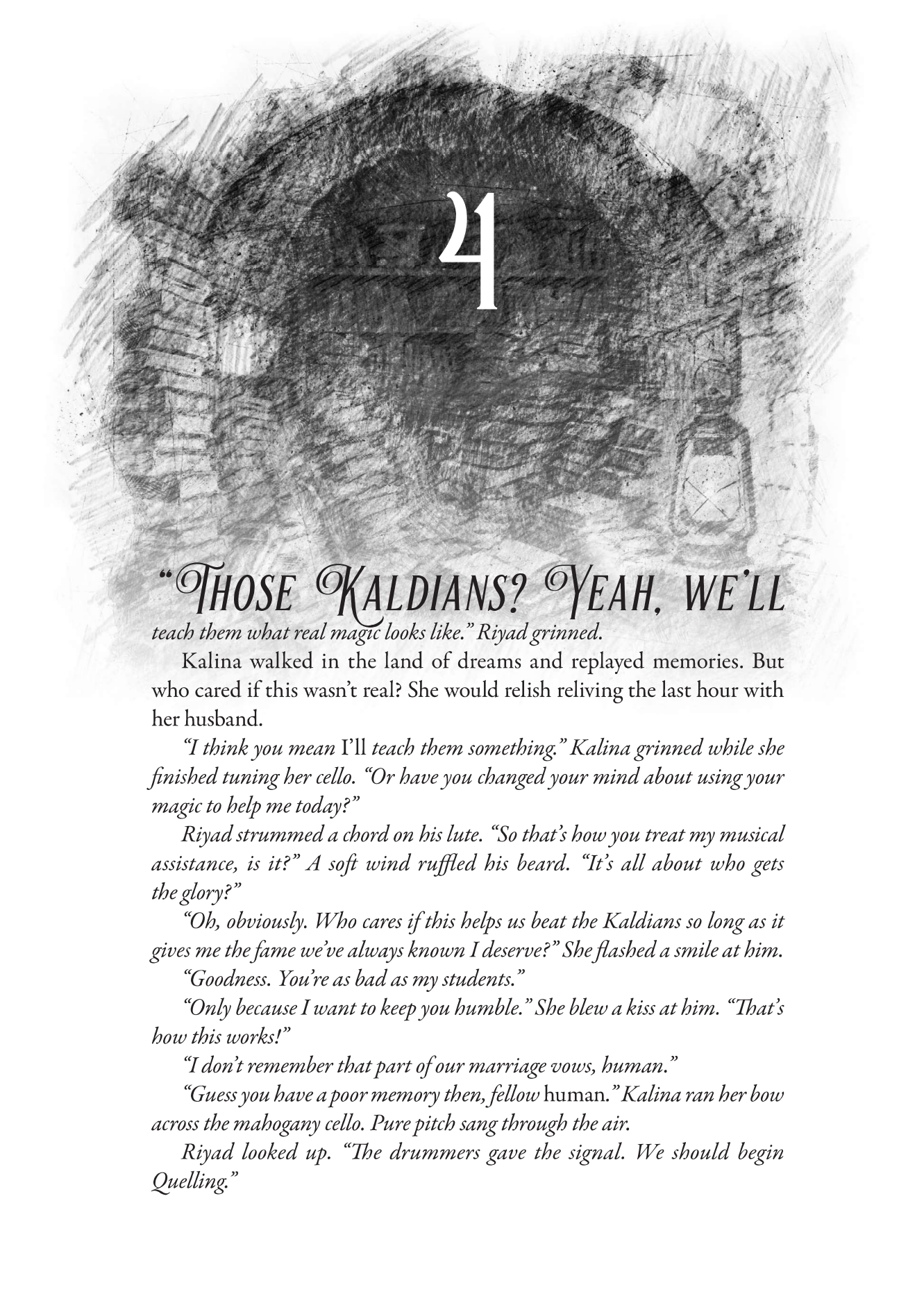
Kay laughed. "Right. The one win that he's trumpeted at least a dozen times as proof that last war's tactics still work." He scratched his chin. "Well, your command will be missed. Teach that son of Mahd about real battles."

"I'll try."

Kay moved on, following the rest of the troops. She ignored the worry worming its way around her chest.

Another retreat of shame and humiliation. Kalina stepped aside to dodge another large crate floating through the air.

Like it or not, Mahd's son was their only chance of reversing these constant retreats.



4

“THOSE KALDIANS? YEAH, WE’LL teach them what real magic looks like.” Riyadh grinned.

Kalina walked in the land of dreams and replayed memories. But who cared if this wasn’t real? She would relish reliving the last hour with her husband.

“I think you mean I’ll teach them something.” Kalina grinned while she finished tuning her cello. “Or have you changed your mind about using your magic to help me today?”

Riyad strummed a chord on his lute. “So that’s how you treat my musical assistance, is it?” A soft wind ruffled his beard. “It’s all about who gets the glory?”

“Oh, obviously. Who cares if this helps us beat the Kaldians so long as it gives me the fame we’ve always known I deserve?” She flashed a smile at him.

“Goodness. You’re as bad as my students.”

“Only because I want to keep you humble.” She blew a kiss at him. “That’s how this works!”

“I don’t remember that part of our marriage vows, human.”

“Guess you have a poor memory then, fellow human.” Kalina ran her bow across the mahogany cello. Pure pitch sang through the air.

Riyad looked up. “The drummers gave the signal. We should begin Quelling.”

She ran her bow across the cello once more. "Ready to show them why we'll win?"

Riyad chuckled. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. We haven't finessed our trick yet."

"No, but it's not long until we do—and then their Quelling won't stop the two of us." She concentrated on the enemy across the battlefield. "Maybe we'll even do it today."

Riyad smiled. "It's good to see you so optimistic again."

"Can't be moody forever. I can tell today has good things in store."

Famous last words.



"And there's Chintor!"

Kalina shifted, head still groggy, as the cart bumped and shook over each rock in the road. *Already?* She could have relived that memory a few more times.

She sat up and tried to get her bearings.

The town lay ahead. Unlike most cities that boasted careful planning and geometrical buildings, the town of Chintor looked like a bunch of ramshackle buildings half nested on top of each other and squeezed between the Valan River and the high cliffs of the Deep Jungle. It reminded her of living on top of a couple dozen girls in her old, crowded dormitory.

Rather fitting that my return to school would mean living in a place like this.

Rice paddies covered the plains across the river. Nearby, a flutist played a melody pulling a stream of water out of the river and splitting it into smaller streams that snaked through the air to the various paddies. Sunlight bounced off the floating streams. The farthest paddy she watered had to be half a mile away from her. Impressive. Most mages didn't have that kind of distance control.

"It's a beauty, isn't it?" Head Mage Bren gestured at the city. "I know you'll love it here." He smiled broadly, his ivory teeth glistening in the daylight.

Kalina glanced back at the overgrown city ahead of them. *Maybe.* She

had expected a more impressive city, given Chintor's reputation. But she chose a polite response.

"It reminds me of my old school days."

She didn't mention how much she'd hated school.

"We can do better than what Baylin Academy offered," Bren said. He gestured to the cliffs. "Chintor Academy sits up there."

Trees and undergrowth covered the rocky face of the hundred-foot cliffs, like a wall vanquished by mold. A trail snaked its way back and forth up the green face.

"It's in the Deep Jungle?"

"There's a cleared plateau. Students aren't allowed to enter the Deep Jungle without supervision. Of course, that doesn't mean they obey." He winked at her. "You know how kids are."

I do indeed know how petty and rebellious children can be. Kalina eyed the walls atop the cliffs. "Was it originally a fort?" The cart lumbered on, passing the flutist and a nearby stream of water running through the air.

Bren nodded. "It still can be. But the school can't fit the whole town anymore."

So if the Kaldians come here, we can only protect the students.

"Don't worry," Bren said. "Here at Chintor Academy, we don't let people fall by the wayside. If war ever comes, we'll protect them. No matter what."

She frowned. Perhaps. But three years of war had taught her sentiments often failed after the first ten minutes.

She glanced at the plodding zeletor pulling their cart. The scales of the elephant-sized lizard glinted in the light of the noonday sun. Beyond it, three other travelers strode ahead of them on the bridge. The middle traveler's hands were bound behind him. His companions on either side carried a trumpet and lute on their respective backs.

The unbound travelers turned as they approached. "Head Mage Bren," the lute player said. "Welcome back to Chintor!"

Bren nodded. "What happened here?"

"Unauthorized use of magic." The lutist clapped his hand on the back of the bound traveler. "Says he has papers from another district. But he doesn't have a license to play music here. So someone's going to stand trial next week."

"I was repairing a local wall," the bound man grumbled.

Kalina shook her head. A mage could easily obtain a license in a district if they already had a license in another one and had a legitimate reason to practice magic elsewhere. Skipping that step signified ill intentions.

And she knew as much as anyone how dangerous magic could be in the hands of the wrong musicians.



The zeletor wouldn't fit in the crowded city, so they left the beast at the stables by the bridge. Two of the stable boys carried Riyad's stretcher into the city—levitating it with magic wasn't smart when crowds could jostle a mage and cause him to drop his rhythm. Bren led the way and Kalina took up the back—she couldn't let her husband out of her sight while these two teens carried him around. She felt every time the crowds bumped his stretcher in the narrow streets. And that didn't even get into her own lack of personal space. She was stuck *here* for the next year? *I might not be a complete claustrophobe, but the academy better offer more space than this town.*

Bren stopped at the entrance to one of the walled courtyards dominating the northern part of the city. Small for a walled courtyard. But this was Chintor.

I should lead the way. Kalina squeezed between the moving crowd and her husband's stretcher to reach the door and hit the metal ringer against the stone wall.

The doors burst open and her sister-in-law swooped her into her arms.

"Oh, Kalina," Chineya said. "I'm so happy to see you. My heart aches for both of you. But you're here now." Kalina blinked, a bit surprised by how elegant the colorful patterns on Chineya's tunic were. Artisan families didn't normally own rich clothing like that. But Chineya's husband *did* design clothing for nobles.

Chineya looked past her shoulder and waved toward the others. "Come on in! Don't stand out there in the street."

She stepped to the side to allow the others to come in as she put both hands on Kalina's shoulders. Her cheeks lifted into that ever-present smile of hers. "You all need something to eat after your journey." She spun to the two stable boys. "Take my brother through the door in the right

corner.” She gestured toward one side of the U-shaped house. “I’ll have a feast ready once you’re back.”

“Oh,” the one said. “We’re not a part of them. We’re from the stables.”

She waved. “There’s stew for half the village here. You take my brother to his room, and I’ll make sure you have proper food in your bellies before you go back to work.”

As they left, she turned back to Kalina. “It looks like my brother showed those human-sacrificers what kind of a man he was.”

Kalina raised an eyebrow. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

She laughed. “You know Riyad. Always willing to sacrifice and take burdens on himself no matter how much it hurt. Don’t you think he’d feel proud about this?”

Kalina’s heart rose as she watched Riyad carried off. Yes, that *was* her husband. He had always feared death less than her.

Of course, the death I’d feared the most hadn’t been my own. And she knew what had put him in this vulnerable position.

Chineya’s eyes softened, and she put a hand on her shoulder. “And you know he wouldn’t have blamed you.”



Kalina didn’t say much as they made their way through the crowded streets after her sister-in-law’s bountiful meal. Head Mage Bren didn’t seem to mind. Perhaps he was still trying to digest all the food Chineya had stuffed them with before they left. It gave her time to roll over the same question again and again in her mind.

How did she know?

Kalina would have sworn she hadn’t told anyone what she really felt about Riyad’s coma. Sure, she’d cried with Riyad about this several times, but did he count in his current state? She hadn’t even seen Chineya in over a year. *But she knew.* She had looked Kalina in the eyes and known the guilt she felt.

Chineya had a point. Kalina hadn’t shot the klyte arrow that broke her cello into splinters.

But if I had only spotted the archer or stood a little farther from Riyad—as I should have—maybe this wouldn’t have happened.

Truth was, unlike her husband, who had a track record of putting

himself on the line for others, her life had been the opposite. She always got away unscathed while others suffered because of her inaction.

Just like when I knew what Qel did to my sister, and—

Kalina shook her head. She couldn't finish that thought. Riyad had told her further introspection about that wouldn't be helpful.

But she had to wonder who she was to think she could prepare a prophesied hero.

"Here we are," Bren said.

The cliffs towered high above them. Kalina swallowed. Bren wanted to introduce her to the school, but she was most interested in meeting the teachers. She wasn't a fool. Bren would only have traveled to recruit her if there was something wrong.

"There's a winding path you can take up to the academy," Bren gestured to their left. "But, of course, if you're with a lutist, there's a faster way."

He stepped onto a wooden platform lying beside the cliffs. Kalina joined him as he grabbed his lute from his back and began to pluck it. The wooden platform shuddered and then ascended as Bren telekinetically controlled it.

Her foot tapped against the platform in alignment with Bren's playing. *The problems better be with Emil, not his teachers.* She needed people she could trust for the challenges she'd inevitably face as a first-time teacher.

They reached the top and Bren settled the platform gently on the short wall overlooking the academy. She gingerly stepped off and raised her gaze to the surrounding campus.

Five large, stately buildings formed a U around an expansive lawn that appeared to fit the dimensions of a golden rectangle. They were all made of seamless stone, no doubt formed by some mage centuries ago. Two golden-rectangle-shaped buildings stood on either side, and a much longer building loomed across the courtyard.

Tall pillars lined the front of the central building with a large dome cresting the center. Architectural sculptures of the Divine Council adorned the sides of the building. It looked like the size of two golden rectangles attached widthwise. *Perfectly proportioned, as great buildings should be.* Seeing traditional geometrical Rizadian buildings again felt refreshing after spending so much time in Arditen on military expeditions with their unproportioned buildings.

And it certainly wasn't as crowded as the city below.



They walked down the stairs of the wall onto the central green. Her body relaxed now that she wasn't being constantly jostled. The noise of conversation and laughter wafted from the side buildings. She guessed they were dorms. Perhaps the one directly ahead housed the classrooms? To the left, past the dorms, were large square depressions that teachers used when training students to practice magic, similar to Baylin Academy. Of course, this place boasted a *lot* more grandeur and geometrical symmetry. Unlike the city below, this seemed fitting for a school with Chintor's reputation.

Keep your head. Kalina straightened her posture and adopted a more confident gait as they strolled across the lawn. The kids would eat her alive if she showed an ounce of fear or unease. And she wasn't an unpopular schoolgirl anymore. She mowed down Kaldian soldiers.

Kalina suddenly realized Bren was talking to her.

"...as a result, we unfortunately can't offer you much training before you start teaching," he said. "We're going to trust you to start off as best you can, and we'll offer training on the way."

No training? She bit back the shock. "You don't think I need that?"

Bren chuckled. "In teaching, you learn a lot on the job. We don't expect you to be a perfect teacher. We just need someone with experience. Even if it leads to a messy first week or month, your experience in war strategies and musical techniques will take you a long way."

So she had to figure this out by herself?

Great.

The uneasy feeling in the bottom of her stomach was growing. *The teachers here had better be the allies I need them to be.*

They walked through the towering pillars into the central academic building. Halls stretched to the sides in both directions. The floor was *tiled*—and it even formed a large fancy geometrical design of encircled triangles and hexagons in the middle of the vestibule.

Sometimes Kalina wished Rizade's architectural tastes were different. Arditen's floral designs held more beauty than their geometrical infatuation.

Bren put a hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry, Kalina. I know this may feel like a lot. But I also know you're able to deliver. And together, we *will* make a difference at this school for so many students...especially Emil."

Were her emotions written across her face today? Because that's what it felt like.

But she smiled and nodded as they turned left to the hallway.

"While you're here, I wanted to introduce you to your fellow teachers," Bren said. "I've put a lot of work into gathering the best teachers in the nation. And I think you'll like them a lot."

"Yes!" Her eager voice slipped out without conscious thought. "I would love to meet them."

If I can only make sure I remember their names...

"Elder Umar's office is closest to us," Bren said, turning to the left. "Let's see if he's in."

He pushed past the mauve curtain hanging in the doorway to reveal a closet-sized room with a miscellaneous assortment of jars, instrument parts, and tools scattered around the desk. The wrinkled man working on a disassembled trumpet by the window turned around to look at them.

"Is this the new teacher?" he asked. A smile spread across his face as he stepped toward them. She felt a note of gentle kindness in the way he shook her hand. "It's great to meet you."

She fumbled for the right words to say. "It's a pleasure to meet you as well, Elder Umar."

"Elder Umar has taught at this school longer than anyone," Bren said. "Forty-two years and counting; isn't that right?"

Umar chuckled. "I lost track a long time ago." He slowly sat in his chair. "I can tell you this job doesn't get easy. But it doesn't get any less rewarding either." He looked up at her and smiled. "I know the first year will feel impossible. But keep pressing on. The second year gets better, and you aren't as bad that first year as you think you'll be."

Unfortunately, she only had one year with Emil, so she had to make this first year count. But she appreciated the welcome. "Thanks, Elder Umar." He seemed promising as a coworker.

After a few polite exchanges, they left for the next room. Bren pushed past the curtain to enter another closet-sized room. Bookcases with sagging shelves and chipped edges lined the walls. Stacks of books and papers leaned precariously on the desk in front of them. A gray-haired woman with wrinkles under her eyes glanced up from behind the desk, candlelight glinting off her nose ring.

"Elder Jadoni," Bren said. "It's so good to see you. I'd love to introduce you to the newest member of the Chintor family."

"Ah." Her gaze flicked back to her book. "Yet another teacher young enough to be my granddaughter. Have you taught before?"

That's one way to greet someone.

"I'm afraid not," Kalina said. "I served as a commander on the front lines up until a few days ago."

"Oh. Wonderful." Sarcasm dripped from her tongue. She stood, keeping a hand on her chair, and scanned the bookcase behind her. "We're doing this again."

She wrested a book from the shelf and handed it to Kalina. Their gaze met.

"I've read every book on teaching magic out there, and this outdoes the others. Obscure, but excellent. Please return it in four weeks. And don't screw up."

Kalina hesitantly accepted the ancient-looking tome from Jadoni's equally ancient-looking bony hands with skin bleached the pale yellow of age. Jadoni sat down again, and her gaze dropped back to the book.

"Th-thank you?" Kalina said. *Jadoni clearly lacks faith in me.*

"Thanks, Elder Jadoni." Joy breathed through Bren's voice and he beamed. "We love the work you do here."

As he left, Kalina tucked the tome under her arm and followed. *So Jadoni is crotchety and doesn't like incompetence. Probably won't be an easy colleague.* She'd need to decide if she wanted to try to read the book or give it back to Jadoni tomorrow so she didn't forget her deadline.

"She's such an amazing teacher," Bren said as they walked down the hall. "I don't get to attend her lectures much, but I've never seen anyone better at teaching the lute. So welcoming as well."

Kalina nearly choked. "I'm sorry?"

"That book." Yet again, a smile broke through his lips. "How kind of her to think about that."

She eyed Bren. Had he not seen the crone's disdain for her, or was he ignoring it?

Before she had the chance to think about that too much, though, he pushed open another curtain to another room. Here, large stacks of books littered the floor, and the clear desk only had three opened books on it.

A bearded man with unkempt hair and piercing green eyes looked up as they entered. He didn't look much older than Kalina.

"Ah? And is this the new teacher?" He stood and reached out a hand. "Elder Mito. Pleased to meet you." A drawl extended his words.

"Elder Kalina," she said as she shook his hand. That *elder* part rolled strangely off her tongue. She didn't feel like she deserved the title. But she was a teacher now, and she had to own it.

"Elder Mito exudes brilliance like a prophet," Bren said. "An exceptional student of war strategy as well. You two should talk sometime."

The left corner of Mito's mouth tilted strangely as he looked at her. "You're from the front lines, aren't you?"

"I am."

He nodded slowly. "Interesting...I've always wanted to talk to an actual battle strategist. I have a lot of thoughts on the whole subject. Still haven't figured out how we're losing to a ragtag nation who wants to make everyone worship their god."

Kalina eyed him quizzically. "I mean, I could tell you the reason. For centuries, the art of war has relied on mages who can block any projectile weapon if they're skilled enough. Now, that's no longer true with Kaldia's imported guns. And we haven't found a way to stop them yet—or obtain our own source of gunpowder."

"Hmm." He studied her carefully. "Is that so? I don't have personal experience on the field, but..." He shrugged. "I don't know. It seems like an easy answer to fall back on. Why fight courageously if we can blame our losses on technology? The Ternion forbid that our country admit we need brave mages. Good thing we have a prophesied boy to save our hides."

Kalina tried not to recoil. Who did this man think he was? The Ternion knew how many mistakes General Mahd had made. But their mages had no short supply of courage.

"Well, I'm sure you'll have some great conversations later," Bren said as he put a hand on her shoulder. "It's good to talk with you, Elder Mito."

He smiled. "And you, Head Mage Bren. Pleasure to meet you, Elder Kalina."

Is it, though? She mumbled some polite response as they turned to leave the room. Jadoni hated her lack of experience, and Mito blamed her for losing the war. Umar seemed nice, but these other two didn't seem like pleasant colleagues.

The other teachers had their own eccentricities. There was Suraya—who looked about her age, had an obsessively organized room, and seemed annoyed that they’d interrupted her from work. And there was Ashinara—who seemed exuberant to see her. A bit too happy, perhaps, since she asked *so* many personal questions about her husband and already seemed intent on becoming close friends. *She’ll be a handful.* Umar seemed the best of the lot.

The other teachers weren’t there that afternoon. Which left her standing with Bren in the hall after she managed to peel herself away from Ashinara.

“I can’t imagine a better faculty,” Bren said. “And every year we lose someone, we always manage to replace them with someone better. It’s such a blessing to have you helping us make this the best academy in Rizade.”

He couldn’t imagine a better faculty? Kalina had only been here for an hour and she already knew that, except for Umar, there was something dysfunctional about the teachers. None of the teachers at her school growing up had seemed this...eccentric. Or uninterested in their Head Mage. Maybe teachers looked like this “on the other side of the curtain.” But she’d expected more from an academy with Chintor’s reputation.

She couldn’t figure out why Bren overlooked that. Unless he, like her, tended to put a smiling face over all the world’s problems.

Either way, it had confirmed her fears: She wasn’t just brought here because Emil was a difficult student. Something more was going on beneath the surface. Even if Bren wasn’t ready to talk about that.

But Kalina smiled. “I look forward to teaching here with the rest of you,” she lied.

“Is there anything I can do to help this transition?”

She thought for a moment. “A cello would be nice.”

“A cello?”

“I can’t work magic with it, obviously. But I did retrain my fingers to play music for a reason.” Nothing quite lived up to the deep, reverberating sounds of a finely tuned cello. “I’d rather not lug mine up the cliff each day.”

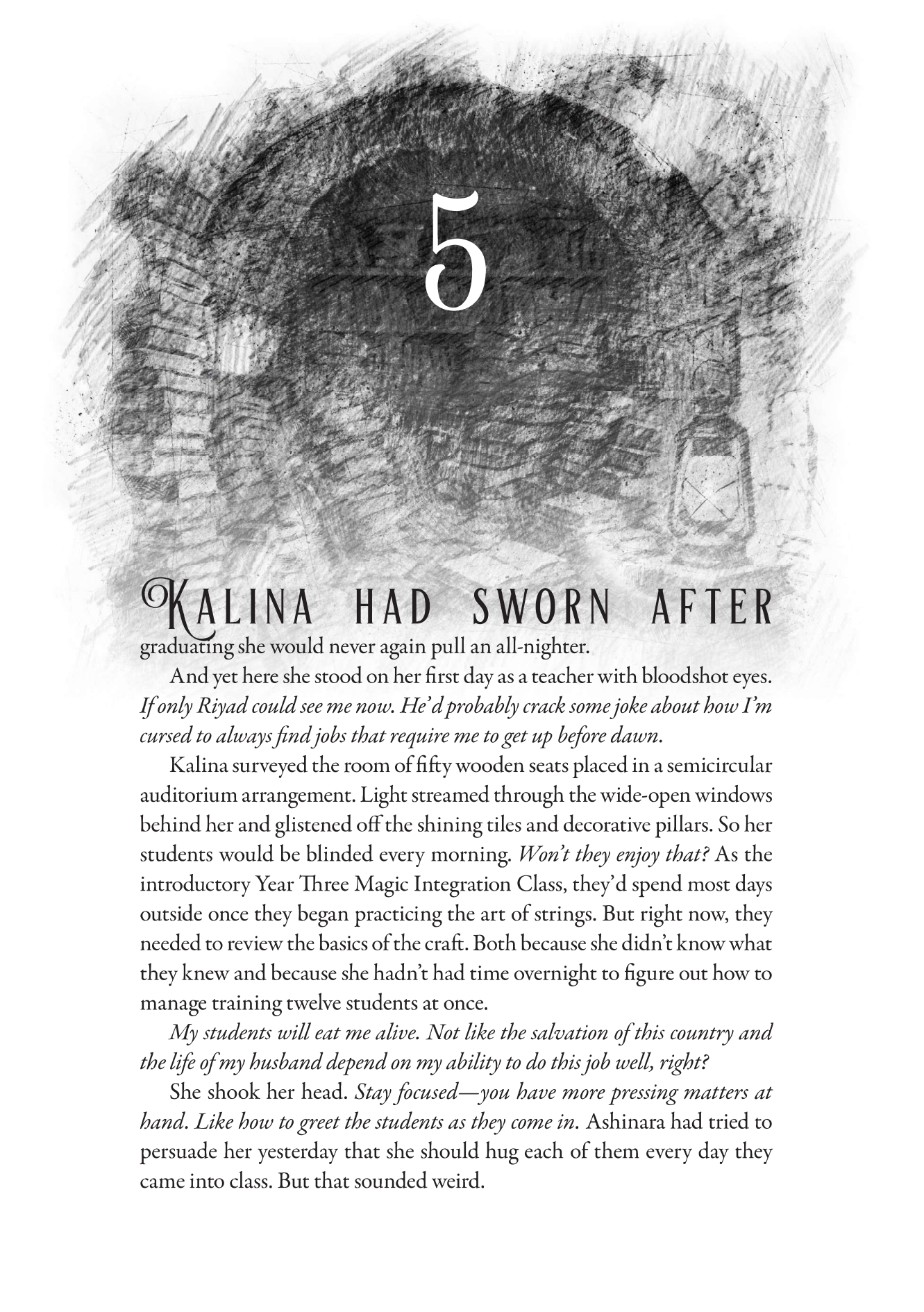
Bren smiled. “Well, I think we can find that for you. Anything else?”

“I’m sure there will be. There’s a lot I’ll need to do in the next week to get ready to teach. But maybe I’ll know tomorrow exactly what I need.”

Bren cocked his head. “I’m sorry, did you not catch what I said earlier?”

“Um...maybe not?” She hadn’t been listening well while stressing about where the school’s dysfunctions came from.

“I had mentioned this when we were walking up to this building, but the temporary substitute we hired to fill this position at the start of school last month quit yesterday. That’s why we don’t have time to give you training. You need to start tomorrow.”



5

KALINA HAD SWORN AFTER graduating she would never again pull an all-nighter.

And yet here she stood on her first day as a teacher with bloodshot eyes. *If only Riyad could see me now. He'd probably crack some joke about how I'm cursed to always find jobs that require me to get up before dawn.*

Kalina surveyed the room of fifty wooden seats placed in a semicircular auditorium arrangement. Light streamed through the wide-open windows behind her and glistened off the shining tiles and decorative pillars. So her students would be blinded every morning. *Won't they enjoy that?* As the introductory Year Three Magic Integration Class, they'd spend most days outside once they began practicing the art of strings. But right now, they needed to review the basics of the craft. Both because she didn't know what they knew and because she hadn't had time overnight to figure out how to manage training twelve students at once.

My students will eat me alive. Not like the salvation of this country and the life of my husband depend on my ability to do this job well, right?

She shook her head. *Stay focused—you have more pressing matters at hand. Like how to greet the students as they come in.* Ashinara had tried to persuade her yesterday that she should hug each of them every day they came into class. But that sounded weird.

Kalina settled for sitting on the high stool at the front of the room and greeting them all together.

At five minutes to the hour, the first few students began to trickle in. They sent a few nervous glances as they took their seats. She tried to smile back. Today would be awkward, and they had to deal with it as best they could. She remembered all the stories Riyad had told her about what students did the moment they learned which teachers tolerated mischief. *If I show weakness, they'll pounce.*

At least she didn't have the pressure of dealing with this "chosen one" in her first class. That lovely challenge wouldn't present itself until the afternoon.

Finally, all the wide-eyed Year Three students sat in front of her in their tan tunics and black trousers. Only the wide, colorful sashes encircling the girls' waists added variance to their dress. The sash designs suggested that most of them came from rich families. No surprise there. Most farmers and artisans didn't have the funds to send their children to mage school. And while schools claimed to only test students' ingenuity when deciding whom they would train, everyone knew the children of magistrates and governors had a leg up.

Especially at Chintor.

She glanced at her desk. The sundial wasn't quite on the hour yet. But she didn't have time to waste.

Kalina cleared her throat. "Welcome to Music Integration Class. My name is Elder Kalina, and I'm going to be your teacher for the rest of the year. We'll practice how to connect the bowed instrument skills you've already learned to the ability to control energy. I know getting a new teacher five weeks into the year presents challenges, but...well, we'll work with it as best we can."

A hand shot up in the front row. *I suppose I should have expected that from a bunch of fourteen-year-olds.*

"Yes?" she asked the boy.

"Is it true you can't do magic yourself?"

Well, there it was, front and center. Kalina held up her hands. "It is."

All the kids stared at her now. Some smirked. Others looked inquisitive.

"I used to." She looked the student in the eye. "I spent four years researching new creative uses of violin magic with the Krazian Inventors

Guild and two years as a battle mage. But I lost my ability when my cello shattered eight months ago, and I've been a commander since."

Another hand shot up. "So you *did* survive your instrument shattering?"

A stab of guilt went through her when she thought of Riyad. But she pushed that aside. "I did."

Any smirks were replaced by looks of shock and awe.

"How did you do that?" This time, the kid didn't even wait for her to call on him. His large eyes widened as he stared at her, looking completely oblivious to everything around him.

If I let this precedent stand...

"Please raise your hand next time." There had to be some distance between a teacher and her students for them to respect her. "But to your question, I don't know how I survived. It must have been the grace of the Ternion. Either way, I'm here to make you the best violinists you can be, and I've talked enough about myself. Let's talk about each of you..."



Turned out, teaching a two-hour class felt as mind-numbing as it did to sit through as a student.

Kalina should have known spending a whole lesson on introductions and review would dull the kids. She still preferred bored and obedient to an animated, chaotic classroom, but she'd hoped to tie fun and obedience together. That, however, required more than a night to prepare.

Right now, she sat at a table in the small teachers' lounge alongside Ashinara and Mito. Sitting with the man who had insinuated Rizadian mages lacked courage wouldn't have been her first choice. But the room only had one table. And so here she sat with the halfway decent stew the cook had made for lunch. It almost reminded her of the signature stew Riyad liked to make during the long days of wet season.

Unlike Riyad, though, this cook doesn't go overboard with the paprika.

"...and he really needs someone to love him," Ashinara said. "He wouldn't act out if he knew he was loved."

Mito rolled his eyes. "He needs someone to hit him over the head with a club." The slow cadence of his voice made him sound bored. "Isn't this your sixth year? Privileged kids like Jacir, who grew up with the mayor of Chintor for a father, don't change unless you come down hard on them."

And besides, the boy already knows he's loved." He smirked. "I ran into him and Meliya last year, and his pants were—"

"Stop that!" Ashinara smacked his hand. "We all know what happened."

Mito side-eyed Kalina. "She doesn't."

"He wouldn't have done that with Meliya if he wasn't trying to fill some void in his life," Ashinara said. "I tell the kids that all the time: Casual intimacies won't give them what they want. If they wait for the special one like I did with Malé, they will be so glad for doing so."

"Yes, I'm *suuuuuuure* hearing that will stop Jacir from acting up in class," Mito said as he leaned back in the chair. His drawl continued. "Always works for kids, doesn't it, Elder Kalina?"

"I don't have much experience with this yet." Of course, Kalina knew Mito was right. Even though she didn't know Jacir, Ashinara struck Kalina as one of those teachers who mothered her students too much.

"Ah, right," Mito said. "You just have experience fighting a losing war."

Kalina bristled. *Seriously? That's how he speaks to a colleague?* "I could recommend you to the army if you want to join our mages."

Mito shook his head as he stood. "Nah. My talents would be wasted. Now, if you hear about any commander or general positions opening up, then maybe we could talk." He picked up his bowl of stew and walked out.

Kalina shook her head. Like the king would even consider giving a generalship to someone who wasn't related to a magistrate or governor. She'd gotten lucky with her own commander position. And Mahd wouldn't be repeating that decision.

Ashinara shook her head as well. "You know, I try to give him the benefit of the doubt. I know we all deserve that. But sometimes with Elder Mito..." She shook her head again. "I don't know. He grew up in the same district as you and everything. You grew up in the Metsan District, right?"

A stab went through Kalina. Her family...well, they'd gained a reputation. Publicly accusing a friar of wrongdoing did that. *Does Mito know who I am? Does he believe us?*

"Enough about him." Ashinara put her hand on Kalina's arm. "Today's your first day teaching! How has it been so far?"

"It went fine," Kalina lied. "I mean, I don't know what I'm doing. I've never done this before. But—"

"Oh, I'm sure you're doing fine. I've been teaching for six years and I *still* don't feel like I know what I'm doing." Ashinara laughed. "Do any of us?"

For the sake of the country, Kalina hoped they did.



Early afternoon meant Battlefield Tactics Class. And that meant preparing for her first class with Emil. She should have felt gratitude that she could meet him in a crowd before the pressure of tutoring him one-on-one. That, after all, would be the real test of whether thinking she could train him was presumptuous arrogance or not.

I just want the verdict. Even if she failed, she'd rather know than deal with the question marks.

Battlefield tactics hadn't been a required course when she studied in mage school. She'd specialized in theoretical magic. But ever since the army began drafting all available mages to serve on the front lines, schools had cut the theoretical, engineering, and even medical specialization tracks. Which meant she'd have all the Year Six students in this class. And since it was a two-year course, the students probably knew a bunch of terms she'd never covered. She'd started the textbook last night and counted at least seven.

Ignorance had never felt more reassuring. It showed how limited textbooks were in preparing students for real battles.

The sundial still indicated ten minutes till the start of class when two girls flung open the curtains and walked through the doorway.

"Hi!" one of them said immediately. "Are you Elder Kalina?"

"I am."

"I'm Anvisa." She descended the stairs to the front of the classroom. "And this is Leneya. We're so glad to have you here with us!"

More names to remember. Anvisa had a ponytail and a big grin. Leneya had glasses and looked a bit more bashful. Classic talkative and silent friend pairing?

Kalina smiled. It was nice to have some people glad to see her. "I'm happy to be here as well. You girls got here early."

Anvisa laughed. "Oh, we're *always* early to our classes. But we needed to make sure we were *especially* early to this one to get to meet you. Like, no disrespect intended, but the sub we had for this class didn't know anything. Not that I missed learning new ways to kill people. I wanted to become a doctor before this all started, and I don't know what I feel about killing people on the battlefield, even if they *are* Kaldians. But if I need to do this,

I want to be good at it.” She paused. “What about you? Did you find it hard to kill people?”

Kalina blinked.

“Sorry,” Anvisa said. “That isn’t the best ‘welcome the new teacher’ question, is it?”

“You’re fine.” She studied their faces. “Do you want my honest answer?”

Anvisa nodded. “I mean, I didn’t mean to ask a question that personal... but yes?” Kalina thought she could see a glint of worry in her eyes.

“I never wanted to join the war. And yes—I did worry about that. To be honest, though...” *Should I tell her the truth?* But they needed to know. “It’s disturbingly easy to kill people as a mage. When you’re above the battlefield manipulating the Substances...you never see the faces of the people you slaughter. And that’s what’s disturbing. Because you become comfortable wiping out lives without batting an eye. It’s different for soldiers on the front lines. But for mages?” She eyed both of them. “Killing will become as normal as waving at someone. And you’ll need to learn how to live with yourself for treating death that way.”

Both stared at her with widening eyes. Maybe honesty hadn’t been a good idea. But they would have to mow down enemy troops within the year. And Kalina hadn’t even mentioned the stress of the battlefield, the agony of losing friends, or the recurring nightmares that left her in cold sweats at least once a week.

“I hadn’t thought about that,” Anvisa said. “I mean, I guess I should have. But you’re the first teacher who’s actually fought before. I’m so sorry to hear about your husband, by the way. I should have said that earlier. That must be awful.”

Kalina swallowed the lump in her throat. “It is. But you know how you get through it? You save lives. That’s our first lesson today, because that’s what we do as mages. And I’m going to give you what you need to save as many people as possible.”

That sounded a bit more like a traditional teacher, didn’t it?

The girls nodded. And then they began asking questions about safer topics like her days as a researcher. Anvisa did most of the talking. But Leneya did jump in a few times. Pretty soon, the room filled with students.

Kalina looked around as Anvisa and Leneya sat down. The whole Year of forty-three students sat in the spacious lecture hall. Which one was Emil?

“Welcome to Battlefield Tactics Year Two,” Kalina said. “My name is

Elder Kalina, and I will be your teacher for the rest of this year. I've spent the last three years of my life fighting this war. I won't sugarcoat what it's like. And I'll teach you how to survive it. Because we don't have time for platitudes or useless memorization in this class. This is about defying death."

A couple of the boys in the second row whispered while they glanced at her. *Should I let it go or crack down on it?*

She couldn't let it become a regular occurrence. "Yes?" she asked, looking straight at them. "Is there something you wanted to say to us?"

The trio looked at her wide-eyed while trying to steal glances at each other.

Kalina waited.

The tall kid in the middle elbowed the kid on his left.

"Uh, we were wondering about your time on the battlefield," the kid on the left said.

"Oh?" Kalina kept a matter-of-fact tone. "And what's your name, sir?"

"Jacir." He pulled on his earlobe.

He was the kid Mito and Ashinara had discussed over lunch.

"And what did you want to know, Jacir?"

"I—uh—we were curious about the rumors that your instrument broke on the battlefield."

This question again? "They're true. I can't do magic now either, if that's your follow-up question."

"And you survived it?" The question flew out of the mouth of the tall kid in the middle. He stared at her with what looked like awe.

"I mean, I'm here!" Kalina said. "Do you have a name?"

A titter rushed around the room. *Did I say something wrong?*

The boy blinked and straightened in his seat. "Oh. Yeah; my name's Emil. You might have heard of me?"

Emil. Now that she knew who he was, he did look the part of a boy chosen by prophecy to save the world. Tall, lean, and handsome with that wind-swept brown hair and self-confident grin curving around the sides of his mouth. No more trace of that surprised, abrupt kid.

He was buddies with the class troublemaker?

Interesting.

"Well, Emil, next time you and your friends have a question, you're more than welcome to raise your hand and ask."

His hand shot up.

“Yes?”

“How did you survive it, Elder Kalina?” His gaze drilled into her. It almost reminded her of Kay. But he possessed a certain charisma Kay never had.

“The grace of the Ternion, of course.” That’s what all the friars said.

“But—but how? That isn’t supposed to be possible.” He paused. “No disrespect intended, Elder Kalina.” He was leaning so far forward, it looked like he might slip off the rickety wooden chair.

Kalina eyed him. *You said you wouldn’t lie to them...*

“Honestly? I have no idea. I suspect there’s something we don’t know about magic that explains how I survived. But your guess is as good as mine. Does it make a difference to you?”

A half laugh burst out of his lips. “Don’t you know the prophecy?”

Her gaze narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“My prophecy. The one from the elven prophet Zedin that says I’m destined to save our nation. You *have* heard it, right?”

“Of course I know the prophecy. I don’t see the connection.”

“I know my dad likes to skip the last line, but I thought the Head Mage would have told it to you.”

An uneasiness began to slip around Kalina like a python coiling around her ankles. “What last line?”

“After it says that we’ll only win if I’m good enough, it says this: ‘And on that day, your instrument shall be broken as a reminder to all that the Ternion raises up and uses whom it chooses.’ You know. Killing me.” His eyes glistened. “That’s who I am. The guy who’s going to give up his life and die young to save this country. Because we all know what happens to mages whose instruments break while they’re playing them. But you found a way to survive it.”

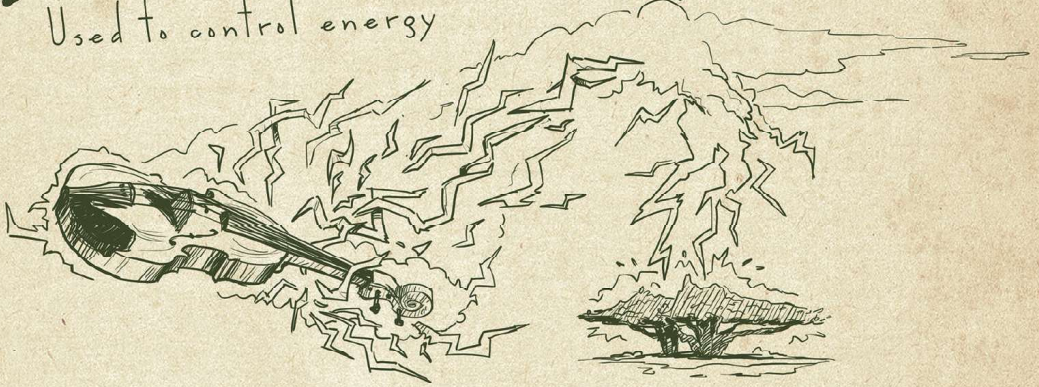
Kalina’s heart thudded. Questions she’d wondered about for days finally clicked into place.

Emil cleared his throat. “I...I need to know how you did it.”


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Leneya's Study Guide:  
Year Six Capstone Examinations  
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BOWED STRING MAGIC

Used to control energy



→ People used to think it could only be used for warfare and for healing people. Over the past twenty years, researchers like Elder Kalina have shown it can be used to create artificial lights and other new inventions.

→ Healers can easily hurt people with this magic if they're not trained to be careful enough.
(only seek healing from professionals, not other students—no matter how much Anvisa tries to convince me!)

Krem studying ^{xo}



REMINDER TO SELF: Proposal
for Year Six Capstone Project
due next week.

→ I know you're reading these notes, Anvisa!