

Chapter One

Dylan strode through the lower levels of the tower. The evening bell ushering the majority of its residents to their quarters had chimed some time ago, leaving the hallways empty save for a few servants and the occasional straggler. He passed them all in silence, giving a brief nod to the former and overtly ignoring the latter.

If this were any other time of the day, he would've dared to ask if they'd seen the petite elf he searched for. But evening seemed specially crafted for secrets. Acknowledgement of another meant placing your fate in their hands for good or ill and the guardians, for all their encouragement of spellsters living a proper life, had rather different views on what was considered as right.

Where are you, Ness? He'd already searched her quarters and the library. Maybe, given the late hour, she was off having some fun of her own. *Like I should be having right now.* He shook his head. So the woman he'd attempted to woo wasn't interested in some meaningless fun... with him, anyway. Being bitter over it wasn't going to change her mind or anything else.

A shape in the dark moved, their head turning to watch him. *Another guardian.* He'd passed several in his travels. Whether they were the deliciously dark hulks in leather armour or the softer figures in grey uniforms bearing the king's emblem, he couldn't remember a time when there hadn't been guardians about. Watching their every move, forever protecting them from the outside.

He rounded a corner and spied a familiar figure scurrying down the hall like the world was about to end. Nestria, his long-time friend and occasional lover.

"Ness!"

The pause in her steps was the only acknowledgement he got. Dylan hitched up the skirts of his robe and hastened to her side. She seemed especially lively tonight. The utter disarray of her usually immaculate bun of brown hair didn't help. What had she been up to leave her in such a state?

"I've been looking all over for you, my delectable dear." Dylan flashed his most charming smile, the one she always liked and gently brushed back one of the frizzy wisps curling about her long, pointed ears. "You know, I was thinking that..."

"Turned you down, did she?" His friend grinned up at him, her hurried pace turning leisurely as they veered into the hallways leading to the tower's duelling arena. They'd been playing this game for well over a decade now, spending time in each other's company when other options weren't viable, that it hardly surprised him to have her jump straight to the point.

He hung his head, shaking it slightly to let the dark tangles of hair fall across his

face, and peered at her through the strands. "Apparently, she's not into tall men." He grimaced. "Or humans, for that matter."

The wrinkles collecting at the corners of her large eyes deepened. Without a pause in her step, she tipped onto her toes and patted his cheek. "Poor baby. I *did* try to warn you."

Dylan shrugged. He'd already assumed that possibility before then. But what harm was there in asking? "The worst she could've done was refuse." Loudly. Whilst telling him what a monster he was for even thinking that way about her.

Nestria wrinkled her nose, the tip twitching like a rabbit's. "She's done far worse than that."

He didn't doubt it. "So..." He sidled up to her, nudging her shoulder with his elbow. "I'm pretty certain there's a vacant storeroom nearby. How about you and me go do a little snuggling? I'll do that ice trick you like so much."

Her nose twitched again, this time deliberately. "As much as I love being your fallback option, I've got plans."

"Oh?" He looked about the end of the hallway they'd come to a halt in. They'd passed several closed doors, but this part had only the massive entrance that opened out into the duelling arena. No one was waiting. "Who with?"

"Mary's—"

"Ness!" Dylan gasped. "*Mary*? Well, well." He grinned and barrelled on. "I knew she was a client of your own gorgeous gender, but I'd no idea you were as well. Why if I had—"

"By the gods!" She punctuated each word with a slap of his arm. "Stop storing your mind in your smallclothes for once." The already delicate pink hue of her cheeks grew steadily pinker as she spoke. Whether through anger, embarrassment or a mixture of both, he wasn't sure. "Mary's guardian—" She held up a finger as he went to open his mouth, the gleam of impending death in her eyes warning him back into silence. "—has convinced the overseers to grant us full sanction to use the duelling arena for her experiment." Those big brown eyes widened further, brimming with childlike glee.

Mary, he mused, rubbing his chin. The woman was one of the few alchemists within the tower, not at all strong in the usual magical feats attributed to the typical spellster. What was she working on? "Is this so she can test her theory about the dog metal?" That'd been the rumours, he was sure of it. Something big, too. He absently toyed with the tuft of hair growing beneath his bottom lip. If he could just remember what that theory was.

"Dog metal?" Nestria echoed, her lips flattening in a failed effort to contain her amusement. "You've spent far too much time listening to Sulin. But yes, because of that."

She swears the shield is stable, but hurtling magic at a piece of *infitalis*—" She slowly spoke each syllable of the metal's name as if he'd never heard of the stuff. "—metal this size could be dangerous."

He knew that. Sharing a room for the past decade with one of the most adept alchemists had left him with a far better idea of the metal their skills let them work than most spellsters. Sulin often spoke of how the ore had to be coaxed into a stable state via weeks of careful manipulation. He'd never heard of anyone crafting an entire shield from it before.

"So Mary's using you as the ammunition." Stood to reason that a test of how much damage the metal could handle would be done by getting one of the strongest spellsters to blast it. *No half measures*. Brave that, considering he'd heard of even worked metal exploding for no reason. Maybe he'd misjudged Mary when he'd labelled her as a bit on the meek side for his tastes.

Dylan peered over Nestria's head as she opened one of the twin doors, not a difficult thing when the elf barely came to his shoulder. Try as he might, he couldn't spot the other woman within the arena's confinement. "Has she got someone to play target?"

Nestria shook her head. "She's fixing it to one of the practice blocks right now. The overseers won't allow a living being to participate until they've seen the first tests." She grinned at him, barring the doorway with one arm. Those brown eyes sparkled a warning of mischief if he dared attempt passage. "That also includes no unsanctioned spectators."

"Well, then." He bowed low, flashing another smile. He'd no wish to get on the wrong side of the overseers' attention. People who did that tended to vanish. "I shall leave you and your darling cohort to your work. Don't blow up anything you're not meant to."

"Oh, Dylan," she called as he went to leave. "If you're so terribly desperate for company, you could always try the woman who's recently returned from the front line."

"Very funny." He shot her a glare over his shoulder, the seriousness on her face turning the rest of him. There actually *was* a leashed spellster in the tower? "Why's she here?" Only the leashed ever stepped foot outside of the tower confines and when they did, it was to serve the king's army. They didn't return. *Not unless it's to compare against prospective recruits*. And yet, his guardian hadn't given any indication of any casualties on the front line that would necessitate new spellsters.

"There was a new call for fresh spellsters just last week. All the adept senior men and women are competing for the honour to join the king's army tomorrow." Nestria leant her head on the door edge and frowned. "Didn't your guardian tell you? *Again?*"

No, she did not. But then his guardian spent a lot of time dissuading him from the very thought of ever leaving the tower. "Ah, you know Tricia. Everything outside is

hell-bent on killing me." He made a display of wrinkling his nose. "Still, I think I'll give visiting a leashed spellster a pass. Call me crazy, but I do enjoy a little magical reciprocation and I'd rather not have to speak with whoever has control over her power to get it."

"You debauched monster," Nestria teased, sticking out her tongue.

"Guilty. Utterly so." He waved his hands at her in a shooing motion. "Go. Before Mary yells at you." He cupped a hand around his mouth and whispered loudly, "I hear she can be quite the sharp-tongued one."

She giggled into her balled hand. "Off with you, then, or I'll be sure to blame you for making me late."

He clutched at his chest, feigning injury. "You wound me, good lady."

The giggling increased its volume, muffled only by her heavy, cream-coloured sleeves. "Mary'll do much more if you're the reason we have to reschedule."

"Does that mean you'd then be free?" Dylan winked at her less-than-serious glare. "Try not to vaporise too much of the arena, my dear." They'd a number of smaller training grounds, but nothing that could handle a pair of strong spellsters fighting in earnest.

She waved him away, grinning, before vanishing behind the thick door.

Whistling to himself, he strolled back along the hallway. Nestria wasn't the most confident spellster when it came to combat techniques, preferring to go on the defensive even when her guardian gave her full sanction to attack. Still, she'd have fun. What spellster wouldn't enjoy a night of unleashing their full abilities upon a harmless object?

He frowned as he ascended the stairway leading to the senior quarters. *Well, maybe not that harmless.* The last he'd heard of Mary's theory was through Sulin. The man hadn't been at all convinced what she planned was entirely safe. *But if the overseers have sanctioned it...* They wouldn't let her do something completely dangerous.

She's strong. Dylan knew that through experience, being one of the few Nestria actively chose to spar with. Although he'd yet to meet a willing opponent that could match him, she came close. *Would* if she put more effort into her teachings. Still, if something went wrong, if the metal *did* explode, Nestria was fully capable of shielding herself.

A pity he hadn't known about it sooner. He was a bit rusty with some of the stronger spells, preferring to spend his free time researching the texts of the lost dwarven culture, but he could've given the overseers a proper display of battle tactics. Maybe it would've been enough to convince them to let him compete tomorrow.

Was it too late to join? What would the competing entail? A prowess with battle spells, certainly. Anything else? He'd a certain flair for healing, which should be helpful

on the front line and an instant mark in his favour.

He flexed his fingers, trying not to let them ball. Why hadn't Tricia told him? Yes, it would mean being fitted with one of those collars and having his magical abilities suppressed until ordered to use them. But it was his only chance of having a life beyond the tower and its walls. He could actually walk through the forests and fields he'd only ever seen from afar.

For that chance, he would suffer being leashed.

"It's rather late for you to be up," a familiar voice said, pulling him out of his musing.

His head snapped up. Tricia, his personal guardian, stood at the top of the stairs. He took in the crossed arms, accompanied by the measured tapping of her foot, and swallowed. "Mother," he murmured, giving her a small bow.

She wasn't his actual mother, despite having raised him from birth. No spellster was allowed to have direct responsibility over their child. He doubted his parents even knew which of the countless children was theirs any more than he knew which couple had been responsible for his creation.

By the quirk in Tricia's pursed lips, humouring him was not on her agenda. "You should be in bed, young man."

Dylan scrunched his shoulders, trying to look as small as possible as he climbed the remaining steps between them. "I was talking to Ness."

His guardian harrumphed. "I swear, that girl is nothing but trouble for you."

He smiled to himself. If his childhood friend's ramblings were anything to go by, Nestria's guardian often said the same thing of him. Having joined Tricia on the landing, he resumed trudging through the hallway to his quarters. As he expected, his guardian followed, silently ensuring he made it there. Perfect. "Did you know Mary's trying out her theory on the *infitalis* metal?"

"Yes." Her lips twisted sourly. The deep brown scar marring the plumpness of her left cheek darkened further. "Her guardian is far too lenient with her, but the overseers have decided."

They walked for a while, the hallways solely theirs. Unlike the lower quarters where the children and servants slept, guardian presence at night was limited to those who'd had a hand in raising the spellsters sleeping here. All on the basis that they'd done a proper job in instilling the right rules into their charges.

He rubbed the back of his neck, trying to think of a suitable way to broach the subject of the impending competition. "I heard there's a leashed spellster in residence."

Tricia gave a noncommittal mumble. Such a response was hardly surprising. Any

time someone mentioned life beyond the tower walls, especially the decades-long war they had with the west and the people they sent to fight on the border, she seemed to prefer ignoring the issue.

"Ness says they're looking for recruits and I... was thinking of competing?"

She came to an abrupt halt and stared up at him, completely horrified. "You want to *leave* the tower? Have you heard nothing I've told you over the years?" Tricia threw up her hands. "It's a dangerous world out there. This tower is your home and you want to just... *leave*?"

"No, I..." No spellster could ever just leave. They needed to be leashed first and that took overseer permission. Trying otherwise meant spending a lifetime being hunted by the king's hounds. "I want to join the king's army."

"Child, you don't know what you're asking." Her calloused and wrinkled hands cupped his face. "You know why we keep your kind here."

He rolled his eyes. It'd been a long time since he was a child. The better part of nineteen years, in fact. Whilst most of the other guardians stopped keeping a tight rein on their charges long before they neared their third decade, Tricia seemed intent on mothering him into his old age. "Of course I know," he mumbled. "To keep us safe. But I—"

She pinched his cheek. "Precisely. Now let's get you to bed." Turning him, she sent him walking down the hallway with a pat on the backside.

"But I'm *good*," he pressed. "You know I am. Let me enter, let me *fight*, and I'll show the overseers how much of an asset I could be to the army's ranks." He was certain her reluctance in having him leave had been the reason behind why they hadn't let him compete the last time they came looking for spellsters to beef up their numbers. If he let her do it again, he'd never get the chance.

At his back, his guardian scoffed. "A little thing like you?"

Little? He towered over her, over most people. It'd been that way ever since he'd hit adolescence. Once, that distinct trait had led him to believe one of the few towering guardians could've been responsible for his birth. A theory he'd abandoned several years ago after stumbling upon the man in question with another man.

"Just look at you," Tricia went on. She squeezed his biceps, almost non-existent compared to the toned and muscular arms of the guardians. "How long do you think you'd last out in the world?" She snorted. "A day at the most, I would think."

True, he lacked a good deal in some quarters, like physical strength, but his magic was always there to take up the slack. *That* was what the overseers would judge him on. "But—"

"That's enough," she snapped, grasping his arm and whirling him around to face

her. "After everything I've taught you, how can you still wish to leave? You will swear to me that you won't pursue this any further, is that understood?"

He sighed. "Yes, Mother." If he could just get *one* overseer to consider him, then he wouldn't need his guardian's backing.

Tricia stroked his cheek. "It's for your own good, dear. Your kind really should stay where they belong."

Locked away. It made sense when he was younger. There was so much that could go wrong whilst they learnt to control their power. But he knew what he was doing. He wasn't a danger to anyone who didn't deserve a bolt up the arse.

"Honestly, I don't know what's gotten into you. You've put so much effort into deciphering the ancient dwarven texts and the overseers are immensely impressed with your latest find. How can you want to throw all that away to...?" She let forth with another harrumph. "Why?"

Dylan hung his head. Nothing he said, no matter the reasoning, would be good enough. "I'm sorry, Mother."

The rest of their journey to his quarters was done in silence, bar the occasional mutter or huff from his guardian. They spoke their goodbyes, the words hollow and clinging to the familiarity of tradition.

He opened the door, almost colliding into his roommate who stood on the other side. Sulin stared, his eyes wide and mouth open, his hand still poised for the handle that'd just swung past his fingers and the usual dark, rich shade of his skin had gained the ashen tinge of shock. Although Tricia's presence might've had something to do with that last one.

Even though she wasn't his friend's guardian, Tricia wasted no time in turning her sharp eyes towards Sulin. "And just where did you think you were going, young man?"

"I was..." Those dark brown eyes flicked to Dylan's face. Whatever the man saw in that second, it swiftly changed his mind. "Just on my way to inform you of how Dylan had not yet returned to his quarters." There was a squeak to his voice, making its usual undulating tone quite abrupt. "But I see that you've found him, so I no longer have a reason to leave this room." His gaze returned to Dylan as he spoke those last few words. The amenable smile turned glassy, silently threatening a dozen painful deaths.

Grimacing an apology and nodding at another farewell from his guardian, Dylan slipped into the room. Sulin might not deliver on his threats of violence, but he'd certainly mete out one hell of a tongue lashing.

At his back, Sulin shut the door. Leaning back on the heavy wood, his roommate groaned long and loud. "How could you do this to me?" His voice returned to its smooth,

rolling accent. The elf originated from Stonebay, a city on the east coast and, although Sulin had lived here for twenty-odd years, his accent hadn't left and had a habit of thickening whenever he was irritated, growing faster with each breath. "I'd finally gotten Tillie to agree to give me a chance. *Finally*. Do you understand that? Do have any idea how hard it is to win her favour? *Do you?*"

He opened his mouth.

"Excruciatingly!" Sulin marched across the room, pacing the gap between their beds and gesturing wildly. "*All* you had to do was stay out of trouble for one night. *One*."

Dylan settled on the not-so-forgiving mattress of his bed. Yes, he knew how difficult it was to garner a second of Launtil's time, even on a wholly non physical level as she was often more interested in plants than people.

"I *had* plans." Tentative ones that might've had the potential. "But apparently, I'm a horrid slime of a creature for even insinuating that she'd want to sleep with the likes of me." The rather shrill notes still echoed in his ears. He was surprised his friend hadn't heard the woman berating him.

Not that it was the first time he'd had such an insult thrown at him. He didn't care if a prospective partner was human or elven, but not every elven woman was as amenable to lying outside their species as others. And he'd been angling for a kiss at most, always did with a new partner. Not that he would've turned down more, but he wasn't one for pushing that option. More suggesting.

"You *are* horrid." Sulin plonked next to him on the bed. Although the elf was far shorter than him, the man's heavier build easily lifted Dylan's half of the mattress. "Do you even listen to yourself when you flirt?"

Laughter bubbled in his chest. He wasn't the worst in the tower. There was Mark, whose idea of flirting tended to involve a lot of bragging on his prowess. Dylan knew he wasn't all that bad at what he did, or at least the tower held those who were worse, but he also wasn't the sort to blurt out how many he'd lain with or how loudly they screamed his name. Not when actions spoke far better. "Hey, at least I'm not wagging body parts in their face and hoping they get it like you do."

Sulin stuck his tongue out at him, although it'd been a long time since Dylan had considered the split organ as a single unit. At least a decade now, ever since the accident that had the poor alchemist abed for days and in pain for weeks. It didn't help that his friend was partial to independently wiggling the tips. Like he was now.

The way they twisted in his mouth, writhing against each other like two wet serpents, was disturbing in a hypnotic sort of fashion and just that little bit arousing. *By the gods, what does it feel like to kiss that?* Dylan shook his head, letting the thought sink back into whatever depths it'd come from. "You're disgusting." He shoved Sulin's shoulder. "Put those away already."

The tongues retracted and Dylan swallowed. The sight of those pink tips gradually sliding between his friend's dark lips was no less stirring than the rest of their performance. Unsettling and powerful all at once.

"Tomorrow, you're helping me explain. You owe me that much."

Dylan rolled his eyes. "Fine." He bit the corner of his lip, thinking over Nestria's words about the leashed spellster and the competition for a place in the king's army. Then there was Mary and her experimental shield. "Do you happen to know where Ness is right now?"

Sulin frowned. The action, coupled with his short tightly-curved hair and sharply angled ears, always made him seem far too serious. "This is a trick question, right? You want me to say she's with someone when she is actually fast asleep or some other equally boring thing."

He filled his roommate in on the elf's whereabouts and what he suspected Mary had planned for the night. Through it all, he stared unwavering at the elf's face. Saw the horror swiftly growing in those ever-widening eyes.

The man jumped to his feet. "They're doing *what*?" He paced back and forth, muttering and tugging at his earlobe. "No, no, no. This is bad. The damn dog metal's not stable enough to handle what she plans." The elf swung around. "We have to get down there."

"But—" His friend wanted Dylan to leave their quarters? After Tricia had escorted him here? "If I leave, I'll be in direct violation of my guardian's orders." He'd no desire to spend the next month re-cataloguing the main library. Not whilst others fought for the right to join the king's army.

Sulin grasped Dylan's robe, nearly lifting him off his feet. The fabric creaked in his grip. "And if we don't, Ness will die."