

The Royal Wizard

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Epigraph

Dreams open the windows through which in our waking hours we seek to see. They are the worlds we create when reality fails to live up to our expectations, and the secret lives we wish we could live. They are the stories we write for ourselves, with no thought of critics or audiences, knowing that, whatever they might be, they will always be well received.

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PROLOGUE

Through the Veil of light and shadow, a moment away from time, the great raven's croak announced a coming rift. Each beat of his black wings sent ripples through the air, disturbing a world that wasn't a world and beings therein and not.

Freki, awakened from her slumber, raised her head and growled, making the earth shiver beneath her master's feet. Laying a hand upon the she-wolf's head, Woden, son of Borr, the All-Father and ruler of Asgard, hummed to soothe her ruffled fur. "Muninn," he said, heralding his friend's arrival. Freki huffed and settled her head on her paws, but her watchful eyes traced the raven's flight until he perched on Woden's arm.

Muninn beat his wings, cawing madly to relay his news, and Woden's brow furrowed in concern as he cast his sight inward to remember what he'd forgotten. The past splayed out before him, a vast wilderness he'd traversed many a time, seeking wisdom on paths taken and paths abandoned. He flew across its plains and meadows to the present as it wove into the Web of Becoming.

There, in the subtle weave, a snarl of crossing destinies arose. Woden traced a lifestring, then another, and another, searching for the one to cause such turmoil, a being so central to a future its very life would alter the world to make it converge.

He found it in a most unexpected place. In water.

A young girl knelt where a cottage used to stand, staring at the driftwood remains of a great flood. She called for her caretaker, wept for the old woman, screamed her sorrow until she could scream no more. And when she rose again and began walking away, the snarl pulled tighter and thrust Woden into another place and time.

Frastrmir, the castle seat of King Manfred of Wilderheim. Not precisely the castle itself. A chamber deep beneath, in the earth's embrace, where an old wizard scryed the air, seeking wisdom beyond his time. His visions showed him dozens of futures and for a moment at least, the human with magic flowing in his veins saw in the way of the All-Father. War and peace, a kingdom destroyed, a vain, selfish king demanding livelihoods with an imperious gesture, visions of dark futures, one worse than the next...and through it all, a single path, one precious thread of hope for something better. It meant a great risk to everything he held dear, the king he'd sworn his life to and the prince who would one day take his place.

Nico's old shoulders slumped as he realized what he had to do. For the good of Wilderheim, its king and his only heir, he would have to betray Manfred's trust and place in harm's way the very boy he hoped to save. He would have to send the child prince into war. "Forgive me," he whispered, as he would many times again until Prince Saeran returned to his father's side.

But there! The prince and his following already riding out to Lyria, even as the Aegiran armies gathered to march from the south. *May your horses be swift and your will strong*, the old wizard thought in blessing. He knew what was to come. Saeran's guard would see Aegiran arrows fly before they reached King Halden's keep. Nico sent a prayer to the gods that the prince would pass safely through his uncle's gates.

Woden caught the prayer in his fist and flipped it across his fingers like a coin, sensing through it the prayer's truth. The wizard was old. His body could no longer carry the weight of his mind and soul. Nico had seen three generations of rulers sit the throne of Wilderheim, and he knew he would not see the fourth. But how could the wizard dare leave him without counsel?

He needed to school an apprentice, but not just anyone would do. It had to be someone strong of magic and pure of heart, with a quick mind and wise soul. Someone who would one day stand at the young prince's side and guide his hand to be just and fair. But years, decades of searching for the right person, have yielded nothing, and he was losing hope.

Muninn cawed, shifting the vision sideways, and Woden spotted a familiar face. Perhaps the old wizard's hope was closer at hand than he realized. With a thought, Woden bent the flow of destiny. The snarl of lives groaned beneath the weight of his command, pulling tighter, resisting, until it gave way and a shining thread of power sprang free, aligning the others alongside itself.

A pot broke in the kitchen. The cook screamed and chased the thief outside, but the wily youth escaped with a loaf of bread to fill a painfully empty belly. The wizard noticed and Woden smiled, savoring his reaction. There again, the girl who'd mourned an old woman's death. She was the one. She would change everything. If only the wizard and his king could accept the counsel of a woman.

Another shift and there was the young prince, barely thirteen years old, strapping on armor and climbing the stairs to the battlements. He gravely surveyed the armies before him and directed the archers in their assault. A shout went up too late. Saeran's faithful general grabbed the boy, shielding him with his body as a massive boulder struck the wall. The two of them fell off the battlements into the courtyard while pieces of the castle wall rained down on them. The boy lived. The general did not. Seeing his friend and protector take his last breath, Saeran closed the general's eyes, and mounted those same stairs back again, calling for the archers to light their arrows.

Years passed in a blink. Lyria had won the war brought to its portals and young prince Saeran stood at king Halden's side, rebuilding what had been destroyed, healing what had been hurt. People looked to him and saw their savior, for it was because of the young prince that his father, King Manfred had sent his armies to aid Lyria. To protect his only son, he had sent Saeran the means to save a kingdom.

And as the prince laid down to rest in Lyria, in a candle-lit chamber deep beneath King Manfred's hall, the wizard's new apprentice cast a spell. There was more than magic in Nia. Like all things Other, she held power in her soul and so an illusion became real and a stone wall shivered into being, locking her in the dark. "Nico!" she called.

With a gentle chuckle, her mentor appeared beside her. "Easy, child. There is nothing to fear." Waving a hand, he uttered an ancient word and the wall disappeared.

Nia allowed Nico to pull her to her feet. "You couldn't have warned me?"

"I thought I was teaching you an illusion." He led her to the table and pressed a chalice into her hands. "Drink."

She coughed as the watered wine slid down her throat. "That was *not* an illusion."

"The wall should have been nothing but mist, an image to fool others," he said by way of apology. "But you made it real." He beckoned to his chair, and it slid over to him so he could sit next to her. Taking her hands in his, the wizard waited until she was calm enough to meet his gaze.

"I don't know how much time we have left, child," he said, "no one knows that. The gods will do as they will. But this you must remember always. Words hold power. Far more than you will them to, more than you would ever expect. Do not use them foolishly. A word can save a life or destroy it. It can cut as well as any blade. Never underestimate the power you hold. Never give voice to an angry thought. You must learn that all actions have consequences and, once spoken, words can never be taken back."

Nia nodded, wide eyed. Nico would never say so, he knew better, but there was more behind his simple lesson. Something that made Nia feel again like the starving, abandoned child she'd been ten years ago. He was saying good-bye.

Woden sighed and let the vision go. Three futures now lay before the kingdom of Wilderheim, all waiting for two people to make a choice. The All-Father resettled Muninn on the arm of his seat and stroked his beard, deep in thought. What would become of this land where humans mixed with beings Other? What would an Other do, given the power to rule humans?

So engrossed in his musings was he that he almost missed the shadow slip away.

Almost.

PART ONE

A MEETING OF SOULS

CHAPTER 1

Midwinter was celebrated by all in Wilderheim, rich or poor. It was an entire week of revelry and good food, a time to forget how cruel and bitter winter could be. The lands were covered with snow, the roads all but impassable, yet in Frastmir and the villages surrounding it, there was nothing but joy in everyone's eyes.

Nia kept pace with Nico's tired gait across the courtyard. She worried he might fall on the uncertain ground. Several maids and hostlers had slipped on icy patches just this morning. Looping her arm through his, she steered him toward a more even part of the walkway.

Nico sighed. "Enough for now, I think," he said wearily.

Nia nodded and walked him over to a bench, sitting down beside him. No one acknowledged them as they passed. Unlike Nia's sloppy shadows, Nico's cloaking spells always worked the way he wanted them to, however long he needed them. In all her time in Frastmir, no one had ever seen her in his company, save disguised as a boy.

"The prince returns tomorrow," she told him.

Nico nodded. "And none too soon."

The young prince had not expected to arrive at his uncle's keep during the first wave of attack. Despite having not yet reached his majority, Saeran and his army had managed to turn the Aegiran forces back and restore peace to Lyria.

But it had not come without a price. Everyone in Frastmir remembered King Manfred's rages as news continued to pour in about the war, the casualties. He'd turned on everyone, but most of all Nico whom he blamed for sending Saeran away.

It had been necessary, Nico would say each time. And then he would show Manfred the vain, cruel, heartless king Saeran would have become had he not left. Saeran needed to see war so he might value peace. He needed to learn the cost of a life and soul so he might never take either for granted. And he needed to prove he could stand against an enemy and defend his people, for Wilderheim was rich in something far more valuable than gold or silver. This kingdom was steeped in magic, filled with creatures Other, who lived on the borders of the human realm. Wilderheim, some said, was the closest a human could get to the realm of the gods, a bastion between Otherlands and the world of humans. And as such it could not fall.

King Manfred didn't believe in old wives' tales. Even with a powerful wizard as his advisor he was too human to see. Nia prayed Saeran would show more respect to their gods.

"Are you certain they will accept me?" Nia asked, worrying the edge of her cloak.

Nico chuckled. She'd been asking him the same question for five years, and he'd always answered the same way. This time, however, he spoke slowly, chose his words with care. "The king trusts me."

While there was no uncertainty in what he said, there was caution. Manfred's steadfast trust had been broken the day he realized Nico had sent his only son into war. It had to be earned back, and though Saeran was returning safe and sound, a hero already beloved by his people, whether Manfred's faith in his wizard was also restored was yet to be seen.

"When I tell him you are worthy of this office after I am gone he will accept you without question. Besides, is there any man alive capable of resisting your charms, my child?"

Nia blushed. "My charms, as you know, still need a lot of work, but I doubt I will ever be able to charm anyone to do my bidding."

Her master laughed. "They will do it for the asking."

"I wish you would be serious," she chastised. Even after all her time in study, even at her age of ten and nine, Nico had more faith in her than she had in herself. "What of the prince?" She asked, tracing circles in the snow with her toe.

"What of him?" Nico returned.

Nia sighed as the wind picked up, ruffling her rebellious hair. She brushed it back and readjusted her hood as she spoke. "The king will not be king for much longer, you said so yourself. I will be in the service of Prince Saeran, and I know nothing about him."

Prince Saeran's accomplishments were commendable, but what should she expect from a man raised in war?

"Who is to say he will heed my word when...when you're..." She looked away. Her greatest fear was not for herself but for all of Wilderheim if its ruler and wizard were always at each other's throats. This land thrived because of the balance of justice and magic. If that balance became disturbed, everything would suffer, and that weakness would call to those hungry for its secrets.

Nico patted her hand. "Prince Saeran is a good man. I have sworn to provide counsel to the rulers of this kingdom, and I will bring them someone whose judgment I trust and value more than my own. But by that same token, Nia, I swear to you that I would not bring you to a king unworthy of his crown and your magic."

"You have great faith in him."

"As I do in you."

She smiled. "Tell me about him."

Nico sighed. "It has been a long time since I've played games with the young prince. He used to love seeing me weave illusions. I would show him pictures of heroes and horses when he was a child, and he would laugh in delight and say that one day he would grow up to be just like them."

A gust of wind snatched Nia's hood off her head. Pulling her cloak closer around her, she helped Nico to his feet and led him back inside the castle.

"Once," he continued, "there was a great celebration and the castle was filled with foreigners. They came from faraway lands, bearing gifts that dazzled the king and his son. The prince walked among them, looking at everything and asking hundreds of questions about them until the merchants became unsettled, fearing the prince's displeasure. Then an old woman with a veil hiding her face beckoned to him and placed a simple wooden box in his hands. 'What is it?' he asked. The woman waved her hands over the box and opened it. It was empty. The prince laughed and thanked her, then returned to his seat at his father's side."

Nia frowned. "I don't understand. What was the box for?"

Nico chuckled as he lowered himself into a chair before the hearth. A fire sprang to life and he sighed in pleasure as its steady warmth seeped into his old bones. "It was only a box. But as she waved her hands over it, she slipped a colorful stone into his hand. Saeran spent the rest of the night trying to learn the trick."

"I assume there is lesson to be learned from this story," Nia encouraged. She filled a basin with hot water and placed it on the floor for Nico to soak his aching feet.

"The lesson is, child, if you keep searching for answers about the obvious, you will miss the true treasure. There is no point to worrying about the prince's reaction to you. What you should be worrying about is what sort of king he'll make."

The way he looked at her as he said it, Nia knew he'd seen that very fear in her mind. Rather than confirm her insecurities, she said with confidence, "A good one."

Nico raised a brow in question.

"He will have me to advise him, will he not?" She grinned with humor she didn't feel.

Startled by her answer, Nico laughed, shaking his head at her impudence. His apprentice had grown into a unique woman. Though she hid beneath her cloak most days, she was beautiful as few women were. She had the easy charm and playfulness of a child, yet her mind was as ancient as his own. She worried, at times too much, about things that rarely plagued even the king himself. Nia had become like a daughter to Nico, and she was more than worthy to serve as Saeran's advisor.

But would the prince be worthy of her advice?

Nico had glanced into the future, and what he'd seen troubled him.

Nia poured wine into two goblets and gave one to Nico. "It's strong. I think this should be a day of celebration."

"Wisely said," Nico praised, bringing the goblet to his thirsty lips. He ached. In his body as well as his mind. For Nia's sake he had stayed longer than he should have. He wanted to be there to present her at court as his successor. Nia should not have to face that on her own. But the effort was taking a toll on him. It wouldn't be long now.

Glancing at his apprentice, he felt at peace. Not because his worries left him, but because Nia exuded serenity. She was the calm in a raging storm. She would do the same for the prince and help him lead the kingdom. Nico had chosen well when he'd brought her under his care. At the age of nine, small and starved, an orphan with no recollection of where she'd come from, she'd proven herself capable of much more than either of them had anticipated.

"They've not yet hung the mistletoe," he remarked absently.

"They will do it before the prince's arrival," Nia told him. "Would you like to see?" As with any ritual at Midwinter, the hanging of mistletoe would be a celebration all on its own.

Nico shook his head. "Not tonight," he said, closing his eyes to hide his sorrow. "I think I will rest awhile before the prince's banquet." Before he would present Nia. As much as it pained him, he could not wait any longer. After tomorrow, Nia would no longer be his charge and he would no longer be needed.

Nia kissed his brow. "Sleep now," she said, covering him with a blanket. "I will wake you when the time comes."

* * *

"Stable the horses," the cloaked rider said, and without waiting to see his orders obeyed, he ran up the stairs into the great hall. The guards changing shifts grew wide eyed when they beheld him. He smiled in greeting and held a finger to his lips to silence them.

It was good to come in from the cold. The sun had set not long ago, but when it did it took all warmth and comfort with it. Stripping his gloves and cloak, he paused by a hearth to warm his hands. The journey had wearied him. He glanced at the chair nearby, wanting nothing more than to rest awhile, but he knew he'd be asleep the moment he sat down and there was important business to attend to.

Shaking off some of the winter's chill, he continued on his path, up the stairway and to the royal wing. A long hallway stood dark before him, all the torches extinguished for the night, but he could see well enough by the light of the moon. He traced the tapestries with a reverent hand

as he passed, recalling fond memories of hiding behind them. The servants always pretended they couldn't see his feet poking out.

At the very end was a set of double doors. The guards who stood watch before them during times of war and unrest were gone, no longer needed now that peace had been restored. He grasped the handles and shoved the portals open.

As he'd suspected, the chamber was lit with candles and the king himself paced before the hearth, tugging at his beard.

"What weighty business troubles your mind, my king, to furrow your brow this late at night?" he asked, deepening his voice and biting back a grin.

King Manfred started and spun around to stare at him, but the moment recognition dawned, the ruler of Wilderheim rushed forward to embrace him. "My son," he cried. "My boy!"

Ceremonies were for kings. There would be time enough for them tomorrow and the next day, and the next. After ten years, this was all Saeran had wanted. To embrace his father without crowds of witnesses watching their every move and gesture.

"I'm home," he said as his father wept with joy.