



magεborn:
the final
redemption

by
michael g. manning

**Mageborn:
The Final Redemption**

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Chapter 1

“The King is in a delicate situation,” explained Rose. “There are rumors that Celior and Karenth have returned, and the church is feeling bold now that...” she let the words trail off, unfinished.

The Countess di’Cameron was irritated. Her friend Rose’s continual reminders were unwelcome, and she was tired of the delicacy that the other woman continued to show whenever the topic of Mordecai’s death came up. “Now that Mordecai is dead,” said Penny, finishing the sentence for her. “Just say it, Rose. I’m tired of everyone tip-toeing around the tragedy.”

Rose’s eyes flashed with anger for a moment, but she suppressed the emotion. “It isn’t easy for me either, Penny. None of us really know how to proceed under these circumstances.”

“I don’t care how *delicate* the situation is, I’ll gut the first pompous fop that even hints that I should remarry!” barked Penny.

“No one has suggested that,” replied Rose hastily, trying to placate her. “It’s only been six months, no one would dare. I just want you to be aware that it *will* happen, probably within days of the anniversary of his death.”

“Damned vultures!” spat Penny, not making any attempt to seem lady-like. “The very notion of a bunch of insipid lordlings sitting around, waiting for a full year to pass before they begin making attempts to steal his lands—makes me sick.”

Lady Rose blanched a bit at the harsh words, though she completely understood the sentiment. “Your son will still inherit, but they will be clamoring to put someone with proper breeding and experience in charge of your estate.”

“Because I’m a woman.”

Rose nodded, “That—and the fact that you were born a commoner.”

“I still don’t care. I’ll castrate the first one to suggest it,” said Penny menacingly. Her hand drifted unconsciously to her sword as she spoke. Since Mordecai’s death she had taken to wearing it constantly, along with the enchanted mail he had made for her.

“You should care!” said Rose emphatically. “If you stick your head in the ground and try to ignore this, you won’t like the results. You have to plan ahead if you want to get the best out of this situation. You have children to consider.”

“This has *nothing* to do with the children, and everything to do with greed,” insisted Penny.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” argued Rose. “James will be forced to act if you don’t find your own solution after a year or so has passed.” She was referring to James Lancaster, the King of Lothion.

“He wouldn’t dare. Genevieve wouldn’t let him,” countered Penny.

Lady Rose took a deep breath. “The Queen understands the political situation just as well as he does, her personal feelings won’t be a factor.”

“He’s the *King*, Rose. If he doesn’t go along they can’t force me to marry.”

“The four churches are coming back into power now that Mordecai is gone. James’ seat on the throne is already growing precarious. He can’t afford to be stubborn now, or the Lords will rebel. Rather than make things worse by sheltering you, he will want

to make use of you to strengthen his position,” explained Rose.

“That’s absolutely disgusting,” declared Penny. The King had been Mordecai’s uncle. She and Mort had been close friends with the entire royal family. “I can’t believe he would try to use me that way.”

Rose sighed, “You’re looking at this backwards. It’s an awkward situation for everyone. James loves you, but circumstances will force his hand. *You* should be thinking ahead, to find a way to help him and simultaneously put your children in a more advantageous position.”

Penny closed her eyes and gritted her teeth, trying to hold back tears of rage and frustration. Once she had herself under control, she replied in a quiet voice, “We should talk about something else for a while.”

Rose pursed her lips, sensing her friend’s dangerous mood. She knew it would do little good to push Penny any further. “How are the twins doing today?” she asked. Talk of children was often the easiest way to shift their conversations to more comfortable topics.

Letting out the breath she had been unconsciously holding, Penny relaxed slightly. “Moira still seems to be handling it well. She cries now and then, but she has accepted the situation. Matthew—I’m not sure if he will ever understand. He still insists that his father is alive.”

“It’s natural to want to deny something so terrible,” observed Rose, “but he will have to face the truth eventually.”

“He won’t listen to me,” added Penny. “The last time I tried to explain it, he got belligerent and angry. I’m afraid if I keep insisting, it will only drive him farther from me. He won’t say it, but I know he believes I somehow forced his father to leave.”

“That’s nonsense,” declared Rose. “Even at his age he has enough sense to know that simply isn’t true.”

“I’m not so sure. The last thing he saw was me pushing Mordecai away, right before Dorian drew his sword to protect us. How is a child to understand that?” asked Penny.

“Perhaps it would help if Dorian talks to him,” suggested Rose. “He might respond better to a man, and he knows that they were best friends.”

“I think that would be a good idea. It certainly couldn’t hurt,” agreed Penny.

“He doesn’t want to believe that Daddy is dead,” said Moira unexpectedly from behind her mother. She had entered so quietly that neither of the two women had noticed her presence.

Penny turned and pulled her daughter close. “You shouldn’t be sneaking up on your mother. How long have you been listening?”

Moira rubbed her cheek against Penny’s shoulder, “Just since you said that Matthew thinks you made Daddy leave, but I know that isn’t true. My other mommy told me what happened.”

This was the first time she had mentioned anything about Moira Centyr. The ancient remnant of her mother had appeared during Mordecai’s last battle and had protected them from the leader of the shiggreth. As far as Penny knew, the stone lady was unable to speak. She had remained mute during the entire event, until at the last she had returned to the earth, leaving no trace of her presence behind. “She spoke to you?” asked Penny, surprised. “Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“I did,” answered Moira.

Penny started to argue the point with her, but as she cast her thoughts back to that day, she realized that it was entirely possible she hadn't been listening. She hadn't been at her best after... She caught herself there and pushed that thought aside, she had done enough crying for several lifetimes already. *Focus on your daughter*, she thought. "What did she tell you, sweetheart?"

"She said that she heard me calling her, that she would protect us," said Moira calmly.

Rose interrupted then, "I never heard her speak. How did she talk to you, Moira?"

Pointing to her temple, Moira answered, "In here, I could hear her voice in my head. I asked her to protect Daddy too, but she said she wasn't strong enough anymore; that Daddy told her to save us instead."

Tears started in Penny's eyes. She turned her head to look away, her throat too constricted to speak.

"What else did she say?" asked Rose, continuing the conversation while Penny struggled to regain her composure.

Moira paused for a moment, hesitating. She could sense her mother's sadness easily enough, and her magesight made it easy to see the tears Penny was hiding when she turned away. She thought for a second before answering carefully, "She said she loved me, and that she was glad I had such a good mommy to take care of me. She told me to be brave for Momma, especially if—something happened to Daddy."

"How did you know she was your mother?" said Penny, no longer trying to hide her tears. She and Mordecai had told Moira of her special past and how she had been given to them, but to her knowledge Moira had never seen the remnant of her actual mother before.

"I just did. She used to watch me sometimes, when I was little, but I couldn't hear her talk back then. You told me about her before, so I knew it was her," replied Moira, as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

Penny hugged her daughter tightly, unable to contain her emotions.

Moira returned the embrace, patting her mother's back with small hands. "I miss Daddy too, Momma."

Chapter 2

Grey light filtered through the opening to the cave as I slowly became aware of my surroundings. I was lying on stony ground, within a shallow niche in a hillside. It barely merited being called a cave, since it was more of a deep undercut.

How long I had lain there was a mystery to me. I seemed to be covered in a thick layer of leaves and assorted detritus. Sitting up, I brushed the loose debris from my shoulders and hair, and then I realized it wasn't leaves at all. The desiccated bodies of hundreds, no—thousands, of insects, had piled up around and over me.

“What the hell?” I said aloud, before reaching up to touch my jaw in surprise. When I had given myself over to fatigue and weariness, my mouth had been a ruin, utterly incapable of speech. Now it seemed to be perfectly fine. Rising from the mound of dead insects, I began hastily brushing myself off, while simultaneously checking to see if my other wounds had healed. They had.

I struggled to remember how I had come to be there. After my ill-fated battle with Thillmaris, Gareth Gaelyn, the dragon, had flown me to safety, for my family and friends wanted me dead. Or perhaps I was already dead? I shook my head in confusion. *I certainly don't feel dead*, I thought to myself.

The dragon had taken me to the southeastern foothills, at the edge of the Elentir Mountains, a distance many miles and at least five days travel (by mundane means) from Albamarl. The journey had taken Gareth less than a half day's flight, even burdened with my extra weight. After landing, he had sought to engage me in conversation, an odd behavior for the normally antisocial dragon, and I had been less than receptive.

The emotions I held after my last parting from my family were dark and soul-crushing. Logically I understood their fear and the excellent reasoning behind Dorian and Penny's decision to destroy me. If the circumstances were reversed I most certainly would have done the same. Still, logic and reason did nothing to ease the pain. My heart still held the image of Penny's face engraved within it, the look of revulsion in her eyes after my hand had touched her cheek. It had been etched, as if by acid, upon my soul.

Depression had overtaken me during the flight to the mountains, and once there I had rebuffed Gareth's attempts at communication. My body had still been broken and battered, resisting my attempts to heal it. In fact, I had been unable to use any power at all. The source of my aythar, the wellspring of my soul, had dried up, to be replaced by an infinitely dark void, an aching emptiness.

Filled with sorrow and weary beyond belief, I had sent the dragon away. In part I had done so out of a desire for solitude, and also for fear that, in my weakness he might take his aystrylin from me by force. I had stolen the small figurine from his ancestral home and if I were to lose it I would also lose my last and most powerful ally. Perhaps *ally* wasn't the best word choice though, for I had coerced Gareth Gaelyn into servitude with the threat of using his aystrylin to forcibly return his humanity. *Servant*—that was a better term for our relationship.

Tired, and growing weaker with each passing minute, I had wandered into the rocky

hills, seeking a quiet place to rest. The cave, if it could be called that, had been the best place I could find, and I had crawled into it without hope of recovery. In reality, I had hoped to die. I didn't know the limits of the curse I had taken upon myself, but it seemed reasonable that if I grew weak enough, eventually I might expire from simple lack of energy.

Apparently, that thought had been naïve.

"I'm still here," I said, speaking aloud again. Interestingly, my depression seemed to have vanished along with my injuries. A strange feeling of calm had descended over my inner world, as if a veil had shadowed my painful feelings. Curious, I turned my thoughts deliberately to Penny and the children. I probed my last memories of them, searching for the ache of their rejection, in much the same manner that someone might probe the painful socket of a lost tooth with their tongue, even though they know it will be painful to touch.

I found nothing.

My heart had grown numb, or perhaps grey, as empty as the black void I saw within myself whenever I turned my magesight inward. My emotions had drained away along with my energy, leaving me an empty husk. *And yet I am alive and whole once more, with enough strength to move easily*, I thought silently. *Well, maybe not alive.*

It was at that point that I realized I also had no feelings of disgust, as I most certainly should have had. *I just woke up covered in dead roaches, centipedes, ants, and...* I kicked at the mound of dead things, shifting it with my foot to see what else it might contain. Along with the insects I discovered an assortment of mice, a snake, and largest of all, a dead fox. Most of the bodies had been perfectly preserved, as if they had dried out slowly without rotting or putrefaction. Only the fox seemed fresh, still warm to the touch.

"I must smell terrible," I observed, though there was no one to listen. Sniffing the air I could detect nothing rotten however, just the smell of dry dirt mixed with the fresh scent of the forest blowing toward the hills. *Touching me killed them, and did so in such a thorough manner that they didn't even rot. My body must have drawn the life from everything that came into contact with it, even the fox.*

Considering the fox, and its obviously recent demise, I figured it must have been what finally brought me to consciousness.

"Too bad for you," I said to the fox as I rubbed my now functional jaw. My internal numbness made it impossible to even enjoy my own sarcasm. After thinking for a few minutes I began walking west, traveling in the direction that would take me back to more populated areas. I had no real desire to do so, and I almost chose to head farther into the mountains, but I knew there were things I had to do. My normal motivations were completely absent, but no other course of action held any appeal to me either.

I considered calling the dragon to carry me, but I decided against it. I was in no hurry. Instead I took my time, walking carefully through the rocky terrain. The morning sunshine failed to warm me, as if it was reluctant to linger on my skin. It fell upon me and illuminated my surroundings, but it still left me cold.

Birdsong filled the air, cheerful as ever, but I felt no joy. The world had turned to ash; grey and flavorless. My sense of smell still seemed to operate, but my internal state rendered it meaningless. *This could get really boring*, I thought, but even that failed to bother me.

I traveled without stopping, without rest, walking onward through both dawn and dusk, heedless of whether it was day or night. My magesight made daylight irrelevant, and I never seemed to tire, so I kept moving. I was untouched by hunger or cold, and I wondered idly if I would ever need to eat; thus far the idea seemed unappealing.

Days passed and the land smoothed, becoming gentler while the trees grew more densely. Eventually I decided to try sleeping, but it proved to be a futile exercise. I lay in the darkness, hidden under leafy boughs that shaded me from even the moonlight, but sleep wouldn't come. My thoughts kept circling, turning over past events, and pondering the future. In the end, I rose and began walking again. Without the need for sleep or physical rest there was little difference in walking and lying still.

Over time, I became gradually aware of dim connections between my inner void and certain distant *others*. My best guess was that I had assumed Thillmaris' connections to the other shiggreth. The spell weaving that I had stolen from him probably acted as a sort of central fulcrum for the other undead he had created. I wondered idly whether it might enable me to control them, but I didn't bother testing the theory. It seemed pointless either way.

My first surprise came early one morning as I passed listlessly through the trees. My feet had brought me ever closer to Albamarl, though I had no real desire to see the city again. I simply had nothing better to do. My travel through the forest had brought me to the Myrtle River, the same river that would eventually pass by the capital. Following it simplified my journey, but it also brought me close to the various human villages that were built on its shores.

I had just skirted one small hamlet in the early predawn hours. Confident that there were no other humans within a distance of at least a mile or two, I had turned my thoughts inward, ignoring my surroundings while my body made its way, following the lightly wooded riverbank. It was a state similar to sleeping, but it brought no comfort or true rest. Instead, my thoughts merely circled, repeating past events and memories before my inner observer. Watching those memories, I felt nothing.

So absorbed was I, that I very nearly walked into a bear before I noticed its presence. A warning grunt brought my attention back to my surroundings where I found myself standing a scant two feet from a very large brown wall of fur, muscle, and teeth. Somehow my approach had startled the bear as well, for he jerked and rose to his hind legs at almost the same time.

That's a big animal, I noted mentally. Even fear seemed to have taken a vacation. Without stopping to consider that my magic was gone, I spoke, "*Shibal*." Then I had the familiar sensation of aythar moving and the massive creature slumped to the ground.

I felt slightly weaker as well.

It seems my magic isn't entirely gone after all, I thought. Using my magesight I tried to look inward once more, and as before, I saw the same black void that had replaced my center. It seemed different though, as if it contained an energy of its own. *The antithesis of aythar*, I decided. Perhaps I had accumulated the power from the animals that had died around me while I slept in the cave. There wasn't any way I could be sure.

"Yes there is," I said to myself then, and glancing down I appraised the bear slumbering before me. Reaching out I put my hand on its shoulder, and immediately I

could feel its strength pouring into me. The great beast was a wellspring of aythar, and within its body I could sense the fire that represented the source of its vitality. Without conscious effort, my body drew at that source, pulling and absorbing everything there. The sensation I experienced during this was akin to being thrust into a fast moving river, a rushing cold sensation as the power flooded into me.

My emotions remained dead however, and I felt no pity as the majestic creature's inner fire dwindled and died under my hands. It was dead now, an empty lump of flesh, though I still retained a thin, dark connection with it. Even as I watched I could sense it beginning to draw life from other things around it. Plants, small insects, and things even tinier—everything in contact with the bear's corpse was dying, while a small dark core within the beast began to grow. It was becoming a monster, an undead beast similar to those that Harold and I fought years before, when we encountered Thillmaris within an underground cave.

Even numb as I was, I had no desire to follow in his evil footsteps. With a small effort of will I severed the link between myself and the dead bear. The darkness within it faltered and began to fade. Within moments it was nothing more than a corpse. Clearly any creatures that might be created by my *feeding* were connected to the spell-weaving that maintained me. Sever that link, and they withered away. I wondered about the other shiggreth that were linked to me.

I hadn't created them personally, but the links were still there. If they created others, were those linked to them, or to me? If I managed to destroy myself, would it end the entire miserable chain of cursed undead? Would humanity be safe then? I had too many questions, and even my best guesses were full of uncertainty.

Do I care? Do I want to die? I wondered, but even those questions were devoid of feeling. I pondered those thoughts as I continued traveling, but without my emotions I simply couldn't decide. Eventually I gave up and shifted my attention to exploring my ability to drain the energy from living things.

The bear had given me an incredible amount of strength, possibly more than I normally would have possessed if I had been alive again. The main drawback, as far as I could tell, was that it was limited. Once I used the power I had taken, it was gone. Unlike my natural aythar, it didn't renew itself with time. That wasn't too much of a limitation however, so long as I didn't mind killing things, and given my present state of mind, that didn't seem like a real problem.

I knew that soon enough I would be reaching Albamarl, and while I still couldn't find any real reason or purpose behind traveling there, I knew that if I was recognized, or if someone discovered my nature, I would be forced to fight those whom I had once loved and protected—or let them destroy me. None of those thoughts really worried me, though I was well aware that they should. Rather than leave things to chance I decided to experiment with my new power.

I killed numerous small animals, putting them to sleep first so that I could touch them. I tried simply willing myself *not* to draw the aythar from them, but that failed completely. My life-drain seemed to be an entirely involuntary thing, requiring only physical contact. After a while I stopped using animals; plants were much simpler to find and didn't require any spells to keep them from escaping. The small plants I used didn't have a lot of aythar to offer, but traveling through a forest there was an almost

endless supply.

Eventually I learned the trick to not killing them. By creating a personal shield around myself, I could keep myself from inadvertently absorbing aythar. It was very similar to the shields I had used for years before my unfortunate transformation. As long as I kept it close against my skin, it was virtually undetectable to a non-mage, even if they touched me, and it made sure that no true physical contact occurred. I also discovered that I could alter its permeability with a certain amount of effort, which allowed me to drain energy more slowly. *It might make it possible to feed without always killing the victim*, I noted.

Technically I could do that now by limiting the duration of contact, but in practice it was hard to force myself to stop once I had actually touched something with my bare skin.

I thought about that and many other things as I walked on through the bright days and empty nights.

Chapter 3

Albamarl was much as I remembered it, and yet it still seemed different. The multitude of buildings faced in rose granite did nothing to warm me. The city felt just as dead as I was, much like everything else I had encountered. *I seem doomed to a cold empty existence*, I told myself silently, *and I can't even summon enough feeling to be depressed about it.*

As I wandered the city avenues in the late afternoon sun I thought of Thillmaris. He had seemed full of rage when we had fought. Where had his anger come from? Surely after years trapped in the body of a small boy he couldn't have still retained that much emotion? That was disregarding consideration of the thousands of years he had spent in some sort of bodiless limbo, yet he had been angry.

"I'm the last lore-warden of the She'Har and my people created the gods. No matter what your bestial kind achieves, you'll never be more than animals in our eyes!" Thillmaris had told me near the end. The bitter hatred in his voice couldn't have been faked. He had told me something else as well, which had turned out to be an uncanny prediction of my fate, *"Everyone gets a happy ending but you."*

"At least I survived," I responded aloud to the memory. It didn't feel like a victory, though. It felt like—*nothing*.

"You look lonely," said an unfamiliar woman's voice. "Why would a handsome young man like yourself be without a lady friend?"

The words should have startled me, but they didn't, I just hadn't expected anyone to speak to me. I had wandered into one of Albamarl's seedier districts, near the river docks. A glance at the woman and her overdone rouge told me quickly enough why she had called out to me. She was a prostitute.

"I'm married," I answered tonelessly, although the thought made me wonder. *Was I?* If I had truly died Penny would be considered a widow now, free to seek a new husband. I knew the thought should upset me, but like everything else it failed to stir my listless heart.

While I mulled those thoughts over the woman moved closer. She was near enough now that I'd have been uncomfortable if I were still capable of such a thing. Her breath was warm and I could see fine wrinkles around her eyes. She was probably a bit over thirty and a hard life had left its marks upon her. *How long before she can't continue this profession?* I wondered.

"You're a quiet one, love. Married doesn't mean much around here," she told me, leaning closer and putting her hand playfully on my chest. "Why don't you let me take you home and warm you up? You seem cold." She tilted her head as she spoke, looking at me through half-lidded eyes.

Her actions were meant to tempt me, of that I had no doubt, but of course they had no discernible effect. I focused my will tightly; making sure my shield would prevent me from inadvertently drawing her life-force away if she happened to brush my skin. "I'm not lonely," I answered bluntly. "You shouldn't touch me."

My words made her pause for a second and her eyes locked on mine. "I've seen eyes like that before, love, though never so sad as yours. Everyone's lonely, love. Why

not let Sweet Myrtle ease your pain for a while?” She lifted her hand to my cheek. “So cold,” she remarked, “let me warm you up. Surely a man like you can afford to sit by my fire for a while?”

I had forgotten my attire. Tattered and bedraggled as my garments were, they gave some indication of my former wealth. The material was too good and the tailoring had been exemplary, even though they had been traveling clothes. “Please...,” I began, intending to finish with ‘leave me alone’, but I didn’t get to finish. Rising on her toes, Myrtle put her lips to mine.

My shield protected her for a split second, until her tongue darted out to slip between my lips, and then something remarkable happened. Aythar unlike any I had experienced before, poured into me filling me with warmth; the world seemed to grow brighter around me. Her body jerked for a second as her life began flowing into me and her hands rose to push against my chest, an instinctive response to try and save herself from the empty void within me. My arms had already locked around her though, and I held the back of her head with my right hand.

An ecstatic rush of emotion flowed through me, coloring the world around me in brilliant hues that washed away the empty grey that had existed before. Passion, an emotion I hadn’t felt since awakening, built within me, and impossibly I felt my heart begin to beat. My own tongue was moving now as I continued the kiss that Myrtle had begun. She began to sag in my arms, but I hadn’t had enough, so I cradled her, lowering her slowly to the ground.

I wanted it all.

The taste of her lips, the softness of her flesh aroused parts of me that I had thought gone forever. In the pleasure of that moment, I considered undressing her so that I could explore the secrets of her body. I hadn’t felt the joy of such intimacy since...

...Penny.

I released her suddenly, letting her sag senseless to the cold cobblestone road. My face twisted with pain as the enormity of what I had lost crashed over me. My breath came in short gasps as I struggled to contain the torrent of grief that threatened to overwhelm me. How had I forgotten this? *I’ve lost everything.*

I crouched there, stricken with a sadness too great to endure for an unknowable time, before eventually remembering the woman lying beside me. My initial fear was that she might be dead, but my senses quickly dispelled that notion. Her chest was moving as she breathed, her heart still beat, and within I could sense the flickering of her aythar. She would recover.

Staring at her face I saw her in a new light. Where before she had seemed unimportant, I now felt the urgency of her heartbeat, the precious struggle for life that continued even as I watched her body working to recover from the life-sapping kiss we had shared. *I almost killed her*, I thought remorsefully. *My existence can only bring death now; no good can come from it.* At that the images of my children came unbidden to my mind, assailing me with another barrage of sorrow as I remembered their smiles, their love, and their trust.

“My touch would kill them,” I said aloud, as if I was speaking to the unconscious Myrtle lying before me.

“What’s going on here?!”

The voice behind me was loud and masculine. My senses identified the speaker as a

member of the city guard, one of Lord Hightower's men, before I rose and turned to face him. "This woman seems to have fainted, guardsman," I responded, using a tone of command that was almost instinctive to me now. "Give me a hand and perhaps we can find someone who knows her." I stared boldly into his face hoping he would respond to my authority without asking too many questions.

That proved to be a mistake. While I didn't recognize him, the guardsman's face showed astonishment and recognition as he saw my features. "Count Cameron?" he said hesitantly before stopping with a look of confusion. "Begging your pardon, Your Excellency, but..." he paused awkwardly.

"What?" I asked, letting my annoyance show. *Of all the rotten luck, encountering one of the guardsmen who would recognize me!*

"You are supposed to be dead, my lord. There was a huge funeral, mourners..." the guard stared at me before finishing, "... the King gave a speech."

"Listen, this really isn't the best time for this," I told him.

"They said the shiggreth..." the man stopped, and then his eyes flicked downward to stare at the unmoving prostitute. "She's dead isn't she?"

I could see the alarm growing in his eyes as he backed away, one hand scrabbling for something around his neck. Before I could say more, he brought out a whistle and began blowing on it, piercing my ears with its shrill cry, summoning aid. He was calling for the watch.

"*Shibal*," I said quickly, but the spell had no effect. I had forgotten that Walter and I had provided the city guard with protective necklaces years ago. People were staring at me now, looking out of windows and stepping out of doorways. I would be surrounded soon, and any nearby guardsmen would already be running in this direction.

"Son of a bitch," I muttered angrily, and then I spoke a few hasty words, summoning up a thick fog. I put a lot of force into it, and within moments the surrounding area was blanketed in a thick and impenetrable cloud.

People cried out in fear at the unnatural mist, while the guard continued blowing on his whistle.

Ignoring them all, I bent down to lift the unconscious woman, making certain my shield was in place before I touched her. She couldn't survive another of my life draining touches, nor was I sure my sanity would endure it either. Her aythar had filled me with something new, emotion. It had brought me to life again, though I could tell my heart beat was beginning to slow already.

She seemed light as I cradled her in my arms, carrying her through the fog. I had no idea where she lived or whether it was safe to simply leave here somewhere so I just kept walking, renewing the mists whenever they began to thin and using my magesight to avoid contact with the few people that ventured into the fog. An alarm had gone up, presumably that a shiggreth was loose in the city, though I wasn't sure.

What I did know was that nearly every door was locked, and most people had shuttered their windows as if a storm was brewing. My magesight revealed many people huddling in their homes, a lot of them praying to the shining gods, which mildly irritated me.

It also felt good to be irritated. The feelings and sensations that accompanied my emotions, *any* emotions, were so incredible as to make it difficult to remain properly irritated. Even my heartache was a welcome change to the endless grey I had lived

with for the past few weeks.

“It feels good to be alive, even when sad and miserable,” I noted. The thought was a new revelation to me. After enduring so much time without passion, motivation, desire, or any other sort of true feeling, I was learning now that even negative emotions were preferable to none at all. “Emotions are like flavors, sweet, salty, bitter... each has its place, and each is worth experiencing,” I posited out loud.

I was brought out of my reverie by a groan from Myrtle, who I still carried in my arms. I watched her carefully, and felt sure that she would awaken soon. Putting her carefully down I moved away, far enough that her eyes wouldn’t be able to find me in the fog, though I remained close enough to assist if she turned out to need more help.

Waiting, I watched as she gradually regained consciousness. Using a bit more of my stolen magic, I disguised myself as an old man before creating a wind to disperse the dense fog that cloaked the streets. In the distance I had already sensed armed parties of guardsmen beginning to walk the streets. I knew there might soon be Knights of Stone among them, if any were in the city. It was time for me to leave.

I began working my way out of the immediate area, all the while keeping my magesight trained on Myrtle. I had to be sure she made it home safely. I walked slowly, in keeping with my disguise, and I managed to leave the dockside district without being stopped more than once. The guardsmen asked a few simple questions before letting me continue on my way.

My inner eye however, remained on the wayward woman who was now resting in a small apartment. She had trudged there wearily after awakening where I had left her. I made a mental note of where she lived, though I couldn’t say why I did so.

Once I had reassured myself that the woman would be alright, I turned my thoughts back to my family and thoughts of the past. They were painful memories, primarily because they represented things I could no longer have. My only solace was that they were safe. If nothing else, I had protected them, and one more threat had been removed. Thillmarius had been given his final rest and the shiggreth, while still dangerous, were under my control—maybe.

I hadn’t tested the notion yet, but I was already certain I could find them through the links between them and the spell-weaving that now maintained my existence. Such links might enable me to command them, or put them to other uses. It was even possible I could destroy them without bothering to track them down. At the very least, if I managed to find a way to end my own cursed life and undo the spell-weaving that bound me, they should pass away as well.

I intended to test those theories before doing anything drastic though, and at the moment I wasn’t entirely sure I wanted to escape the world anymore. My experience with Myrtle had given me something to savor, a bit of hope. Perhaps things didn’t have to be as dark and bleak as I had imagined.

What if I just took a little, from lots of different people?

If I only needed power, plants and animals were enough, though humans seemed to be a much richer source. What I worried about was the loss of my humanity. The intensity of my emotions had already dulled a bit and I assumed they would continue to fade. How long before I would be completely dull and lifeless again? Once I had returned to that condition could I fully trust myself to follow the wishes of my more human self? What if I killed someone while trying to recharge my humanity?

Perhaps Penny would help me, I thought suddenly. With that thought came a rush of feelings, along with an unbidden fantasy... kissing her. My experience with Myrtle had been unexpected and overwhelming. What if I could control myself? The thought brought with it a powerful desire, a terrible craving. I knew then what would happen. My feelings would overpower my senses. My desire for my wife, more than anyone else, would be compounded and corrupted by my need for human aythar. *Touch her and there will be no stopping.*

I clenched my jaw in frustration. For her safety, as well as my children's, I would have to stay away from all of them. *As long as I exist—as long as there are shiggreth, they will never be safe.* There could be only one outcome, and it wouldn't be a happy one, at least not for me. The only good news was that my friends and family already thought of me as dead, so at least they wouldn't suffer any additional trauma at my passing.

There were still several obstacles in my path however. First and foremost being Mal'goroth himself, the dark god had to be dealt with before I could allow myself to rest. Millicenth and Doron also needed a permanent resolution of some sort; otherwise I'd be leaving my friends and family at their mercy.

They were created to serve mankind, not threaten it, I thought to myself. Memories began surfacing as I followed that observation to its source. No longer bound by my fear of the past I searched for the information I knew had to be locked within. Thillmaris had said that his people created their gods, but that was only the beginning. *We followed their example and created our own—but when?*

That question brought an image forth in my mind, a woman's face, one I recognized, Moira Centyr. I had never seen her human face in life, but one of my ancestors had. *She was beautiful*, I noted, comparing her mentally to my daughter. The resemblance couldn't be denied. *The gods couldn't have been created without her family's special gift.*

I began following a chain of ideas and thoughts, ideas that had led to many conversations between Moira Centyr and the man she had loved centuries before, the ancestor I had been named after.

Chapter 4

The Countess di’Cameron sat in her study, staring out the window that illuminated the small writing desk. She was in Albamarl, staying at the Illeniel house. The Thornbears had planned a visit to see Rose’s parents, the Hightowers, and Dorian’s mother, Elise Thornbear. Lady Thornbear had taken up residence in the capital recently, to remain near her close friend, the Queen.

Rather than stay in Cameron alone, Penny had chosen to make the trip with them, offering the use of her house while in the capital. In reality however, she simply hadn’t wanted to be alone. Rose had a house of her own in Albamarl, but she had chosen to stay with Penny anyway, on the pretext that Gram preferred to enjoy time with Moira and Matthew.

All of them understood the truth however; no one wanted Penelope spending much time alone.

They had made the trip using the World Road, which had been operating steadily for nearly a year now. They could have had one of the Prathions transport them directly, but Penny had preferred to make the trip using the road, possibly for nostalgic reasons. The majority of their travel had consisted of a half day’s ride from Washbrook to Lancaster, where one of the entrances to the World Road was located, followed by a short ride from there to the capital itself.

A noise from downstairs told her that Rose and Dorian had probably returned. Peter arrived at the door of the study a minute later to confirm her suspicion. “The Thornbears have returned, my lady, along with a guest, Lord Stephen, son of Earl Balistair,” he informed her.

“What?” snapped Penny, “I specifically told *that woman* I didn’t want any visitors.” By ‘that woman’ she was referring to Rose.

Peter merely pursed his lips, there was no good reply to her statement, nor was one desired.

“Tell them I will be down in a few minutes, I wasn’t prepared to receive a guest,” she added in a flat tone. In truth though, her attire was perfectly acceptable and she had no reason to delay. She simply needed a moment to collect her thoughts and control her irritation.

When she finally appeared downstairs over fifteen minutes had passed, a delay that most would consider rude without good cause, especially when the guest was a nobleman. Penny didn’t care. She found them sitting in the front parlor, sipping tea and eating the dry, thin cakes that were popular as snacks in Albamarl.

Dorian and Rose sat together on the divan, across from Lord Balistair. Despite his occasional awkwardness in the past, Dorian looked entirely comfortable meeting with a fellow peer; he and Rose had both been raised and trained for such occasions. In contrast, while Penny’s rank in the peerage was technically greater, she had been born a commoner. She still had to expend conscious effort to appear relaxed in such company.

Everyone stood upon seeing her. Dorian was the first to speak, “Your Excellency, please forgive the unexpected visitation. May I present Lord Stephen Balistair? He

came here at my insistence.” He added those words to account for their breach of protocol; ordinarily another noble would send a card requesting an introduction before appearing unannounced.

Penny wondered how Rose had managed to maneuver her husband into such a situation. She had no doubt regarding the true source of this unexpected guest. Her eyes appraised the young lord standing before her. Lord Stephen was lean and muscular with tanned features that spoke of extended periods of time in the training yard. He wore a sword, and the calluses on his hands told her he had spent many hours practicing with it. His bearing was military and his height was respectable, slightly above average though a bit under six feet, if Penny had been forced to guess. *Almost as tall as Dorian, though definitely shorter than Mordecai*, she thought to herself before wincing at the pain that observation brought.

She stared into his blue eyes as she replied, “If what Dorian says is true, I cannot hold it against you. You are welcome in my home, Lord Stephen. Please sit.” She made a point of not offering her hand to him in greeting. *Let him fawn over someone else*. Penny could almost feel Rose clenching her teeth at the brusqueness of her response.

Stephen Balistair stood awkwardly for a moment before he realized that Penny had no intention of following the ordinary rules of introduction. “It is a great pleasure to meet you, Countess,” he said, recovering his composure. “I have long been an admirer of your late-husband, if you’ll forgive me for mentioning it.”

Penelope moved past him to take a comfortable chair that would put her farther from where the young nobleman had been sitting than any other seat in the room. “My husband had many admirers and even more enemies, you did not need to present yourself here to tell me that,” she said, rebuffing him.

Stephen’s face flinched slightly at her cold reply, though he kept his expression respectful. Luckily, Rose came to his rescue, “Actually, we encountered Lord Stephen at my father’s house. He had come to relay news of recent disturbances near the docks. After hearing what he had to say, Dorian asked if he would be kind enough to recount his news to you personally.”

Penny glanced at her friend’s face, trying to spot her duplicity. As always, Rose’s face was unreadable. Looking back at Lord Stephen, she noticed a glint of gold on his left hand. *He’s married*, she realized with an inward sigh of relief. She had felt certain this was part of some plan to begin socializing her with the eligible bachelors of the kingdom. Now she merely felt embarrassed to have been so impolite.

“I may have been too harsh. Please overlook my remarks, Lord Stephen. I have not been myself of late,” Penny said, gesturing again for the others to take their seats.

“Given your circumstances recently, I think I can understand something of what you’ve been through, Countess,” responded Lord Stephen.

Penny’s embarrassment evaporated immediately. “I sincerely doubt that,” she answered, struggling to contain a more bitter response.

Dorian’s mouth opened momentarily, as if he wanted to say something on Stephen’s behalf, but a quick nod from Rose cut him off. When he began again a second later it was definitely on a different course, “Stephen has some news that may relate to what happened to Mordecai last year.”

Those words drove out Penny’s subtle wonderings at Rose’s motivation instantly. If

they had come from any other source she might have reacted more skeptically, but Dorian's pain at Mordecai's loss was nearly as great as her own. "Please explain, Lord Stephen, and be quick to the point. You have my full attention," she commanded.

Lord Stephen sat a bit straighter and launched into a quick explanation, "Late this afternoon an alarm was raised in the dockside district. One of the city watch discovered a man leaning over a dead woman near an alleyway. When he approached the man, the stranger straightened and pretended to request assistance."

"What do you mean, pretended?" she asked impatiently.

"The guard knew him on sight having learned his appearance while working at the palace a few years back. He identified the man as the late-Count di'Cameron. Because of this, he was able to recognize his danger before the creature could get within arm's reach of him. He retreated and used his whistle to summon aid," explained Stephen.

Penny's knuckles were white where her hands gripped the arms of her chair, and she struggled to retain her composure. "Were they able to restrain the creature, or did they d—destroy it?" she asked, unable to prevent her voice from cracking slightly.

It was a foolish question. Standard procedures called for immediate cremation of any shiggreth found, regardless of the situation. Stephen's face reflected a deep sympathy as he went on, "No, it summoned a fog and while search parties were organized quickly, it escaped nonetheless."

"And the woman?" she managed.

"Her body had disappeared as well, probably for the reasons that..." Stephan began.

Penny cut him off, "the reasons one would expect when dealing with shiggreth. Did anyone identify her or report someone missing afterward?"

"Not thus far," he replied.

"Do you have any further news?" she questioned.

"No, Countess, and I apologize for being the one to bring you such a painful reminder of..."

She dismissed his apology with a wave of her hand, "My feelings are not your concern. I neither want nor need anyone's sympathy, no matter how well intentioned. Now if you will excuse me I'd like to be alone. I'm *sure* you understand," she said cutting him off in a bitter voice. She stood and started to leave the room, pausing only at the doorway, "If you do receive any more information, please do not hesitate to inform me."

She made it up the stairs and nearly to her bedroom before her exterior calm began to crack, first with a tremble in her breathing, followed soon after by a hot tear on her cheek. She wanted only to be alone, but Rose had followed quickly on her heels. The other woman opened the door and entered the bedroom immediately after her, without waiting for an invitation. They had been friends for many years.

"You were rather hard on Lord Stephen," Rose observed.

Penny used a handkerchief to dab at her eyes before turning to answer her intrusive friend, "Perhaps you will make my apologies for me. I don't seem to be fit for proper society these days, Rose."

"I do understand that, Penny. You know I do," responded Rose, "but there are others out there who can appreciate your loss as well, if you'll take the time to listen to them."

“What do you mean?” asked Penny.

“It was pure coincidence that Lord Stephen brought the news, but the reason Dorian and I asked him to come and repeat it for you directly, is that I thought perhaps you would benefit from hearing his personal story as well. He has suffered in a similar way to what you have,” said Rose.

Penny’s eyes narrowed, “I should have expected you had a secondary motive. Nothing is ever simple with you is it?”

“He lost his wife a few years ago, when several shiggreth slipped into Malvern. He had to order her cremation personally. The two of you have quite a bit in common...,” Rose explained, but her words were cut short by a stinging slap.

Penny’s hand burned from striking her friend. The action had come so quickly it surprised her, and she had barely managed to reign herself in in time to keep the speed and force of the blow from reaching potentially dangerous levels. Even so, a trickle of blood ran from the corner of Rose’s lip where a nail had torn her skin, and her face was already reddening.

“Never Rose! Never again! Do you understand me!? I have had it with these games! If you are truly my friend, then act like it! Stop trying to maneuver me!” yelled Penelope. The rage inside her burned hotter than she could ever remember feeling before.

Despite the pain, Rose’s face remained calm. Blood dripped from her chin as she replied, “I have never been anything but your friend, Penelope. Through fire and blood, childbirth and death, I have always supported you. One of these days perhaps you’ll pull your head out of your ass and realize that sometimes there are things more important than *your loss*—things like your children, your people, and possibly even the friends you are too blind to appreciate!”

Anger and shame warred within Penny in equal portions, making it impossible to think. “Please leave,” she said at last, uttering the only words she could manage.

Moving briskly, Lady Rose stepped out before slamming the door behind her. After she had gone, only the image of her angry blue eyes remained to haunt Penny’s mind.

She spent the next hour struggling with the emotions that seemed to undercut every rational thought she attempted. The idea of Mordecai wandering the city as a shiggreth haunted her. How much did it remember? No one knew exactly how much of the victim’s memories remained. Over the years they had discovered that most didn’t even remember their names, having become nearly mindless creatures of pure hunger, but on a few occasions they had encountered a few that retained the ability to speak and obviously some of their memories. Those were the worst, for they sometimes fooled their former loved ones into trusting them.

Stephen had mentioned a sudden mist, presumably summoned by the shiggreth. In the past only Timothy, the leader of the shiggreth, had possessed any magical capacity, beyond the usual life-draining abilities of his kind. If the undead one that had resulted from Mordecai’s death retained some or all of his powers—the consequences were unthinkable.

Penny’s emotions finally settled, drifting down from anger and confusion to a more tolerable melancholy depression. She also felt embarrassed for her behavior with Rose. While she still felt her anger had been valid, her reaction had been unforgivable. *I owe her an apology*, she thought, grimacing.