

Chapter One

The harsh wind of the Great Berg bit at Darek Takren's ears and fingers. He normally wouldn't have noticed this much, due to his specializing in ice magic; but now that he no longer could use magic, it was impossible to ignore. He slid his hands into the sleeves of his white robes to keep them out of the wind.

Auratus, on the other hand, didn't seem cold at all, despite being an aquarian. She wore the usual green-and-silver uniform that all Institute students did, but she was quite literally radiating a warm temperature—no doubt due to the heat spell she had cast on herself prior to their teleporting from North Academy a few minutes ago—a heat spell that, despite extending to Darek, still didn't make him feel as warm as he should have. Yet even Auratus shivered slightly when a particularly gelid gust of wind tore through, cutting through them both like the tusks of a baba raga.

Darek looked around at their surroundings, as he always did whenever they teleported somewhere new, because in recent days it was more necessary than ever to do that in order to avoid getting killed. The grounds of the Xocionian Monastery—a monastery designed for monks dedicated to serving Xocion, the God of Ice—was completely empty of all monks.

The reason for that was no mystery. Wherever Darek looked, he saw chunks of rock piercing through the icy ground. A nearby storage building had collapsed on itself, and a statue of Xocion himself lying on the ground in pieces, likely knocked over by the shock waves that had shaken Martir after the death of Skimif. The finely carved stone pathway leading from the steps of the Temple to the gates on the other end of the Monastery was cracked and broken in several places, while the gates themselves barely appeared to be standing, holding on only because they had fallen in such a way as to support each other.

The Temple of Xocion itself was still in one piece. It was made entirely out of ice, having been designed ages ago by the first Xocionian Monks who traveled from the Northern Isles to the Great Berg. It looked almost like a castle, with turrets and towers, but much smaller, with a main building with a tall spire in the center that resembled an oversized icicle.

Above the main doorway—which was shut, though not locked—was the Monks' motto, carved in ice: *TO SERVE XOCION WITH ALL OF OUR HEART, SOUL, STRENGTH, AND MIND.*

If that was the only thing we had to do, then life would be so much easier, Darek thought as Auratus and he walked up the steps toward the large ice doors.

Though the doors to the Temple were large and thick, Darek knew he wouldn't have any trouble opening them. As he had done many times before, Darek waved his wand at the doors, expecting them to push open thanks to his mastery over pagomancy.

But nothing happened. The doors stood as closed as ever, making Darek confused for a moment before he heard Auratus's voice in his mind say, *No magic, remember?*

Darek blushed in embarrassment. “Oh ... right.” He had forgotten that he could no longer use magic anymore, not after losing his magical power to Uron a couple of months back. The sight of the ice doors must have triggered an old habit of his, though that didn't lessen the embarrassment of what he had just tried to do.

Thankfully, Auratus did not push the point. She waved her own hand toward the doors and they

opened inwards, albeit slowly, allowing Darek and her to enter without trouble. Though as they entered, Darek noticed how unused the doors appeared, as if they had not been opened regularly.

Of course they haven't, Darek thought. *The Monks have been holed up in here ever since Skimif's death, too afraid to leave or go anywhere else.*

Thinking about the God of Martir's death caused a heavy depression and even panic to settle on his heart before Darek forced the thought away. No time to be afraid or scared. In desperate times like this, you had to be stronger and braver than you normally were, even if you didn't feel like it. *Especially* if you didn't feel like it.

The interior of the Temple of Xocion looked essentially the same as Darek remembered it: High arches, ice sculptures of Xocion in the nooks in the walls, closed doors leading to different rooms (such as the Prayer Room and the Sculpting Room), and a staircase to the left of the doors that led to the second floor. None of that concerned him at the moment, because he knew, from experience, that the Monks were currently gathered in the room at the very end of the Temple lobby, the room known as the Mourning Room.

So he and Auratus strode toward the doors at the end of the Temple's lobby, doors that were smaller than the front doors, small enough that Darek could easily open them with his hands. The interior of the Temple was eerily quiet; at least, until Darek heard the sounds of mourning from the Monks, muffled by the doors of the Mourning Room, coming from the other end of the Temple.

He looked at Auratus. He had gotten better at reading aquarian facial features and body language over the last two months, ever since he and Auratus had started working more closely together. Though she walked as naturally as an aquarian used to swimming underwater could walk on dry land, he could tell by the way her shoulders slumped that she did not believe their current mission was going to be anymore fruitful or successful than their last few attempts had been.

What should we do, then? Darek had asked Auratus once, about a week ago, after their last attempt to convince the Xocionian Monks to join them had failed. *Leave them here, where Uron will eventually get to them? They are my brothers in ice, so I don't have the luxury of abandoning them, even if they are stubborn as icebergs sometimes.*

Auratus had agreed that they needed all the help they could get, but she clearly didn't think that this mission was a good investment in their time. He understood her desire to return to North Academy, but he didn't want to, mostly because he was getting tired of the endless debating over how to deal with Uron among the people there.

We need as many people on our side as possible, Darek thought. *Even if we aren't strong enough to kill Uron, this is better than standing around doing nothing.*

Upon reaching the doors, the mourning of the Monks was louder than ever. They sounded very similar to the howling wind outside, except Darek could distinguish actual words among the Monks' mourning. It was a prayer, a prayer he had memorized over the past month or so after so many visits to the Monastery. As he listened, he could tell they were about halfway through it:

“O great Powers/Please save us/Your gods are scattered and weak/Your world is at its edge/The Fire grows ever closer/It burns away at every island and every god/There is no hope to be found/None, not even in the Wisdom of Xocion/Help us, O great Powers/Help us.”

Darek bit his lips. The 'Fire,' in Xocionian mythology, was the term for the force that was said to end the world in its final days. The Xocionian Monks had taken to identifying Uron with the Fire,

no doubt due to Uron's attempts to destroy Martir. It was a depressing prayer, written by the very first Xocionian Monk, that was supposed to be prayed only in times of great despair.

There were only a couple of times that the prayer had ever been prayed, to Darek's knowledge. Once, around thirty years ago, when the Powers had come to destroy Martir (but had decided not to after being convinced to spare the world by King Malock of Carnag and Skimif, who at the time had been a mortal and not a god); and second, recently, after Skimif's death.

Just hearing that prayer made Darek depressed; however, he shoved the doors open anyway, determined not to let this prayer of sadness continue to sap the confidence and energy from the other Monks.

The scene laid out before him and Auratus was almost exactly like the scene they had seen several times before: Two dozen Xocionian monks, each wearing the same white-and-blue robes that all Xocionian monks wore, lay prostrate on the floor around a massive statue of the God of Ice, a statue said to have been carved by the founder of the Monastery. There used to be more, many more, Monks than the two dozen around here, but when Skimif's death rocked the world, Darek had learned that many had died in the chaos, while many more had simply fled to parts unknown, even though there was nowhere in the known world to flee to.

The Monks did not seem to notice Darek and Auratus's entrance, because they continued to pray just as if the two had not entered:

“Great Xocion/Ruler of Winter and King of Cold/Intercede on behalf of your followers/Implore the Powers to send a savior to our world/Your followers plead with you to fulfill your promises/Prove our faith in you/And we will serve you forevermore.”

One of the Monks, a large burly man named Vian, was actually crying as he prayed. His tears fell down his large cheeks and landed on the ice floor, where they immediately froze. Another Monk, a short elderly woman named Fajan, had both of her hands on the toes of the Xocion statue, without any gloves to keep her hands warm. He could already see the tips of her fingers turning blue from the cold.

It pained Darek to see them like this. Darek had only been a Xocionian Monk himself for about a month before Skimif's death; even so, he had grown close to his brothers and sisters in ice and thought of them as his family, in a way. To see them all in such despair was saddening; to know that they had refused, repeatedly, to listen to his pleas of forming an alliance with them, was depressing.

Nonetheless, Darek walked over to the nearest Monk, a man with a full gray head of hair and a long gray beard named Abbot Carcello, and patted him on the back.

“Abbot?” said Darek, raising his voice to be heard above the Mourning Prayer of the Monks. “It's Darek Takren again. I am here to—”

Without warning, Carcello stood up, causing Darek to step back in surprise. Carcello whirled around to face Darek, his ice blue eyes cold with anger, his fists shaking at his side.

“Get out of here,” Carcello said, pointing over Darek's shoulder at the doors behind them, the grief in his voice vanishing like a rock tossed into the ocean. “You and your aquarian friend. Out.”

Darek had expected Carcello to react a little less than happily at his arrival; nonetheless, Darek didn't back down, despite being completely powerless himself and standing in front of the most powerful pagomancer in all of Martir.

“Can't we at least talk?” said Darek. He gestured over his shoulder toward the open doors. “In

the lobby, where we won't interrupt the other Monks?"

Not that they were in any danger of doing that. Despite Carcello's sharp tone and sudden movements, not a single one of the other Monks had so much as glanced up to see them. They were all too absorbed by the air of despair that seemed to hang over Martir like a heavy fog.

To Darek's relief, Carcello's shoulders slumped and he sighed. "All right. We can talk, but only briefly. I do not have time to listen to any half-cooked, harebrained schemes to save our world from a god-killer like Uron, so we shall make it quick."

Darek nodded and walked out of the Mourning Room with Carcello. Auratus joined them, pulling the doors closed behind them as they left. The prayer of the Monks became muffled once again, although it sounded a little louder now, as if the Monks had raised their voices in an attempt to be better heard by Xocion and the Powers.

Carcello put his hands together in his white sleeves and looked Darek straight in the eye, as he always did whenever he talked to anyone, and asked, "What is your mother's offer now?"

Darek cringed at Carcello's tone. Darek's mother, Jenur Takren, was technically the Magical Superior at the moment, albeit only a temporary one. Carcello knew that, but ever since Skimif's death, he had taken to calling her 'your mother' whenever he spoke to Darek, like he did not really accept her authority as genuine, even though the previous Magical Superior had passed the title on to her prior to his death.

Carcello hadn't always been this way. When Darek had first come to the Xocionian Monastery, he had accepted Mom's position as the Superior, as he had known Mom already and understood that the position was temporary until Skimif chose someone more suited for the position. He had even sent her a letter of congratulations, which Darek remembered because Carcello had asked him to deliver it to her personally.

But ever since Skimif's death, Carcello had been rather hostile toward Mom. Though Darek didn't know for sure, Carcello seemed to think that Mom's authority as Magical Superior was no longer legitimate and, thus had, for all intents and purposes, cut ties with North Academy, despite the Monastery being located very close to that school. It was primarily the Abbot's hostility toward Mom that had made it difficult for Darek and Auratus to convince the Xocionian Monks to work with them.

Still, Darek didn't back down or apologize for Mom's authority, which was as legitimate as ever, even without Skimif to affirm it.

He simply said, "The same as always, Abbot. If you would just stop praying to Xocion—who is in no position to intercede on your behalf more than any of the other gods are—we might be able to figure out how to defeat Uron. Your wisdom and guidance could be of immense help to us, you know."

Carcello lifted his nose up at Darek's words and scoffed. "Oh? So I am supposed to believe that your mother, the teacher, has a better idea of how to defeat Uron than Skimif himself? What a silly notion, though I have always held that Jenur Takren was a silly woman."

Darek grit his teeth. "It's not just the Magical Superior, as you very well know. Archmage Yorak, the head of the Undersea Institute, is also working with us, as are Ranama, the God of Language, and the Ghostly God, the God of Ghosts and Mist. All of us are working together to figure out how to defeat Uron before he destroys us all."

Carcello laughed. “Don't take me for a fool, Darek. The gods are practically powerless against Uron, especially with Skimif dead. Having two gods—especially two as obscure as Ranama and the Ghostly God—on your side means *nothing*. And as for Yorak, I have never believed her to be particularly wise, so dropping her name does not impress me.”

Auratus stepped forward, an angry look on her goldfish-like features, but Darek held out an arm in front of her and gave her a brief, but very clear, glare. He understood that Auratus respected Yorak more than any other mage in the world, but there was no point in her arguing with Carcello right now, who already had a low opinion of aquarian mages anyway.

“Our only hope lies in praying to Xocion and hoping he brings our prayers to the Powers, as the Apocalypse Prayer says,” said Carcello. Then his eyes narrowed. “You, as a Xocionian mage, should know that better than anyone, Darek. I wonder if you lost your memories of our teachings along with your magic.”

That was another thing that had made bargaining with Carcello so different. If Carcello's opinion of aquarian mages was low, he held non-magical humans in even lower contempt, despite his great wisdom. He seemed to think that any human who did not wholeheartedly pursue the study and practice of magic was inferior to those who did in every way; morally, spiritually, even physically.

That Darek had lost his own magical power—a fact that he couldn't hide from Carcello even if he tried—had put Darek even lower than humans who had simply chosen never to study magic at all in Carcello's eyes. This in spite of the fact that Darek still honored Xocion and tried to worship the God of Ice as best as he could without his magic.

“I know that praying to Xocion feels good,” said Darek. “And trust me, I've prayed to him plenty of times over the last couple of months, but the fact is, Xocion is as scared and weakened as the rest of the gods. This is not the time for us mages to be scattered and afraid; we have to be united and strong, even if the gods aren't.”

“How can we be strong when the God of Martir himself is dead?” said Carcello. His voice almost broke when he said that. “I do not believe in instilling false hope in my brothers and sisters in ice. The only hope we have is the same hope we've always had: Relying on Xocion to do what our forefathers and ancestors promised he would do in our blackest times of need.”

“If you guys continue to stay here, praying to a god who can't do anything about Uron, then you *will* die once Uron reaches the Great Berg,” Darek said. “But if you come with us, you might live, maybe even live long enough to see Uron fall for good.”

“You cannot guarantee that,” said Carcello. “I will not let you tempt me with your high-sounding 'ifs' and 'maybes.' I was not made the Abbot of the Xocionian Monastery because I listened to magic-less mages who try to instill false hopes in my Monks.”

“It's not a false hope,” said Darek. “It's a hope that is far more reliable than praying to Xocion to do something he cannot. No one, not even the gods, know where the Powers are; how, then, can you expect Xocion to find them and ask them to save us?”

“It is what we were always taught and is what I believe,” said Carcello. “Now, I am done arguing with non-believing youth. I must return to my *true* brothers and sisters in ice, the ones who continue to believe and who do not doubt, unlike you.”

That was the last straw. Darek grabbed Carcello's beard and forced Carcello to look him in the eyes again. He didn't care that Carcello appeared shocked and angry at Darek's impropriety, nor did

he pay any attention to Auratus grabbing his arm and trying to get him to let go of Carcello.

“Listen here you old fool,” said Darek, in the sharpest, lowest tone he could speak in and still be understood. “Martir is currently on the very edge of apocalypse. It is even closer to apocalypse than the day when the Powers returned and tried to destroy everything. As much as I hate to admit, this time, we can't rely on a Carnagian prince or a leader of a social movement to intervene, nor can we rely on the gods to intercede, either. But if you want to lie on the floor and whine like a baby, fine. Just don't come whining to us when Uron knocks down the doors of the Monastery and kills you all.”

Though Darek was pulling on Carcello's beard hard enough to cause some pain, the Abbot showed none of it. He simply glared into Darek's eyes, a strong glare that reflected his own authority and conviction, and said, “And who, I wonder, is to blame for that? The blizzard whispers that it was the result of a silly young mage freeing Uron by sacrificing his own magical power. Tell me, might you know who that is?”

“It was an accident,” Darek growled. “I didn't know any better. If you had been there—”

“I would have berated you for being the idiot that you are,” Carcello snapped. “Now, either let go of my beard or I will turn you into another ice statue. Would you like that?”

Darek was about to respond, but then a resounding *boom* echoed through the lobby, causing all three of them to freeze. Even the praying of the Monks went silent, as if they, too, had heard that crack.

Still clutching Carcello's beard, Darek looked back down the lobby the way he and Auratus had come. The front doors of the Temple were cracked, like something large had hit them hard. The cracks were thick and ugly, too, reminding Darek of how the ground outside had looked.

“What ... was that?” said Carcello, the anger in his voice replaced by fear. “What's out there?”

“I don't know,” said Darek. “But whatever it is, it can't be—”

Another *boom* and the doors went crashing inward. They landed on the floor hard enough to shatter into chunks of ice, which scattered all over the icy floor like dropped coins. Darek gulped and let go of Carcello's beard when he saw who stood behind the door, though Carcello didn't even try to run away.

The being that had knocked down the door was large and bearlike in appearance, with thick red hair and massive ape-like fists that looked more than capable of crushing human skulls. She looked like a monster, but Darek knew who and what she really was, even though it had been quite some time since he had last seen her.

“Who in the name of Xocion is that?” said Carcello with a gulp. “No, *what* is that?”

“Not a *what*,” said the new arrival, her tone harsh and cruel, “though I will tell you I am a *katabans*. It is *who*, though I don't think I need to tell you that, as Darek and Auratus already know who I am.”

“Yeah, we do,” said Darek. He glared at her. “She's Durima the Demon, a servant of Uron.”

“Indeed I am,” said Durima calmly. She gestured at the shattered doors at her feet. “Like these doors, Martir, too, will be shattered into a million pieces by Uron. It is only a matter of time before he hunts down and kills every last god in the world; after that, it will be even less time before Martir itself is no more.”

“A servant of Uron, eh?” said Carcello. He drew his own wand out, which was made out of ice,

and pointed it at her. “I don't know how powerful you are, but I have the power of Xocion flowing through me, and he is no weak god. If I were you, I would run back to Uron now.”

Durima smiled an ursine smile. “Why would I ever do that? Old, fat mortals wielding icicles don't scare me.”

“This 'old, fat mortal' is the Abbot of the Xocionian Monastery,” said Carcello. “But what does that matter to you? Whether or not you understand the significance of my position, I will kill you where you stand.”

Durima rolled her eyes. “Right. Well, why don't we test that theory? It's not like I have anything better to do, after all.”

“Why are you here?” said Darek. “Did Uron send you?”

“Yes,” said Durima. “He hasn't made his way to the Great Berg yet, but he wanted me to take out any possibly obstacles on his way to destroy North Academy once and for all. He's already had me destroy more than a handful of other magical schools. They died screaming.”

“How monstrous,” said Carcello, shaking his head. “If you are truly a servant of the gods, why would you choose to serve him?”

Durima crouched low to the ground, like she was going to jump at them. “My reasons for why I do what I do are my own. Anyway, talk is a waste of time. I came here to tear this Monastery to the ground, and to do that, I must first kill you.”

Carcello marched forward, his wand glowing icy blue. Darek reached for his arm to get him to stop, but Carcello was already out of his reach.

“Stay back, you two,” Carcello said, glancing over his shoulder at Darek and Auratus. “I will take care of this traitor in less time than it takes for a cup of water to freeze in the Great Berg.”

“Quite confident,” said Durima. “Too bad you won't be able to back up that confidence with anything even remotely resembling talent.”

“I need not talent to do away with the likes of you,” said Carcello. “For I have the guidance of Xocion, the God of Ice, the Frozen Lord, to—”

Durima vanished and reappeared in front of Carcello so fast that Darek didn't even realize it until her massive hands grabbed the Abbot's head and neck and twisted.

A terrible *crack* shot through the air like a bullet. Carcello immediately collapsed onto the ground, dropping his ice wand, which Durima crushed with one of her big fists before it even stopped bouncing on the ground, shattering it like the doors she had knocked down.

The next moment, the doors to the Mourning Room opened and the other Monks peeked out. Many of them looked confused until they spotted Carcello's corpse lying on the floor underneath Durima, at which half of them yelled in fear and the other half just stared in horror.

Seeing an opportunity, Darek yelled, “Run, you idiots! Or you'll end up like Carcello!”

He didn't need to say that twice. The Monks shut the doors to the Mourning Room, but he could hear them hurrying out of the secret exit at the back of the Mourning Room. He had no idea where they would run to. He hoped that they would go to North Academy, as they would be safe there, but considering how fearful everyone was, he wondered if it would even occur to them to do that.

Darek thought for sure that Durima would get angry at him, maybe even attack him right away. After all, he had just saved the lives of two dozen people she was supposed to kill. That had to make her angry.

Instead, however, Durima cocked her head to the side, confusion spreading over her beastly features.

“Let me get this straight,” said Durima. She pointed at Carcello's corpse. “After I kill one of your allies, you tell a dozen well-trained Monks—who specialize in ice magic and live in a temple made of ice in the coldest place on Martir—to run away from me. Thus leaving you two, a mage who can't use any magic and an aquarian who clearly doesn't like the cold. I don't think you thought this through very well.”

Darek opened his mouth to say that he had, but then it struck him that Durima had made a very good point. He stepped back in fear, because he knew that he couldn't take on Durima in a straight fight, though Auratus stood her ground, like she wasn't afraid of Durima at all.

“Based on your silence, I'm going to say that you have realized just how dumb your 'heroic' efforts were,” said Durima. Her wicked smile revealed row upon row of sharp, ursine teeth. “Not that it matters. I will kill you two and smash the foundations of this useless Temple, which I think should be more than enough to clear the path for Uron's eventual arrival in the Great Berg.”

Not unless stop you, said Auratus, her voice in Darek's head, though Durima must have heard it, too, because she simply shook her head.

“Stop me?” the katabans laughed. “Little fish, I am three centuries old and have killed mages far more powerful than you during that time. If you had not been stupid enough to tell your allies to run, you might have stood a chance; as it is, this will be a brief, yet bloody, slaughter.”

Faster than someone of her size should have been able to move, Durima slammed her fist onto the floor, cracking it. A moment later, Darek heard something burrowing through the ground underneath, like a massive drill spinning, but before he could do anything about it, a massive spire of rock burst through the floor like the fist of a giant.

The spire's breaking through the floor sent both Darek and Auratus flying. Darek screamed, but was cut off when he crashed onto the floor again, sliding across the icy, slippery surface until he bumped into the wall. One of the Xocion statues in the nooks in the wall crashed beside him, spraying him with ice, the statue's ice sword sliding away across the floor from him.

Shaking his head, Darek smelled wet animal fur and instinctively rolled to the right. Just in time, too, because Durima's fists suddenly came down on the spot where he had been lying not a moment before, smashing it and sending ice shards flying into the air.

Rising to his feet, Darek walked backwards away from Durima, who lifted her ice-covered fists and shook the frozen chips off them as she glared at Darek.

“You will be the first to die,” said Durima as she began to advance on him. “I've always believed in picking off the weakest first ... and you, Darek Takren, are the weakest of them all, being that you lack magic.”

Darek didn't dare take his eyes off Durima, even though he wanted to look around to see if Auratus was still conscious or not. For that matter, he also needed a weapon of some sort.

Then he almost tripped over something, causing him to glance down. It was the ice sword from the Xocion statue that had fallen over next to him earlier. It was large and likely heavy, but he bent over and lifted it up with both hands anyway.

His hands burned under the cold hilt of the sword, making him almost scream from the painful gelid blade. Not only that, but it was indeed heavy; perhaps not as heavy as an actual sword (though

Darek didn't know for sure, as he had never wielded a real sword before), but heavy enough that he was unsure he could wield it effectively.

Durima must have thought the same thing, because she just smiled even more widely at him. “Do you honestly believe that a fake 'sword' like that will hurt me even slightly? It's not even designed right. Just look at that edge; whoever sculpted that piece of crap has clearly never seen an actual sword in person before.”

Whether or not Durima's criticism of the sword's blade was accurate, Darek didn't know or even really care. He just held it before him, looking for an opportunity to strike, even though he doubted he would be able to attack her before she took him down.

Then Durima swiped at him with one of her claws. He just barely managed to bring up the ice sword in time to block it. It was useless, however, because Durima's claw smashed through the sculpted sword like a toy, leaving nothing but a freezing hilt in Darek's hands.

It was enough for Darek, however. He threw the hilt at Durima, but she knocked it out of the air like it was nothing more than an annoying bee.

“Now you're really unarmed,” said Durima. “Time to die.”

Just before she leaped at him, a fountain of water came out of nowhere and struck her in the back. Durima roared in shock from the water blast, while Darek looked in the direction the water was coming from and saw Auratus shooting it from her hands, her magic stone glowing bright blue around her ankle.

But then a portal to the ethereal opened in front of Durima and she rolled into it. The portal closed with a *pop*, while Auratus ceased shooting water from her hands and lowered them. Her eyes darted around the now-ruined lobby in search of Durima, but the katabans was nowhere to be seen.

She gone, said Auratus. Maybe forever?

Darek shook his head. “I doubt it. Durima doesn't strike me as the kind to give up, even after being sprayed with water in an ice cold room. She'll probably—”

He heard the *pop* of an ethereal portal opening behind him. Instinctively, Darek dove forward, just as he felt the air from Durima's claw pass him by. He hit the floor, rolled to his feet, and looked over his shoulder in time to see Durima's arm disappear back into the ethereal.

“What did I say?” said Darek, looking up at Auratus. “We have to keep our guard up at all times. Durima's a veteran of the Katabans War, so she knows how to fight even better than we do.”

Auratus nodded, turning her head this way and that in an attempt to find Durima. Darek stood up and walked over closer to her and looked around as well, even though there wasn't much he could do against Durima if the katabans showed up again.

The Temple of Xocion was once again quiet, aside from Darek and Auratus's breathing. The rock spire that Durima had summoned earlier still stood where it had burst through the floor, while Carcello's corpse lay near its base. Darek tried not to look at Carcello; he could not afford to let his emotions get the best of him.

Darek picked up a nearby chunk of ice to use as a weapon. It was by no means threatening or intimidating, and it probably wouldn't be very effective at all, but Darek didn't like being weapon-less in this situation. His hands tingled against the cold ice chunk, but he gripped it anyway.

Leave, Auratus suggested. While Durima gone, we leave.

Darek frowned. “Not a bad suggestion. Can you teleport through solid objects yet?”

Auratus's silence told him that she had not yet mastered that particular skill, which did not make him very confident about the likelihood of their survival in this particular situation.

“Our only way out would be if we walked out the front doors and immediately teleported,” Darek said, nodding at the open doorway and the shattered remains of the front doors. “But there's a clear gap between here and the doorway. If we run, we might make it ... or just give Durima an opportunity to burst out of the ethereal and kill us.”

Understood, Auratus thought. Keep fighting?

“Until we can get a safe opening, yes,” said Darek.

So the two ceased speaking, Darek straining his ears to listen for the usual *pop* of an ethereal portal opening. That would likely be the only signal they would get before Durima attacked; therefore, it was imperative that they listen for it.

What's she waiting for? Darek thought. Maybe trying to dry off her fur so she doesn't instantly freeze when she returns? Looking for the perfect opening?

That was when Darek heard that familiar *pop*, causing him to look wildly around for its source. Auratus looked as well, but no matter where Darek looked, he didn't see Durima anywhere, which made him wonder if his ears were playing tricks on him.

“Auratus, did you hear that?” said Darek. “That pop? You heard it, right?”

Auratus nodded without looking at Darek. *Yes. Where is?*

“No idea,” said Darek. “Thought you might—”

He was interrupted by the floor rumbling beneath his feet, almost throwing him off-balance. He looked down just in time to see another rock spire tunneling through the clear ice floor under him.

Without thinking, Darek shoved Auratus to the side, sending her out of the way of the incoming second spire. He then tried to move himself out of the way, but he was too slow. The spire broke through the floor, sending shards and chunks of ice flying everywhere. The spire only glanced him in the side, but it was a powerful glance that sent him staggering like a man shot by a gun.

He heard Durima's growl and looked up in time to see her jumping at him from the other spire. Her claws were flashing, forcing him to duck to avoid getting his head taken clear off his shoulders.

Durima soared over his head and landed on the floor hard. Nonetheless, she turned around and slashed at him with the fierceness of an enraged baba raga. Darek dodged as best as he could, but he was so tired and could feel the cold starting to seep into his bones, which made it harder to move as smoothly as he normally did.

Then his foot slipped on the ice and he stumbled. A second later, Durima's right claw flew at him and tore through his chest.

Durima's claws were as sharp as knives. Darek cried out in pain, falling down onto the cracked ice floor underneath him. His bloody chest stung against the cold air of the Temple and he found it hard to breathe, though he could scream just fine.

He saw Durima's claw—with his blood—coming at him again before another burst of water flew over Darek's head, dropping tiny droplets on his face, and struck Durima head on. Durima once again roared in anger before disappearing through another ethereal portal.

Then Darek felt Auratus's hands, colder than ever, grab his shoulders. Their whole world went black for a brief moment and then they were outside of the Temple in the snow, having teleported through the open doorway that Durima had created earlier.

Yet the icy weather out here was even worse to Darek's bloody chest than the interior of the Temple of Xocion had been. It was like a cat was clawing at him, a cat that had dunked its paws in freezing ice water, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Hold on, Auratus said, her grip on him tightening. Going back to North Academy now.

Just as their world went dark, Darek thought he saw another ethereal portal open and saw Durima's head staring out it in rage. But it was only briefly that he thought he saw that; the next moment, he was too distracted by the darkness of teleportation and the pain in his chest to think much about what he had seen.