

Chapter One

WHEN BRAIM AWOKE this morning, he realized that he was gripping the handle of the sword that was leaning against the dresser next to his bed. He let go of the sword handle, trying to figure out why and how he had grabbed it during his sleep.

Must have had a bad dream or something, Braim thought. He rubbed his eyes. *Doesn't look like anyone is in the room with me, though.*

Braim sat up and looked around his room again. It was indeed empty, aside from himself. The shutters on the windows were closed, with tiny rays of light sneaking through the cracks. It was also rather cold this morning due to a cold snap that had swept over World's End last night, causing Braim to shiver as he pulled his blankets more tightly around his body. He wasn't sure how early it was due to the fact that the shutters were closed and he had no clock in his room, but he guessed that he had awoken at his usual time at sunrise.

It was so quiet that Braim considered just sitting there for a while or maybe going back to sleep. After all, despite having gotten a full eight hours of sleep, he was still quite drowsy. He was hungry and thirsty, but not enough to convince him to get up and get dressed.

Just as Braim was about to go back to bed and sleep for a little while longer, he suddenly remembered something important he had to get to this morning. Tashir had asked Braim to come down to Last Beach to do some more sword training at the crack of dawn, and if the weak rays of the sun peeking through the cracks in the shutters meant anything, then dawn was practically here.

Shaking his head, Braim jumped out of bed, threw on his red tunic, combed his hair in the mirror above the sink in his bathroom, splashed some ice cold water on his face to wake himself up, and then was out of his room in a second. He dashed down the hallway to the inn's exit and heard the innkeeper, Mishak, shouting from what sounded like the kitchen area, "Mr. Braim! Would you like some breakfast? Delicious coffee, just the way you like it!"

"No thanks, Mr. Mishak!" Braim shouted back as he grabbed the door and pulled it open. "Got an urgent appointment to keep. No time to eat."

"Very well," came Mishak's voice, which sounded disappointed. "Will leave you some food in room for when you return, in case you hungry."

"Thanks, Mr. Mishak!" Braim shouted, and then he ran out the door, closing it behind himself on the way out.

The air outside was cold and crisp, unusual for World's End, which was usually a warm island due to the fact that it was located so far south. But Braim didn't focus on the cold. He just ran as quickly as he could through the wide-open, largely empty streets of World's End. He found it odd how few katabans were out this morning, but with the sun not high in the sky yet, that was probably because they were still asleep.

In any case, Braim enjoyed the empty streets because that meant there was no one to get in his way or slow him down. Still, he found the empty streets to be little worrisome, as he was used to them being full of katabans going about their daily business. Perhaps that would change as the day progressed ...

or maybe it wouldn't, considering how depressed many katabans seemed nowadays.

It's all of the bad news, Braim thought as he rounded a corner, hoping that Tashir would not be too angry at him for being late. *Kind of hard to remain upbeat and normal with at least three major threats to Martir currently active.*

But Braim pushed those thoughts out of his mind for now in order to focus on the present. He just needed to get to the beach as quickly as he could, because he wasn't sure he'd have time to train for the rest of the day if he was late.

Because Braim ran fast, he reached Last Beach in about ten minutes. By the time he did, he was hot and tired and even sweating, even though Last Beach was even colder than the rest of the city due to the cold wind blowing in from the south. As he expected, Tashir stood on the beach, already swinging his sword around in practice, but curiously enough, Tashir was not alone. Yoji, the young bald mage who was in the same bracket as Raya, was sitting underneath a grove of trees nearby, reading a large, thick book without a title on its cover or spine. The young mage seemed engrossed by the book, but Braim didn't know what was so interesting about it, though he didn't care enough to ask.

As soon as Braim stepped onto the beach, Tashir noticed him and immediately stopped practicing with his sword. Lowering his blade, Tashir walked over to Braim. The aquarian makhimancer didn't look angry at Braim's lateness, but maybe he was just hiding it.

“Braum,” said Tashir, his gurgly accent slightly distorting Braim's name. “I was wondering where you were. Did you forget about our appointment?”

Panting, Braim nodded. “Almost. When I woke up this morning, I'd almost forgotten about it. I had to skip breakfast to get here on time.”

“Skip breakfast?” Tashir repeated. He frowned. “It is never wise to skip meals, Braim. Especially when you are learning to wield a sword, which takes a lot of energy out of you. It is better to train with a full stomach than with an empty one, in other words.”

Braim's stomach growled, like it agreed with Tashir, but Braim ignored it and said, “Nah, it's fine. I can get lunch later or something. I'm ready to train now. I even brought my sword. See?”

Braim lifted up his sword to show it to Tashir. Tashir didn't look like he agreed with Braim skipping breakfast, but then he shrugged and said, “Fine. But don't complain when you find it hard to perform the very basic sword techniques I'm going to teach you.”

“Don't worry, I won't,” said Braim. Then he glanced at Yoji, who was still reading his book. “What's Yoji doing here? Is he trying to learn makhimancy, too?”

“No,” said Tashir, shaking his head. “The Hollech Bracket Challenge is for later in the morning, so Yoji came here to have a quiet place to study in preparation for it.”

Braim looked at Tashir in confusion. “But how does he know what the Hollech Bracket Challenge will be about? Has Alira said anything about it?”

“As usual, no,” said Tashir. “But Yoji explained to me that it will probably have something to do with thievery, deception, and horses, so he has been reading up on all three areas extensively since winning the last sub-bracket challenge three or four weeks ago now.”

“Oh,” said Braim. “What about Raya? She's supposed to be in this challenge, too, right?”

“Yes,” said Tashir, “but I don't know whether she is studying for it or not—I doubt it for obvious reasons—but I have not interacted with Raya much since she and Alira returned, so I am not sure what

she is doing.”

“Knowing her, Raya probably expects to win without any effort,” said Braim. He rolled his eyes. “And then she gets insulted when I call her silver spoon. Do all members of royalty lack self-awareness like her or is she special?”

“Not all royalty is as spoiled as Raya,” Tashir said. “Regent Kaserous, the Regent of East Yudra, is well known for her humility. Raya, as far as I can tell, is simply young and foolish, though she seems much more thoughtful ever since her kidnapping.”

“Maybe getting kidnapped by a psychotic prison escapee did her some good,” Braim said, stroking his chin. “Anyway, what about Alira? What's she doing? Has she recovered her magic yet?”

“I don't know,” said Tashir with a shrug. “Last I heard, Alira was trying to get her powers back and has been making a little progress, but whatever the golems did to her must have been severe, as every time I have seen her, she always seems depressed. I believe she will be presiding over the Tournament, however, regardless.”

“Right,” said Braim. “Speaking of the golems, I haven't heard anything about them recently, either. Have the gods taken them out yet?”

“I'm just as in the dark about the golems as you,” Tashir said. “And that is what troubles me. I don't know much about these golems, but it seems to me that the gods should have no trouble destroying creatures that are clearly not their equals. Yet the gods have not announced that the golems have been destroyed.”

“Which means they're still out there,” said Braim. “Yeah, you're right. That *is* suspicious. The golems can't be *that* powerful, can they?”

“I doubt it, but there may be other complications that the gods have run into,” said Tashir. “Tamra and the Void, after all, are still active threats.”

The mention of the Void made Braim look to the south. Across the last stretch of sea after World's End was a massive, black wall that seemed to be eating at the sky. It was as solid as a wall, but Braim knew that the Void was an intelligence not to be underestimated. He wondered if she was looking at them now, listening to their every word. He wondered why the Void hadn't simply tried to consume World's End whole now, considering how powerful she was, but maybe the Void feared the gods or had some other reason for not doing it yet.

In any case, Braim didn't want to focus on the Void, so he looked at Tashir again and said, “Right, right, almost forgot about those two. Any news on Tamra? I haven't seen her since she attacked those four gods.”

“None whatsoever,” said Tashir. “It seems like Tamra has vanished into thin air. I have spoken with some of the Soldiers and they said that none of the gods know where she is, though they suspect she is somewhere in the Northern Isles.”

“Well, I hope they stop her soon,” said Braim. He looked up at the sky, which was clear this morning. “The last thing we need is a crazy mortal like her running around stealing the souls of the gods.”

“I'm not sure how she can possibly be a threat to anyone, though,” said Tashir. “You said that she lost her arm when she tried to use the Soul Collector on you, correct?”

Braim winced at the memory, even though it had been about a week ago when that happened. Still, the scene of Tashir lying on the floor screaming in pain as the stump where her arm had been bled pro-

fusely had left an impression on Braim's memory that was unlikely to go away anytime soon.

So Braim nodded and said, "Yes, but remember she has the souls of four gods in her body. She might be able to harness their power to heal herself, maybe even make a new arm entirely. No telling what she can do now."

"I suppose that is possible," said Tashir. "Anyway, the sun is rising ever higher in the sky. If we're going to practice sword-fighting, then we should get started right away."

"All right," said Braim. "That's what I'm here for. Let's get started."

But then Tashir paused and looked at Braim. He had a questioning look in his eyes, which made Braim a little nervous because Tashir had the head of a shark and so sometimes he looked more intimidating than he intended to.

"What is it?" said Braim. "Did you forget something?"

"No," said Tashir, shaking his head. "I just wanted to know if you had regained your magical powers yet."

Braim frowned. He scratched the back of his head. "No. They're still gone. Can't use any spells or anything like that."

"Oh," said Tashir. "All right. Just wanted to make sure. Because if you could use magic, then I could have taught you makhimancy. Without magic, however, you can't learn it."

"Yeah, I know," said Braim. He folded his arms and looked back toward the city. "I've thought about going to the Ghostly God and demanding that he come up with something he could use to restore my magical power to me, but he's never around because he's technically not allowed to be here. Still, it's frustrating to lack magical powers after you've had them for a while."

"I cannot imagine how hard that must be," Tashir said. "No one is born with magical talent and skill, but when you learn it, it becomes such an important—and sometimes even necessary—part of your life. Are you sure you can't relearn it on your own?"

"I've tried," said Braim. "I've tried several times to cast even the most basic of spells. But whatever that bracelet did to me, it completely took away my ability to do any magic."

"You mean you can't do any magic at all?" said Yoji.

Braim looked to the right and saw Yoji walking toward them, his large book tucked under his arm. Even though it was early in the morning, Yoji looked wide awake and ready to take on the day, which Braim decided had to do with the fact that Yoji was still quite young and so didn't take as long to wake up as Braim or the other godlings did. He didn't know the mage's exact age, but Yoji seemed to be even younger than Raya.

"Yeah," said Braim, nodding. "It sucks."

Yoji stopped a few feet away from them and tapped his chin thoughtfully. "And you've tried to get your magical powers back?"

"Well, not really," Braim said. He shrugged. "I don't even know *how* I'm supposed to get them back. I had a friend of mine who lost his magical powers once, but he got them back in a way I can't really replicate."

Braim expected Yoji to simply nod and say some words of sympathy, but to his surprise, Yoji snapped his fingers and said, "I think I know how to help you get your powers back."

"You?" said Tashir. He sounded quite skeptical. "What do you mean?"

“I mean exactly what I said,” said Yoji. “I know how to restore a mage's magical power.”

Braim and Tashir exchanged skeptical looks, prompting Yoji to say, “I'm not just saying this. I really do know a way. I read about it in a book once.”

“Well, that certainly is reassuring,” said Braim, looking at Yoji. “I mean, reading something in a book definitely makes it sound more truthful.”

“I will have you know, Braim Kotogs, that I am a prodigy,” said Yoji. He stood up straight, although due to his skinniness that did little to make him look more mature. “When I was ten, I was already performing complex magical spells such as the Elemental Titan Spell and also doing interdisciplinary study in fields as far apart as divination and geomancy. I've debated adults three times my age and beaten them in debates. So I know what I'm talking about, even though I am younger than both of you.”

Braim held up his hands in a pacifying way. “All right, all right, I believe you. But what's this method that will restore my magical power, anyway?”

“It's easier if I show it to you than to tell you about it,” said Yoji. “We can go to my apartment in the city and do it there. Should be safe.”

“But what about Braim's sword training?” said Tashir, gesturing at the sand with his sword. “Isn't that the whole reason he got up this morning?”

“Who cares about learning how to swing a sharp piece of metal around?” said Yoji, waving off Tashir's concerns rather dismissively. “After all, you can learn sword-fighting any old time, but you can't always regain your lost magical abilities.”

“He's got a point there, Tash,” said Braim. “As much as I like learning how to use a sword, if there is any way at all that I can regain my magical powers again—especially in light of recent events—I think I'd rather do that instead. Maybe we can do this sword training later?”

Tashir scowled and looked away. He just shook his head and walked down to the beach away from them without another word. Drawing his sword, he started practicing again, swinging his sword even more ferociously than before.

“Guess that's a no, then,” said Yoji. “Anyway, we don't need him to get your power back. The two of us can do it together. I can assure you of that.”

Braim nodded and followed Yoji back up the beach toward the city. He still looked over his shoulder, however, at Tashir, who he felt bad about abandoning like this after agreeing to train with him. He hoped that Tashir wasn't too angry at him, because the last thing he needed, on top of all of his other problems, was to have one of his only friends too angry at him to even speak with him again.