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## Acknowledgments

## CHAPTER I: ERRAND OF MERCY

[Illustration of group standing at the edge of the forest  
goes here]

Late in the morning on the border of a snowy forest and a small village, four people approached the forest. The front-most of the four carried a two-handed sword and was sitting atop her horse while wearing heavy steel armor, the horse himself simply clad in a saddle and wool. The other three sat in a horse-drawn cart with no visible weapons and wearing simple brown cloaks for warmth against the lightly, but steadily, falling snow.

As the quartet reached the edge of the forest, a voice cried out from the trees. “Who are you and what is your business in our woods?” the voice demanded.

One of the trio still on the cart stepped down and pulled back his hood to reveal a man in his early thirties. “Greetings! My name is Lelwyn. I am tasked by the Order of the Golden Shield to offer aid to those afflicted by the blight in Midway,” he explained.

“You are a healer.” The voice half asked and half surmised. “Who are the others,” it asked.

“Indeed, I am,” Lelwyn confirmed then motioned to the others on the cart. “The two who remain on the cart are my friends and fellow mages, elementalists Kirel and enchanter Bewr.” He then motioned towards the woman on horse-back. “The knight sitting vigilantly on her horse is our bodyguard and escort, Rikel,” he finished.

Another voice rang out from the trees. “Very well, you are hereby granted leave to be in our forest but must be gone before the first day of Planting. Should we find you still in our forest after that time, you will be killed on the spot,” the voice threatened them.

Lelwyn nodded in understanding. “It will be as you say,” he acknowledged while returning to the cart. He sat back in his spot next Bewr, who sat between him and Kirel.

Once Lelwyn was safely seated, Bewr picked up the reins and got the horse underway.

As the quartet started heading into the forest, the first voice warned. “Remember the laws for guests of the Elvish woods: damage any living tree or kill any animal (save in self defense) and your lives are instantly forfeit.”

Lelwyn nodded again while putting his hood back up to protect against the thickening snow. “It is nearly midday,” he told the others. “We best make haste.”

As night started to fall in the forest, Rikel brought her horse to a stop and turned to face the others. “We should stop and make camp soon; traveling the woods in the day is dangerous enough, even more so at night,” she advised.

Lelwyn nodded his head. “Agreed. Bewr, the advanced forms of the sentry spells tonight, please. The standard versions will be insufficient given the situation,” he ordered.

Bewr sighed. “If you’re going to make me spend the extra hours needed for those spells, I expect some real food tonight,” she countered, directing that last part towards Rikel.

Rikel held up her hands in defense. “Sorry, I’m rubbish at hunting,” she apologized. “Besides, we wouldn’t be able to kill anything due to the laws of the forest, anyway. We’ll just have to make do with oh-so-delicious conjured food again,” she added sarcastically.

Kirel entered the conversation. “You never did explain why we couldn’t just restock our food supplies while we were in Nighforest,” he accused Lelwyn.

“Their last harvest yielded insufficient crops for their own needs, much less have enough for trade with outsiders,” Lelwyn countered. “They’ll be eating conjured food of their own before the next Harvest.”

As Bewr cast her spells, Kirel used his magic to raise their tents. Rikel turned to him. “It still amazes me that you can do that,” she admitted.

Kirel stopped his spell and laughed. “Elemental magic is more than just fire balls and lightning bolts,” he explained with a smile.

Lelwyn interrupted. “It would be best to let the matter rest, Rikel,” he warned. “If not stopped, Kirel has been known to wax eloquent about his chosen field of magic long into

several days after his audience has any semblance of interest.” He then started casting the spells needed to conjure their evening meal.

After the mage trio finished casting their spells hours later, the group started to eat. Kirel made a face as he bit into his meal. Lelwyen saw the face and smiled. “Come now, my friend; conjured food is hardly that bad,” he commented.

Kirel scoffed. “It may be better than staving,” He admitted. “But not by much,” he joked. “While I may have never been much of a cook, even I could make something better than this. If I had ingredients, that is”

Bewr chuckled. “I think I’m going to have to agree with Kirel,” she added. “Which I think marks the first time in the history of Terris that that particular sentence has ever been uttered,” she added with a wink to Kirel.

Kirel replied by simply making a face to Bewr.

Rikel sighed. “I get that conjuring food is hard enough without making it tasty. But I wish we had a few real spices or other seasonings on hand. At least then the food wouldn’t be quite so bland,” she lamented.

The three mages all looked at her in horror. Bewr recovered first. “Right, you’re not a mage,” she reminded herself. “You didn’t spend several years learning about the Apprentice’s Malady at the Academy.”

Rikel looked towards Lewlyn with a raised eyebrow. “Dare I ask?” she mused.

Lelwyn placed a hand on Bewr’s shoulder. “Allow me to field the answer to this one.” At Bewr’s nod of acceptance, he continued, “it pertains to Veorn’s Fourth Law of Magic.”

Rikel laughed. “That doesn’t exactly explain anything to me,” she teased.

Lelwyn nodded with an understanding smile. “A spell, without a significant expenditure of additional energy, will only be temporary,” he quoted. “Put simpler, it takes a lot of effort for a mage to make any spell, conjured food for this discussion, permanent. Further, mixing any real food in with conjured food can often cancel the permanence of said food.”

Rikel scrunched her face. “But food isn’t meant to be permanent anyway, right?” she asked in confusion.

Kirel cleared his throat. “Think of it this way. What happens to food after you conjure it?” he chimed in.

Rikel shrugged her shoulders. “You eat it?” she answered slowly in confusion.

Kirel rolled his hand. “And then?” he prompted. Instead of answering, Rikel started to look at him in disgust. Realizing the mistake of his question, he quickly clarified. “I meant the food that stays inside you. As in, where does it go at that point?”

Realization dawned on Rikel's face. "Ah," she answered. "I," she paused for a moment. "I guess I never really thought about it before."

Lelwyn cleared his throat. "Most don't," he admitted. "However, the nourishment your body assimilates becomes part of your body. Should that food disappear, so would go your body. Such events are almost certainly fatal."

Rikel nodded her head. "I see," she almost whispered. "That almost sounds like it might make a good weapon to use," she trailed off nervously upon seeing the looks of rage on the faces of the three mages.

Lelwyn glared at her. "Not even the Necromancers used such a tactic before their destruction in the Mage's War. It is a needlessly cruel death. Also, it takes so long for the victim to die that it has negligible tactical use," he admitted.

Bewr stood up. "On that delightful note," she started sarcastically. "We should probably get some sleep."

The others nodded and headed into their tents to get some sleep and warmth against the falling snow..

After the group broke camp for the fourth morning in the woods without incident, Rikel was intensely watching the road ahead for signs of danger while personally grateful that the snow had finally stopped falling sometime during the previous night.

Kirel laughed and interrupted her train of thought. “Rikel, the foliage can’t be that fascinating,” he joked.

Bewr chuckled. “On the contrary, I believe that the particular shade of green in that tree’s leaves is slightly different than that of the five thousand or so trees we’ve passed so far on our journey,” she jokingly added.

Rikel rolled her eyes. “I don’t know about you, but I’m rather worried about that wolf that I heard howling during the night; it sounded way too close to us for my comfort,” she countered. “Wolf attacks are hardly unheard of in the forest.”

Bewr entered her lecturer mode. “A single wolf is unlikely to bother a group of four beings bigger than they are. Besides, if a pack did attack us, we’d be able to fight them in self-defense,” she explained.

Rikel shook her head. “Not necessarily,” she answered. “I’ve heard tales of people in these woods getting attacked by wildlife and still being executed for harming the animals.”

Bewr turned to Rikel. “Wait! If they were executed, who was able to spread the story?” she asked in confusion.

Lelwyn interrupted the brewing argument. “It doesn’t matter if it’s true or not. It’d be better to err to caution in this. Should we be attacked, it’d be best for us to flee if we can and only fight if no other avenue is available to us,” he ordered, Rikel nodding in agreement.

Kirel shrugged in answer, not caring either way.

Bewr nodded. "I suppose that makes sense," she reluctantly conceded. "I wasn't exactly looking forward to fighting woodland creatures, anyway," she quickly added.

Kirel loudly sighed. "I still don't understand why we're going all the way out to Midway to cure this blight," he complained while changing the subject. "Can't the Elves just deal with it themselves? Why do they need us to come in and help them?"

Lelwyn shook his head. "Your lack of knowledge of the forest's politics does you ill," he scolded. "Midway has been laid claim by both the High Elves and the Wood Elves."

"So?" Kirel countered. "What does that have to do with anything? Shouldn't that mean that both sides of the civil war would be willing to help?"

Rikel looked back over her shoulder. "Basic tactics, mage. Since the city's been claimed by both sides, they're both pretending the other side doesn't have a claim. As soon as either group sends official support, the illusion is shattered and the lull in the war would likely end, resuming the war," she finished her impromptu lecture.

Bewr continued the line of thought. "Whereas if the Order of the Golden Shield sends help, both Elvish nations can save face, keeping the peace," she lectured.

“Precisely,” Rikel complemented her. “Though, there’s one thing I never did quite figure out on my own. Why did you specify ‘humans only’ in the bodyguard/escort job posting? Wouldn’t another race have worked just as well and have been faster to fill?”

Lelwyn took the question. “The Order posited that a group of only humans would be interpreted as the least offensive by the Elves,” he explained.

Rikel pondered this. “I can see your point, now,” she acknowledged. “While Humans and Centaurs are both barely tolerated by the Elves, the Centaurs are too isolationist to likely want to get involved. Further, most of the other races would have probably been killed on sight. A Dwarf would specifically be seen as an insult and I don’t even want to think about what they would have do to a Demorkan who tried to enter their forest, even with an offer of help. Finally, other Elves are obviously out or it’d disrupt the illusion of Midway being on both, or rather neither, of the sides of the civil war at the same time.”

Kirel scratched his head. “Elf politics gives me a headache,” he complained.

Lelwyn turned to Kirel. “I don’t think I’ll ever understand you, Kirel,” he stated. “You’ve made multiple significant advances in the theory of Elemental magic yet you

can't seem to grasp the simplest facet of Human, or in this case, Elvish, interaction. Why is that?" he asked.

Bewr laughed. "the answer is simple, Lelwyn," she joked. "Unless it's about Elemental magic, Kirel doesn't care about it in the slightest."

Kirel turned to Bewr. "Not all of us tried to memorize the entire contents of the Mage's Academy's library when we studied there, Bewr." He teased back. "Some of us had these little things called 'lives' outside of studies we also had to deal with at the time."

"Do not tease an enchanter, Kirel!" Bewr warned jokingly. "It tends not to be conducive to one's long-term health," she added, raising her hands as though to cast a spell.

Kirel motioned to Lelwyn. "Then it's a good thing that we have our own healer sent by the Order of the Golden Shield with us, isn't it?" he rebutted in the same humor.

Lelwyn turned to him. "There is a potentially fatal, though possibly subtle flaw in your reasoning, my old friend." At Kirel's confused look, he continued. "Your strategy is based upon the assumption that I would deign to utilize my, admittedly, not-inconsiderable healing magic in your aid should you be injured in a fight against Bewr."

Kirel pouted in an exaggerated manner. "You would really let me die instead of healing me after all we've been

through together?” he asked in mock horror. “What kind of monster are you?”

Lelwyn winked back with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. “Merely one who has grown somewhat exasperated by your ceaseless antics,” he replied.

Kirel rolled his eyes as Bewr laughed again. “Then it's settled!” she announced. “I get to attack you with impunity!”

Kirel held up his finger. “Ah! But I'm a living being inside the forest and would, therefore, count towards the laws protecting the animals of the woods,” he countered with a smug look.

Lelwyn chuckled. “I believe that such a comparison is a disparagement to the non-sapient denizens of the forest,” he joked along with the other mages.

Rikel rolled her eyes at the mage trio's antics while Bewr and Lelwyn laughed. Kirel crossed his arms in mock annoyance. “Oh, I see how you two are,” he joked.

Bewr lightly bumped her shoulder against Kirel. “Aw,” she laughed. “You know we tease because we love you!”

Lelwyn chuckled. “You have gotten in more than your fair share in yourself,” he added.

Rikel suddenly stopped while raising her fist. “Hold up! I think I see something ahead,” she warned the three bantering mages.