

CHAPTER ONE

EARLIER THAT SAME DAY ~~earlier that same day.~~

They were off to a later start than Zeal had planned. The sun was already past its zenith. Deena had insisted they eat before returning Mehrle to Arlanda. Finally, Zeal and his friends stood in the center of the Casting Quad, where conjures were practiced without endangering Havensharth.

The Quad's protective barrier had already been activated, so a shimmering field ringed the boundary columns delineating the area's boundaries and arformed a dome overhead as a dome. Zeal and Tulip, Kit, and Mehrle waited along with him for Deena to open the circle that which would allow them to travel to the city of Arlanda.

I could have conjured the circle myself, he Zeal grumbled to Kit, who was in hiding size. Although still bigger than a large house cat, she drew little attention from people who saw her in her current form.

As could I.

I know. Deena is just being protective. I shouldn't begrudge her taking advantage of this opportunity to mother us, not that I'm not pleased by it.

Deena interrupted their discourse. "Kit, give me the image again of where you young ones want to be, when the other side of the circle is to open."

Zeal tried, but was unable to determine how Kit could was able to form generate an a combined image off from him, Tulip, and Mehrle inside of the interior of the Arlanda warehouse in Arlanda where they

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Commented [KG5]: I think people have to work too hard again when a chapter starts with 2 pronouns and no nouns! Who is They? Who is He? And this is the start of the book.

Mystery is okay sometimes but this is a place to be more generous. I'm not even sure he is Zeal/whose POV this is. And why are you flashing back, really?

Let's give people a softer landing into your book 3 please.

Commented [KG6]: So that means, the first time you say somebody's name, either here or in the Prologue, if it's not too tense, you need to explain who it is or how they look and how they're related—you go into Mehrle's difference in training below—good! But sooner, something for the reader's mind to hold on to please.

had once trained as apprentices in the Trade together. Mehrle was considered a journeyman-level Trade apprentice. Although he and Tulip had continued to receive instruction from the Trade Master of Havensharth, they were yet to reach Mehrle's level of expertise. Zeal had focused instead in the use of the conjuring Arts, while Tulip had studied as a Mercenary.

A Practitioner of the Arts needed to be familiar with the location to which they intended to travel by way of a circle. Kit gave Deena the details of the destination so that she could complete her conjure.

"Thank you, Kit. I feel as if I have physically visited your warehouse before." She gestured and spoke a word, "Cinul."

A glowing green hoop twice the height of an average person floated a half hand above the ground. The empty warehouse could be seen through the opening.

Deena gave them each a hug. "Zeal, I will watch over Shalie and Firemyst till you return." She held up her hand to show him the ring she wore. "If you decide to stay the night, send me a tell."

The ring would enable them to communicate at a distance. "We plan to drop off Mehrle, see what is worrying Mother Essmee, visit a few folks, and return."

"Contact me when you are coming back. I will meet you here and make sure the Quad is warded."

Zeal hated to leave Firemyst and Shalie behind. But he agreed with Deena that they were safer staying in Havensharth. Tulip, Mehrle, Tallen, Kit, and he had made it possible for Firemyst, a Firebird, to be born. During the process, Zeal had rescued Shalie, a Salamander, from enslavement.

Mehrle pointed to the open portal. "Now that you know how to create a Threshold Circle, you can visit us as often as you wish. We just need to figure out a way to exchange messages."

Tulip placed a hand on Zeal's arm. "Shall we go? The longer we take deciding when to leave, the later our return."

Deena stood on her toes, gave Zeal a kiss on the cheek, then knelt and scratched Kit behind the ears. "Take care of each other. Arlanda

Commented [KG7]: e.g., helpful to mention how long ago this was...

may not be the city you left so many seasons ago.”

Zeal kissed Deena on the top of ~~her head~~ ~~after she rose~~. “We’ll be fine. Arlanda is still our city. We ran over, under, and on her streets before coming here to live. I doubt things have changed that much. Mehrle would have told us if they had.”

~~He~~Zeal waited for Mehrle and Tulip to pass through to the warehouse before crossing the circle’s threshold, ~~himself~~. Kit silently padded alongside him.

Deena waved farewell ~~as t~~. The portal closed, blocking her image from view.

~~Zeal~~He took a deep breath and slowly let it out. He had finally returned to Arlanda. But what was that smell? “Did someone store rotten vegetables in here?”

Tulip sniffed the air. “I detect an off odor as well.”

Mehrle laughed. “It’s Arlanda’s welcome to you. What you perceive is her underlying perfume. When we all lived here, we never noticed it and were only aware of strong fragrances such as the salty ocean air, the reek of fish and seaweed at the dock, the stench from the sewers, or a maid wearing too much toilet water.”

Tulip wrinkled her nose. “Whenever you leave for a period of suns, on your return you notice the aroma?”

Mehrle nodded. “You’ll get used to it again, if you stay long enough. The three of you should head to Master Feneas’s place. I’ll locate the Trade Master and give him my report. I’m sure he will want to meet with you. Since I don’t know where, why don’t you return here a mark after sun-down? He’ll either be here or someone will who can take you to him.”

Zeal took Mehrle’s hands in his. “Thank you for all your help, Mehrle. Firemist wouldn’t be alive if you hadn’t been with us. I don’t know how Master Slag knew to send you, but we were lucky he did.”

Mehrle looked up at him. “It was an adventure I wouldn’t have wanted to miss.” She released one hand and placed it over the hilt of the blacked blade sheathed alongside her other throwing knives. “Thank you again for my new most favored weapon.”

Tulip grasped Mehrle’s free hand in her own. “Zeal hasn’t told me about your gift nor of its unique properties.”

Commented [KG8]: This sounds like she’s floating or something. Don’t need it.

Mehrle's face brightened with a broad smile. In one motion, she took her hand ~~away~~ from Tulip, drew the blade, and threw it. The knife imbedded deeply into a wood post. Mehrle raised her open hand ~~and. A soft slap was heard when~~ the weapon handle struck her palm, ~~making a soft slap.~~ "I call it Starhawk. When loosed, whether it strikes its target or not, I can call it back. Also, if someone attempts to steal or use Starhawk against me, it will burn its way free and return to me."

Tulip whistled in appreciation. "Nice. Now, if you ever need either of us, just send word. As you can see, we have many ways to get to you."

"Don't worry about me. I plan on finishing my training with Master Turk and, hopefully, become a member of the Set." Mehrle sheathed her blade.

"We know the Set are the Trade's enforcers, but the work they do puts them at risk. ~~s-~~So, there is a cause for concern."

Mehrle shook her head. "What about our recent adventure? Don't tell me you don't remember the perils we had to overcome. I'm thinking your lives will be just as full of jeopardy as mine."

Zeal gently gripped Mehrle's shoulder. "Just try to be as careful as you can, and don't go looking for trouble. Also, let's not allow seasons to pass before we next see each other."

"Listen, Mouse, I'm not the one who attracts danger to them. ~~I-~~ That's you! Stay alert." ~~She~~Mehrle gestured toward Kit and Tulip. "Thankfully, you are in good company, as am I with the Set."

Kit huffed. *Striker will miss you.*

Mehrle laughed. "I should return to visit you all just to have a ride in the sky on him. Make sure ~~that bay, sans Hippogriff, is treated well.~~

I will see it done.

Mehrle knelt and held Kit's head. "I know you will. You and Zeal be good to each other, and you both watch over Tulip."

Kit ran her tongue across Mehrle's face. *We are Pride. The Pride will feed. Return to us when you desire warmth.*

Zeal, along with Tulip, gathered Mehrle in ~~his~~their arms after she regained her feet. The three held each other for a long moment. Mehrle broke away and hurried out the door without looking back.

Commented [KG9]: Pretty restricted in understanding to someone who's just come out of book 2...

Tulip couldn't help staring at the changes that soon-to-be-six seasons had made in her former home. In some areas, new construction replaced what had been familiar ~~building-ones~~. Businesses were not where they were supposed to be. The ways were more crowded. People didn't smile, offer a greeting, nor seem as warm as she recalled from her past. Folk openly stared at Kit ~~as she roideing~~ on Zeal's shoulders, ~~but i-~~It might have been worse had Kit trailed along with them like a dog. Strange—there were no other felines about. How could she feel so out of place?

As they approached 59 Gull Way, ~~Tulipshe~~ saw that Master Feneas's residence was as she remembered. The property's boundaries were formed by gardens lush with growth. A cobble-stone drive ~~wouned~~ past the front of the two-story cottage and ended at an oval carriage house. Trees bearing fruits and nuts were almost ready for harvest. The estate was still without fence, wall, or guards.

Zeal rapped on the door three times with the skull-shaped brass knocker then took a step back.

The skull's eyes glowed red and its mouth moved as it spoke. "Zeal, Kit, Tulip, do come in, and wipe your feet."

There was a soft click as the door unlocked.

Zeal opened the door and nodded for ~~Tulipher~~ to enter. As she crossed the threshold, ~~Tulip saw a male figure, dressed head to toe in sky blue, hurriedying down the steps to the entrance. She would have known him anywhere.~~

"Qwen!" ~~she cried,~~

~~She rusheded forward into the man's open arms for him tohe held ready and was envelop hered by them. HeQwen~~ smelled of fresh-baked honey scones. ~~AsShe heard the door clicked closed behind Tulipher, and out of the corner of her eye saw Kit raced up the steps while.~~

~~A scuffing Bbehind her, informed her that unlike herself, Zeal scuffed his feet onhad made use of the doormat untilthen. She released Qwen to allow him to gawe him aZeal welcome.~~

"We didn't expect to find you here," Zeal ~~said, hi's~~ voice ~~husky~~

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Commented [KG10]: See, this is just a guy in space. Sort of paints a picture but in early chapters you need an emotional picture, for your readers. Who he is (in very brief) relative to Tulip and Zeal and Feneas—to clue us in to why they're all excited

~~and was~~ filled with emotion ~~and sounded husky to her when he spoke.~~

"Well, I didn't anticipate having the three of you pay Feneas a visit while I was with him today, either. I would have known Tulip had I met her on the street, but you, Zeal, I never would have recognized."

Tulip raised her hand ~~to get Qwen's attention.~~ "We weren't aware ~~that~~ you were acquainted with Master Feneas."

Zeal turned to her. "It's probably because they are both Practitioners."

Qwen shook his head. "Actually, I sought him out upon my return to Arlanda, after taking care of a foul bit of business associated with Liddea's abduction. The two of you had already left for Havensharth. I had to meet Feneas upon learning from the Trade Master that Feneas had discovered ~~you~~ Zeal, ~~was~~ ~~ere~~ a Phosfire and had the potential to become a Practitioner. Since then, Feneas, Essmee, and I have developed a wonderful friendship."

~~Tulip thought~~ Zeal sounded surprised ~~when he next spoke.~~

"Master Feneas introduced you to Mother Essmee?"

Qwen chuckled. "Not at first. I didn't discover the existence of Shadow Cats until I intervened between you and Listina in Havensharth. I shared my discovery of Kit and her unique abilities with Feneas, who then introduced me to Kit's mother, Essmee. It was much later, ~~after~~ ~~with~~ Kit's strong recommendation, that Essmee accepted me."

Zeal looked ~~towards~~ ~~toward~~ the steps. "Can you tell us why Mother Essmee is worried about Master Feneas?"

~~Soberly~~ ~~Tulip saw~~ Qwen's facial expression ~~sober before answered~~ ~~ing.~~

"Let's go up. You will see."

Tulip wiped her feet on the mat then quickly ~~bounded past~~ ~~Zeal and Owen as they caught up with the two males who had begun climbing~~ the steps. ~~Zeal allowed her to move ahead of him.~~ At the top of the steps, ~~she brushed through~~ an open door ~~provided entry~~ into a large room. The headboard of a sleeper big enough for four ~~humans~~ or, in this instance, one person and two Shadow Cats,

Commented [KG11]: So again, you are seeming to hope that the characters' reflecting emotion and absorption in memory will translate to your reader... but it doesn't. Especially not after such a long time. So you should consider reading through all these first edited chapters and seeing where you can (without overt exposition and head-hopping) bring through threads of these characters' past and history, so we understand why people are emotional or excited or have deep affection...

occupied the middle of the wall on her right. The floor was covered in pelts. ~~Tulip~~She didn't recognize the beasts that once wore them.

~~Loaded b~~Books ~~on~~ shelves lined two of the cream-colored walls ~~and the room had.~~ ~~It was interesting to note there were~~ no windows, ~~so t-~~The only way ~~to get in~~ or ~~out of~~leave the chamber was through the door they ~~had used to~~ enter. An empty fireplace took up the far corner of the chamber ~~with t-~~Two overstuffed chairs ~~sat~~ in front of it. A glass globe twice the size of ~~Tulip's~~her head hung from the ceiling ~~and g-~~Glowed ~~ing~~ with an inner luminance ~~to light it provided~~ the ~~room space with light.~~

The ~~frail~~ person propped up by several pillows on the sleeper was gaunt, ~~with thin, u-~~and ~~frail appearing.~~ Uncombed ~~thin~~ gray hair ~~hanging~~ limp ~~to~~on his shoulders. ~~His~~The haggard face was drawn by a multitude of lines. ~~He had bright, alert~~The eyes that stared back at ~~Tulip and these~~her were still familiar ~~to her but, a-~~They were ~~bright, and alert.~~ Although she recognized him, she ~~still~~ had difficulty accepting that this man was Master Feneas.

CHAPTER TWO

FENEAS CHUCKLED Feneas chuckled to himself. Essmee stood on the sleeper next to him, ~~h-where they'd been resting.~~ Her eyes ~~were~~ focused on the stairs ~~outseen through~~ the open door ~~to~~ of their chamber. Her tail twitched with impatience.

~~Just then, a~~ small, furry form entered at a run and launched itself into the air, ~~to landing~~ on the sleeper. Feneas's ~~s~~ laugh was cut short by a fit of coughing. When he was able to catch his breath, ~~he saw~~ both Shadow Cats were watching him.

~~"I'm fine! I~~ just choked on my own spittle. Kit, I must say that ~~Essmee and I are quite pleased to see you."~~

Mother, I have felt your worry. What is wrong? Kit ~~mind-spoke both to her mother and Master Feneas, included them all in the discussion.~~

It is Feneas, Essmee replied sadly. H-he is close to his last hunt. ~~Sadness laced Essmee's thoughts.~~

Feneas appreciated ~~that he was~~ being included in their conversation and placed a hand on Essmee's paw, for his comfort and hers. She dropped down next to him ~~as~~ ~~Moving nose to nose,~~ Kit rubbed her face against her mother's, ~~nose to nose~~. Feneas looked at mother and daughter.

"Kit, you look exactly as you did the day Essmee took you to Zeal. I understand from Qwen that you are a Practitioner of the Arts. Therefore, I assume you have used some form of conjure to appear as you are. If you please, Kit, show me how you really look."

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Essmee pawed the sleeper. *There is room.*

Kit backed away to give herself more space and changed to her hunting size.

FeneasHe was impressed. Standing before him, Kit was more than half again the size of her mother. Her tufted ears and tail twitched under his inspection. ~~H~~Interesting, her hind quarters were slightly higher than her shoulders, due to ~~t~~her rear legs being longer than the front ones. FeneasHe figured ~~this gave her~~ ~~she had a~~ greater spring when jumping.

~~The young Shadow Cat's~~Her eyes were large and egg-shaped with black and white markings around them. ~~her~~Kit's coat was a mixture of light gray and tan with a ~~some~~small degree of mottling and clouding. ~~Her~~The fur was short, and Feneas~~he~~ wondered if it felt as soft as it appeared. There ~~were~~ ~~as~~ ~~the~~ hint of ring markings in the tail and striping of ~~her~~ legs, ~~which reminded him~~. Kit was only half Shadow Cat. Essmee had neglected to give him an answer each time he had asked for information regarding Kit's father, ~~but h~~His being a different species might explain Kit's ability to conjure.

"Essmee, you did well when you gave birth to this one."

Essmee rumbled, *Kit is a good provider, and,*

Feneas appreciated her ~~way of laughing~~.

~~I~~When the Shadow Cats ~~shifted their~~ gazes towards the chamber's entrance, ~~so Feneas~~ ~~he~~ knew his other guests were coming up the stairs. He was excited to see Tulip and Zeal again. Qwen, along with Essmee, had kept him up on the boy's doings. ~~That~~ ~~e~~ young one's life had already been full of adventure.

~~As~~ Qwen, ~~who was accompanied by two of his Zephyrs~~, stepped through the door, ~~he was accompanied by two of his Zephyrs, which appeared~~. Feneas saw them as faint, semi-translucent ripples in the air ~~which were hovering~~ close to the ceiling. ~~He had mentioned to Qwen~~ ~~O~~en their first meeting. Feneas had mentioned to Owen that he was able to see Qwen's friends. ~~When asked how, he had replied that~~ because he was a Necromancer, ~~he was~~ able to perceive life and un-life in all its myriad forms. Qwen ~~had then confided~~ ~~then admitted that~~ he was a Tzefire, aligned with the element of air, and ~~then~~ introduced his friends to Feneas.

Commented [KG12]: THIS, on the other hand, is a bald expositional laundry list totally out of character and narration—even if it was cut and tailored to be more a comparison, since he knows Essmee, it would read better. But this is just a full stop in the story for no reason.

Tulip entered Feneas's chamber nearly at Qwen's heels. She had become a lovely young woman. ~~Tulip had grown to~~ just shy of the height of an average male. The hilt of ~~her~~ sword showed above her left shoulder, ~~and~~ Tulip moved as the warrior she had wished to become. ~~She~~ ~~Her survey of the room~~ stopped abruptly ~~upon~~ ~~with her~~ seeing him. ~~Of course, he~~ He knew he did not appear as he had when ~~they~~ had last visited. Essmee was right. His life was ending.

The next person through the door could not be the small boy he remembered. The tall, sun-kissed, well-developed young man ~~could~~ ~~new look~~ ~~Lee, who~~ was a head taller than most, ~~and he was changed~~ ~~in some way, directly in the eyes.~~ Feneas at first couldn't quite place ~~the main change in Zeal at first, but~~ then it came to him.

"Tulip, Zeal, thank you both for visiting. Tulip, as Essmee would say, you have become a mighty hunter. And Zeal, you have filled up."

Qwen laughed. "Didn't you mean to say, Feneas, that Zeal has filled out?"

Feneas shook his head. "No, Zeal knows what I mean. Don't you?"

Zeal smiled. "You are right. I have filled up. You are the only person who has noticed without me explaining first."

The young man's voice had deepened.

"Well, you will just have to tell me how it came about. You know it is a little chilly. Would you mind starting a fire for me, Zeal?" ~~Feneas~~ ~~watched his guests.~~ Qwen looked at him questioningly.

"Feneas, you have no fuel in the fireplace. By the gleam in your eyes, you are up to something."

~~Feneas saw Zeal's face light up with understanding and he Zeal~~ gestured theatrically with one hand. A large blaze appeared in the hearth.

Feneas applauded. "I knew you would succeed in mastering your Phosfire ability. I am proud of both you and Tulip."

~~Zeal moved~~ ~~closer to stand next to him and asked with deep feeling.~~

"Master Feneas, are you ill?"

~~Feneas could tell by the depth of feeling behind Zeal's question~~ ~~that~~ the boy deserved an honest answer. "No, lad, I am old. My life is

Commented [KG13]: All this false choreography of x sees y has to go, everywhere. It's not how it works, James. You know that. You just say what happens. It's implied it's seen and heard by other characters, if it's visible or audible.

nearing its end. I would probably already be gone, but Essmee won't stop feeding me her strength."

You are mine.

"Forever and always, dear one."

~~He saw~~ Zeal glanced towards the Shadow Cats.

"What will happen to Mother Essmee when you are gone?"

~~His question meant Feneas understood Zeal was asking about Essmee and~~ Kit, as well, of course. What became of a Shadow Cat who lost the one to whom ~~she was they were~~ bonded? ~~Feneas~~ He wished he knew. The question had been haunting him, ~~and h-~~ He worried ~~that~~ Essmee was harming herself by helping him. "I don't know, and Essmee won't tell me."

Zeal looked to Tulip. "Maybe someone at the Temple could help him?"

~~She~~ Tulip stepped over and took Zeal's hand. "The Ladies of Life are healers. Master Feneas can't be healed of becoming old."

Qwen ~~moved to them and~~ placed his arms across their shoulders. "I am not the only one who has been looking in on Feneas. Lady Tirteen visits daily to make sure ~~he~~ Feneas eats, and ~~she~~ helps care for his needs. She is the daughter of Master Shell, who took care of your injuries when you were acquiring your Trade Skills."

"Master Feneas, have you talked to Master Ice?"

~~Feneas was captured by Zeal's haunted features.~~

"Not yet my boy, but soon," ~~he replied about Feneas thought momentarily of the young man he and Essmee had trained and raised. Ice had grown up to become a Practitioner of the Arts and also Zeal's m-~~ Mentor, ~~whom Feneas and Essmee had trained and raised.~~ "Now then, there is nothing to be done for me. I don't intend to use the knowledge I have gained of the Necromantic Arts to prolong my existence."

Qwen nodded. "You are not the kind of person to make such a mistake. It never ends well."

Feneas scooted closer to Essmee, ~~He took note of the silent exchange Zeal and Tulip shared. He~~ placed his hands on the sides of her face, and leaned forward. "You have been my life."

~~She~~ Essmee brushed his face with her tongue. *We hunt as one.*