

TAKING
FLIGHT

TOMES OF ASCENSION

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Prologue

THIS WAS NOT WHAT LAURALEE had expected.

When her mother told her she was being sent to the walled city of Russenholde to apprentice beneath Lady Jane, she had expected high society, mingling with the nobility of the hardy folk, manipulating and controlling the whims and mood of court. After all, the only other time she had met Jane, the woman had seemed the perfect socialite, dressed in the highest fashion and speaking with the cocksure confidence of someone used to getting exactly what she wanted.

Instead, Lauralee found herself trudging through the ancient, mouldering aqueducts beneath the city. Rats squeaked just out of sight, and foul-smelling grey water sloshed about her wax-coated boots. The wax was supposed to stop the stench seeping in permanently and with only two pairs, she hoped it worked. They were on an incline, heading steadily down, and it was all she could do to keep just her boots, and not the rest of her, in the filth as she slipped and slid her way down.

Infuriatingly, her new mistress had the magic to float bare inches over the putrid water's surface. Apparently, that magic couldn't be extended to Lauralee. Her mother and she could not use magic. Something about their blood, but for just that reason she always carried scrolls to dispel other's spells before they could cause her harm. She was very tempted to use one of those precious scrolls now to drop Jane into the sludge.

If any were to see them, they'd be hard pressed to find a pair more out of place. Jane still projected that same impression she had first given Lauralee, with her beautiful auburn hair, flickering to an orange-red at its curling tips. It hung in long tresses over the elegant, tight fitting black gown she wore to show off her shapely figure, which, miraculously, picked up none of the filth that infested this place. A wand hung lazily in her right hand, dancing between her fingers as she twirled it idly. Meanwhile, Lauralee looked every part the vagabond adventurer, with her close-cropped white hair, pale, almost boyish features, garbed in her travellers' leather cloak, which she did her best to hold from the muck.

Neither belonged down here, as far as Lauralee was concerned. Jane had not even told her their reason for coming to this place, with none of her guards, without her husband, without any of the protections and guardians she would normally surround herself with. Lauralee supposed she should be honoured. Mostly, she just wanted a bath.

'We're nearly there,' came Jane's melodious tones, and Lauralee nearly stumbled into her mistress's back.

After staring at it in the dark for so long she hadn't noticed it growing closer. She pulled herself to a halt hurriedly and the filth around her ankles sloshed loudly, echoing in the tunnels. Jane spun with silent grace in the air, turning to face her and said, 'Don't look so dour darling, you're about to bear witness to a very important moment for us all. Besides, didn't your mother tell you your face will stick that way if you wear a frown too long?' A smirk played across her lips as her manicured hand reached over to pinch Lauralee's cheek. Lauralee flinched in response. Her sisters and aunts might've been habitually physically affectionate, but Lauralee still felt uncomfortable at the touch of anyone but her mother.

'You still haven't told me what we're doing here,' Lauralee said, trying not to sound like she was sulking.

'That is because it is a ward's duty to observe and learn by silently doing so. If you had any part to play here, you would know, my dear. For now, all you need to do is watch, so you can tell your mother all about this in due time. Now, come along, we shouldn't keep them waiting.'

With that, she spun back around and drifted forward, a globe of light materialising at the tip of her wand as she went. Lauralee, curious as to who "they" were, followed. They came to an unnatural intersection; the wall of the aqueduct had been broken in on one side, providing access to a natural cavern, from which a strange smell rose; like burnt bread or

roasting fat. Lauralee was surprised she was able to pick out the smell over the greywater, but something about it tingled in the back of her throat, catching in her mind.

Jane drifted into the cavern and touched down upon the dry rock. Lauralee followed eagerly, having dry ground beneath her feet was a small reward for the journey so far. Before they continued, Jane turned to her and without a word of explanation, incanted a short spell. Lauralee flinched as the wand pointed at her, then stood relieved as the greywater, along with its scent, slid off her cloak and boots.

‘So jumpy,’ Jane tittered. ‘You do need to learn to relax dear, though I suppose you do take after your mother,’ she mused as she turned and walked down through the tunnel without another word. Lauralee hurried to keep up.



IT WAS ANOTHER FIVE MINUTES of walking before the cave opened up. They stepped into a natural atrium which thrummed with the eerie blue glow of bioluminescent fungus. Standing at the bottom of a craggy depression in the centre of the room, half in shadow, were two figures.

The smaller of the two turned to face them as they approached. It wore dank, mouldering robes, coloured grey, tinted blue by the fungus light, which clung to its form in the same way cobwebs cling to rafters. Though shorter than its partner, it was tall, head and shoulders over Lauralee and stood with an awkward, stooping posture extending one arm towards them in greeting as they approached. That arm seemed to short-circuit something in Lauralee’s mind. Looking at the figure, she knew something was off, unnatural, but couldn’t figure out what.

A moment later, it clicked. The arm reaching toward them was not the only one on its left side, the other hanging slack in its sleeve, starting some halfway down the creature’s chest. Its hood sat strangely, as if it were draped over horns. Most of its face was lost in shadow, but what she could see was smiling, wide and predatory, lips melted to teeth where flesh had run like wax spread wide in a shark’s all too cheerful grin.

She looked past it to its fellow, her eyes roving, looking for anything else to focus on, but its companion was no better. Hulking, huge, it stood an easy eight, maybe nine feet tall. It would have been even taller, had it not stood in a painful stoop, back bent almost double beneath the weight

of... what? At first, she took it to be covered in armour, plate mail, akin to a knightly bodyguard. But that wasn't armour. It was thick and grew in random protrusions, with waving fronds of vegetation growing from it. It was like someone had ripped a chunk from a coral reef, animal life and all and wrapped it around what, at a stretch, could be called a man.

No, she wasn't quite sure she could bring herself to call this thing a man. Its massive arms scraped the floor with chitinous pincers, and its head – god, its head. The flesh of the scalp was ripped back to meld into its verdurous carapace, keeping its head pulled hard upright, while its eyes, having escaped their sockets, waved on stalks made from skin and muscle twined together like cord. They turned to stare straight at her. They were so red, and yet all too human. There was so much pain in those eyes.

Lauralee had seen many terrible things since becoming her mother's daughter, done terrible things too, but she doubted any moment would sit as stark in her memory as this one. She felt something her mother had promised her she'd never have to feel again, felt something she was not meant to be able to feel. That cold shudder running down her spine. Looking into those eyes, all she wanted to do was run.

'The Scholar does not like to be kept waiting,' said the smaller of the two. Its voice was like a man screaming for help as he drowned. Each word bubbled up from somewhere deep within him, through a morass of fluid. She was sure it drooled as it spoke. Something hissed on the floor.

However terrifying they were, Jane seemed none affected, gracing the creature with an indulging smile as if she was humouring a petulant child's bravado.

'Well, then it is a good thing you are not the Scholar, isn't it? Besides darling, have you not heard of being fashionably late? It would've been uncouth if I'd shown up right on schedule.'

The creature stared at her silently for so very long. Was it trying to make sense of what Jane had said? Or was it just deciding whether or not it should kill them? Lauralee didn't dare lower a hand to her knives, but she did edge subtly behind Jane. The creature's head ticked to one side hard, like an owl eyeing prey.

'You will be on time if you have further dealings with the Scholar, or payment will not be given,' it announced. It was so bizarre, its words were that of a clerk, a merchant, but its voice, its body, were the sheer stuff of nightmares. What payment?

'I will keep that in mind if, for some reason, I wish to return down

here,' Jane said, reaching into the satchel hung at her side to retrieve a massive, silk-wrapped tome. Suddenly the atmosphere in the cavern shifted, a mantle of dread settled over Lauralee as she saw a change come over the creatures before her. They stood more alert now, puppet strings pulled taut as if there was something else gazing through them. The robed ones' two left arms reached for the book, and Jane pulled her hand back.

'My payment?'

Another voice spoke from its lips. It was deep, rumbling, and spoke with a natural poetic cadence that rolled in and out. It put Lauralee in mind of the tide.

'You will find, Lady Jane. That I'm very generous. With those who serve me. I have your payment. I have included extra. A spell-book, a gift. In it, details. Tools. Information you'll need soon.'

'Icaria, I presume?' Jane purred, not skipping a beat. That must've been the Scholar's name, Lauralee supposed.

'Indeed, that is I. A pleasure, meeting truly. You are as I guessed.'

'Quite, well, it's not truly face-to-face, now, is it? But then I suppose it will do,' Jane said in a mellifluous purr.

Rather than reply, the creature twitched a hand and its hulking aide turned, loping to the side, where it picked up what looked to be a coffin by a chain hung from a forged metal ring in the lid. It dragged it to them, as the robed creature produced a large tome of its own from within its robes and held it out with its right hand. Its two left hands sat waiting. A short silence ensued, before it was broken by Jane.

'And my creatures? The forces you have promised to me?' Jane asked, still holding the tome.

'They await your call. They are hidden for now. They are close indeed. Close to your manor, your home.'

Jane grinned and, only then, finally, did she extend the book. The robed creature, the servitor of this scholar, this Icaria, took it and proffered the other to her. Jane accepted, slid the book smoothly into her satchel, and looked to the coffin.

'It is asleep, yes? Will it wake if I remove it from the coffin?'

'No.' The burbling, gasping voice had returned. 'Powerful enchantments will keep it asleep for some time. But it will need to be returned to the coffin in time to keep it at rest.'

'Good, then I think that should be all, yes? I look forward to calling upon your creatures later to inspect them. The book has the details?'

‘Yes.’ With that, the creature turned and began walking away, its companion following. Once they were gone, Jane’s smile grew wider and she stepped close to inspect the coffin, undoing the locks to crack it open, before peering inside. Her smile grew truly predatory then.

‘What were they? What is that?’ Lauralee asked her mistress, arms gesturing helplessly between the creatures and the coffin they’d left behind, beginning to approach it in desperate search of answers. A glance from Jane warned her away.

‘Them? They’re not important. Not anymore. They’ve served their purpose until I have a future need for them. Servants of some ancient mad wizard who thinks himself a god, not knowing what they’ve given up. I heard tell of them through some hearsay rumours and was able to get their attention enough for an exchange of letters, surprisingly nice handwriting. Did cost quite a few servitors of my own, though.’

She reached a hand into the coffin, her smile turning almost tender for a moment, then she leaned away, closing the coffin, and twirling the red feather she had retrieved between her fingers, smelling it with relish.

‘So, what did they give up?’

‘She’s a demigod, Lauralee, and now, she’s mine. Even if that fool wizard thinks the tome can grant him divinity, having the real deal is so much greater. Come.’

She summoned up an arcane well of force beneath the coffin, keeping it suspended unsteadily off the ground as she began to pull it along by the chain. She dropped the feather absently as she continued on past Lauralee, who stood wishing she had taken the chance to peer into the coffin, but imagined the contents wouldn’t stay hidden from her much longer. She had so many questions she wanted to ask, but that wild, dangerous look in Jane’s warned her they could wait for now.



AS THEY DEPARTED, NEITHER WOMAN took note of the feather left on the floor. Its tips began to smoulder and burn until it was wholly alight. Within those flames, within the light of the burning divine feather, a silhouette began to form. In moments, the feather was nothing but ash, and nestled atop it was a small red songbird. Looking around, it let out a chirping song before taking flight, making its own way from the caverns.