

Dark Mists of Ansalar- Blood of Dragons

Chapter 1

24 Brinaren CY631

The heat was oppressive in the rocky mountain pass. Aeris stumbled for the third time and cursed to herself in hinterlic. She narrowed her eyes at Lorak, who chuckled as he walked beside her. The dusty larian she was leading snorted through her nose, and Aeris rolled her eyes as she felt the wetness from the spray begin to roll down her arm. Lorak chuckled even more, and only when he caught her glaring at him did he bother to hide his laughter behind the arm he raised in front of his face.

“Just think, Aeris. It could be worse. It could be *raining*,” chuckled the ranger.

Aeris pursed her lips but said nothing. She wasn't feeling very well, and not for the first time she wished that they had a cleric in their midst. Such a person would know what types of herbs they could use to reduce the effects of illness, and perhaps she wouldn't have to suffer needlessly.

Raissa fell into step beside her, leading her own mount. “We can stop if you want, Aeris. It won't hurt to rest for a few hours longer this night. Besides, you need it.”

Aeris shook her head. “No. I want to make it out of this pass before tomorrow evening. If we stop early today, then we will be stuck here for another night.”

Raissa shook her head. “It isn't all that bad. We have met very little trouble so far.”

“But that doesn't mean that we won't. This pass holds too much significance in my family history. The sooner we are out, the better,” said Aeris adamantly.

Raissa was quiet after Aeris' declaration. She was well aware of Aeris' dislike of their location and why. It was within the Ratik Pass that Aeris' mother had met her grandfather, Thane Darnesse, and killed him before he laid waste to her and the rest of the group who followed her. The Wildrunners had won the battle, but the negative aura surrounding the pass remained. Aeris and her brothers grew up hearing the stories: how their mother had made Thane a mortal once again, and that Adrianna's sister had struck the final blow that would finally put him to rest forever.

For the rest of the day the small group progressed through the Ratik Mountain Pass. Upon leaving Elvandahar a few months ago, Lorak, Doran, and Mavik had been asked to accompany Aeris and Raissa to Andahye. The three young rangers had agreed to the task, and once the women reached the city, they went to the Vanderlinde Academy and took the required tests that would place them within the ranks of other journeyman spell-casters.

For two weeks they were in Andahye. Aeris and Raissa passed their tests and the group then journeyed to the city of Celuna, located within the realm of Monaf on the eastern side of the Ratik Mountain range. It hadn't been part of the original plan, but the women had a way of getting what they wanted. Besides, the rangers weren't against an adventure themselves, and they required very little persuading. They spent a few days there, and then headed back west towards Elvandahar.

Finally the group stopped for the evening. Aeris started the fire and began to

prepare the tea while Raissa set out the tents and bedrolls. Meanwhile, Lorak saw to the larian and Mavik and Doran hunted for their evening meal. Aeris was glad to finally be out of the pass and thought perhaps they could make another detour to the city of Sangrilak before finally heading home. She wouldn't mind seeing Volstagg again, and then stopping to make a visit to Tianna and Triath Solanar, parents of her brother's closest friend, Tigerius. The man was a scoundrel, and his mother and father deserved to know that he was up to no good. Aeris had received the 'pleasure' of seeing Tigerius while they were in Celuna, and his activities were focused around the more unsavory variety. He was a trouble-maker, and Aeris hoped that perhaps she would be doing him a favor if his parents knew of his, rather reprehensible, activities.

Aeris sniffed disdainfully at the pathetic fire. Under different circumstances, she could have done much better. But as it was, she hardly felt up to the task and thought that she might fall asleep right there at the spot. But the tea was beginning to boil, and the men would soon be back with something for the stew pot. Aeris was no cook, but the group relied on her to make the meat at least somewhat edible. She lamented her inadequacies, as well as those of everyone else in their group. Could not at least one of the rangers her father chose to accompany her know how to prepare a simple meal?

Raissa and Lorak completed their own activities just as Mavik and Doran returned with some ptarmigan for the stew pot. Aeris took the birds from Doran, and Mavik winked at her before accepting his mug of tea. She swore that he was sweet on her, but had yet to make any overtures. Not that she would have responded to them if he had. Aeris wasn't interested in anything the young man might offer her, which was, most likely, only a frolic in the bed-furs. She wanted something a bit more tangible from a man, a solid foundation for a future more promising than simply the wife of a ranger.

Aeris shook her head. No, that wasn't quite it. Her mother was the wife of a ranger. Yet, Adrianna was also much, much more. She was one of the founders of the academy that she and Dinim had constructed when the Wildrunners returned to Elvandahar after their battle with Lord Aasarak.

It was at the Medubrokan Academy that Aeris herself had been trained in the art of dimensional magic, and Dinim had been her master for as long as she could remember being there. She was early to exhibit her Talent, just out of childhood at a mere fifteen years of age. Her mother had decided that it would be best for her co-founder to train her daughter, feeling that perhaps she had too much vested within Aeris to make a proper teacher. Aeris had no complaints. Dinim was an excellent master. He had taught her well enough for her to pass her tests at the Vanderlinde Academy with flying colors. The masters there had congratulated her upon her skills, and she had given credit where the credit was due.

Aeris handed one of the ptarmigan off to Raissa and the two women made quick work of removing the feathers and gutting the birds before roasting them over the spit. Soon after, the meat was added to the stew pot, and while the rangers sparred with their staves, the meal cooked slowly over the fire. Aeris leaned back on a rock, one of the many that were strewn around the pass. It was then that she began to hear the strange trilling sound.

Aeris frowned as she listened. Oddly, it sounded as though the noise was coming from beneath them. Within moments the sparring had stopped, and all five of them were focused upon the sound that seemed to be coming from right below the encampment.

The sound became louder, and suddenly there was an eruption.

From out of the ground in the middle of the encampment emerged a huge creature. The worm reared above the group, most of its long brownish body concealed below the ground from which it had come. It appeared to have no eyes. Its mandibles were huge, and it was from the strange nodule at the top of its head that the trilling sound was generated. Aeri had only heard of creatures such as this . . . behiraz that burst from the ground, devouring all that was within its range.

Aeri jumped up from her position near the fire. Raissa had done the same, and the three young rangers eyed the worm from the other side of the encampment. Aeri considered running from the threat that the worm presented, but she had heard that the behiraz were fast, much too fast for her to escape. And then what of her comrades? She couldn't very well leave them behind.

As Aeri began to concentrate upon her first spell, Raissa did the same. The rangers waited for the behiraz to attack, and possibly didn't even know what they faced. The only reason Aeri knew was because she had seen it once in one of the many manuals she had been bade to read whilst in training at the academy. It was a creature that was rarely seen, commonly making their existence within the temperate hills and mountains.

Aeri cast her spell just as the worm made its first attack. The lightning arced from her fingertips as the behiraz lunged for Doran. Within the sharp mandibles of the worm, Doran screamed as he was brought before the yawning maw. Then he was gone. Aeri's *Lightning* spell struck the behiraz just before Raissa's *Flamesphere*. The creature emitted an eerie wail from atop its head, and Aeri found herself cringing from the sound.

The worm fully emerged from the ground. It was long, so long that it coiled its body against itself. At the tip of its tail was something that appeared to be a sharp stinger. It dripped with fluid, and Aeri could only imagine that it was some type of poison. Mavik and Lorak attacked the creature with their swords, an attempt to penetrate the thick hide. But it was to no avail. The tail end of the creature descended. It missed Lorak by only a hairsbreadth, and when it swung around to grab Mavik with its mandibles, it was an unexpected move. Mavik had disappeared within the maw of the worm just before her second spell was cast. Aeri watched as her *Lightning* struck the creature yet again, this time leaving a scorched mark on its thick hide. The worm shrieked again, and Aeri had to struggle not to put her hands over-top her ears.

Raissa completed her incantation, and another *Flamesphere* hit the worm. In response to the flame, the creature coiled more tightly around itself. Deep scores of flesh fell from its body and Aeri could almost sense its hesitation . . . perhaps the cost wasn't worth continuing the meal it had chosen for itself.

But then the worm struck again. Aeri felt her heart almost stop in her chest as she saw the stinger descend upon her. She was quick to move, but she wasn't quite fast enough. Aeri fell as the thick body of the worm moved into her line of vision, blocking her escape route. The stinger embedded itself into her thigh and pinned her to the ground. She immediately felt the poison begin to work its way through her body as she saw Raissa get picked up by the worm. The woman was torn in two before she reached the creature's mouth.

Aeri suddenly felt herself gasping for breath. The poison was doing something to her, stopping her from being able to breathe. She saw Lorak fighting the worm,

piercing it with his sword, the glow of it permeating the darkness that had begun to descend. *His blade must be enchanted . . .* But then Aeris lost the thought as she succumbed to the darkness.

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Aeris slowly awoke to the feeling of silk beneath her fingertips. She slid her hand over the smooth fabric and knew herself to be in bed. She shifted her body and was about to begin a stretch, when the pain invaded her consciousness.

Aeris' eyes snapped open, and she groaned deeply. What in the Nine Hells had happened? Her gaze took in her surroundings, most of which were hidden to her due to the gauzy dark green canopy that enveloped the large bed in which she lay. Aeris struggled to sit upright, despite the terrible pain in her leg, and once she was able, she moved aside the veil nearest her.

Aeris found herself to be within a large chamber. The stone floors were covered by expansive rugs. The furnitures appeared to be made of the finest wood. They were embellished with engravings and then stained a rich chestnut. Upon the walls were hung lush tapestries and ornate wall scones that held torches. The dancing flames cast shadows among the depictions of exotic landscapes, great battles, and mystical beasts.

By the gods, what am I doing here? Where is 'here'? Her leg ached abominably . . . and where were her clothes? Aeris unconsciously brought the cover up to her chest, which was covered only by a thin camisole. *Where are Raissa and the rangers?*

Suddenly it all came rushing back to her. She remembered the Ratic Pass and how much she hated being there. She remembered the behiraz and the deaths of her comrades. Then there was the excruciating sting of the barbed tail as it entered her leg. But after that there was nothing. She recalled aught of her escape from the monstrous worm, not to mention how she came to be in this chamber. But at least now she knew why she was in so much pain.

With tears in her eyes and a cry in her throat, Aeris jerked the blankets free of her body. She gazed down at her leg, which was wrapped neatly in clean cloths. She felt a mixture of anger and sadness well up inside of her, and she struggled to retain her calm. Her best friend was gone. Aeris would never see Raissa's smiling face or hear her sweet voice ever again. And then there were the others, the three men with whom she had shared her childhood as well. All of them were gone.

Aeris fought the urge to claw the bandages off of her leg. She battled with the realization that she should be back in that Pass with her dead comrades, not here within this chamber, sitting on a bed made for a queen. She tried to resist her need to scream, to call out to the gods in her agony and tell them of how unjust they had been to allow the others to perish while she received the chance to live another day.

But Aeris was not quite so successful with that fight. She screamed as loud as she could, her voice reaching every crevasse within the chamber. Hot tears streamed down her face, and she screamed until she had no breath left. She gasped, and when her chest was full, she screamed again.

Aeris wasn't aware that someone had entered the room until he was standing beside the bed. Her breaths came in ragged gasps, but somehow she was able to form the words she wished to speak. "Where in the Hells am I?" she asked with a hoarse voice.

The man leaned over her and despite the anxious look on his face, he replied in a soothing voice. "Please, calm down. You are going to be just fine. The Master has been taking care of you . . ."

Aeris grabbed the front of the man's tunic and jerked him closer to her, bringing his face so close that she could feel his breath on her nose. "Get me the Hells out of here, right now!"

The man's eyes widened, and only then did Aeris realize how uncommon they were. They were colored a deep gold, and she vaguely thought that they were familiar. But that did not deter her. Aeris pushed back on the man, releasing his tunic. She then scrambled to swing her legs over the sides of the bed.

"Please stop. I will tell you everything if you would just . . ."

Aeris penetrated him with her eyes. "Where are my clothes? By the gods, what have you done with my clothes?" She could sense the increase in the pitch of her voice, but she couldn't seem to control it, nor did she really want to. Her friends were dead, she was lying in a strange bed without her clothes on, and a man with flaming red hair and gold eyes was telling her to remain calm.

Aeris stood up from the bed, having forgotten her injury. She suddenly found herself falling, and then barely being caught before her body hit the floor. She struggled against the hands that held her, raking them with her fingernails. She cried out and realized that the tears continued to fall. She felt the rawness in her throat as she cursed at the man who held her, and she was pleased when she saw the blood that streaked the tops of his hands.

"Pylar, leave her."

Aeris startled when she heard the voice. It was loud as it filled the room, and it exuded power. Aeris was suddenly left to tumble to the floor as the man left her side. She looked in the direction that the voice had come, and when she saw the person who stood at the entry of the chamber, her breath almost caught in her chest. She knew the man because he had been the one to train her mother in the art of Dimensionalism. She had met him only twice in her life, but Aeris would know him anywhere. It was Tallachienan Chroalthone.

Aeris watched in silence as the sorcerer slowly crossed the room. His lavender gaze was critical as it assessed her where she sat on the floor. Aeris suddenly was very aware of her state of undress, but she refused to feel intimidated, and she made no move to try to cover herself. When TC finally stood over her, Aeris just stared up at him. He stood there for a moment, watching her, but his expression had softened.

TC slowly extended his hand out to her, bridging the gap between them. Aeris hesitated only a moment before taking the hand. Then she was being pulled up, caught about the waist, and then guided back onto the side of the bed. She hissed as she seated herself again, and then remained quiet with her head lowered.

Tallachienan looked down at the young woman. Hells, she looked even more like her mother when she was awake than she did when she was sleeping. Her slightly canted eyes were the same dark brown, and her face the same oval shape. The only real differences lay with complexion and hair color. Where Adrianna's skin tone had been a pale gold, her daughter's was deeper. Aeris' hair was a golden red, while Adrianna's had been so pale, it often seemed to be the color of Shandahar's largest moon, Steralion.

It had been many years since TC had seen Damaeris last. At the time, she had

been merely a child. But now it was fully apparent that she was a woman. He was made even more aware of that fact by her state of undress; all she wore was a camisole and her small-clothes. She had her mother's small frame with all of her shapely curves in all of the right places. And aside from her injury, she was in good physical fitness.

Several days ago, one of his journeymen had contacted him via the Travel Notebook. Torres explained that he had killed a behiraz, but not before the creature succeeded in bringing down a small group of young people that had been traveling through the Ratic Mountain Pass. Torres bade TC to come for him, hoping that TC would be able to save the life of the only survivor of the attack. TC had come immediately, and when he saw who that survivor was, he was desperate to get her back to the citadel and into the hands of Hermod.

Aeris should not have lived. The poison had already paralyzed her lungs, and her breaths had stopped. Torres breathed for her until TC came, and that had probably kept her alive long enough for him to get her back through the portal and into the citadel. TC continued what Torres started while he awaited Master Healer Hermod. Then the god had worked his magic. Aeris would not be well for quite some time, but at least she would live.

Aeris finally lifted her head to look up at him. The rims of her eyes were red and puffy and her hair an unruly mass around her shoulders. Her lower lip trembled before she mustered up the will to speak, her voice naught but a whispered croak. "Tell me that I am dreaming."

TC felt his chest constrict with emotion. Her eyes were haunted, and she had become only a glowing ember that remained of the flaming anger and defiance that met him upon his entry to her chamber. Aeris felt the loss of her companions keenly, and TC could not blame her for the outcry. He wished that he could tell her what she wanted to hear, but to do so would be an injustice.

All TC had to do was shake his head. As Aeris' shoulders slumped and she began to cry, TC sighed and seated himself next to her on the bed. He took her in his arms and held her tightly against him. The young woman clutched at the front of his robes, and she sobbed piteously onto the wall of his chest. TC just sat there and stared solemnly into the space before him.

The breeze was cool and brisk, a herald to the end of the youth and vibrancy of the warm season. As all good things come to an end, so must also the joy of summer. The tinkle of her sweet laughter drifted to him in the winds and he reveled in it, opened himself to the simple delight of her presence. He turned as she emerged from around the bend, her once youthful body now bent and creased with age. The jauntiness was gone from her step, and silver had overtaken the locks of her dark hair. Over one arm hung a basket of flowers, those last remaining valicas and lirylocs of the season. They were her favorite ones, all shades of fuchsia, indigo, and azure. Her blue eyes shone with happiness and Tallachienan felt his heart melt at the sight of his sister, still the epitome of beauty despite her advanced age.

Briyana slowed as she neared him, her lips pursing slightly as she turned her face to look up at him. "Don't look at me like that Talli. I know what you are thinking."

TC shook his head. "I will bet you have no idea." He crossed his arms at his chest and struggled for an expression of nonchalance. It had become difficult for him

over the past few years. As TC remained young and strong, he was forced to watch as his little sister began to wrinkle and shrink into the tiny woman before him. The years simply did not ravage him as they did other people, and he had come to the conclusion that it must be something about his paternal parentage that gave him that attribute. While TC was the son of some mysterious man whose identity his mother had never truly divulged to him, Briyana had been sired by a 'normal' man whom TC had met on several occasions. And incidentally, she would age as any other 'normal' woman.

Yet, Tallachienan had not stayed idle. Over the years, as he grew in strength and power, he developed the means to prolong mortal life. The concoction was not perfect and would have to be imbibed every so often to maintain its effect. However, it would serve to keep Briyana with him for as long as she wished it.

But therein lay the problem. Briyana did not want to partake of TC's potion.

His sister's eyes narrowed mischievously and the corner of her pursed lips turned up. TC felt his stoic demeanor crumble. He had never been good at keeping the truth from his Briyana. She had a way of breaking him down like none else could. Yet she was his anchor, his guiding light. She had been there during his most brilliant accomplishments and a shoulder to lean upon after his most dismal failures. It devastated him to know that he would soon be forced to go on without her.

Tallachienan gently took Briyana's shoulders in his hands. "Briya . . . please let me give you the elixir." He smiled tremulously. "We can stand here in the garden this time next year. Your flowers will still be blooming here for you."

Mischief faded into sadness as Briyana brought a frail hand to TC's face.

"Brother, I am not like you. I was not made to live so long. Do you really think I want to keep on this way . . . old and withered? I am hardly able to walk without stumbling. You have to help me every morning and every evening to dress myself. You prepare all of my meals . . ."

"But I don't mind doing those things, Briyana. I would do those things forever if it meant having you here beside me." TC paused and then continued, "I don't want to lose you."

Briyana's lower lip trembled minutely. "But Talli . . . I don't want to be old forever. Your elixir can only lengthen my life. It can't make me young again. Every day is a struggle, and age has brought me pain. Besides, you have Trebexal to keep you company. You don't need an old woman holding you back."

A shimmering tear ran down her cheek. TC cupped his hands around her face, wiping the wetness away with his thumbs. He hated to see her cry and now he wished he had never brought up the subject of the potion. He felt selfish and undeserving of her . . . she who had always given him so much.

Briyana was right. His elixir could not give her the youth and vitality she needed for her to have a wholesome life. It was wrong of him to want her to stay by him when all she wanted was to rest . . . to be free of the fetters of old age. He swept her up in his arms and he had the pleasure of hearing her laugh once more. It was a song to his soul . . . all he needed until the end.

TC stared solemnly into the darkness of the chamber. Briyana had died centuries ago before the cataclysm that brought about the Cycling of the world. But he remembered that day like it was yesterday, remembered holding her in his arms as she

took her final breaths. At first it had seemed like a dream. But the passing of Time made it real and he mourned. He had mourned the way Adrianna's daughter now mourned for her lost comrades. He wished he could tell the young woman that it was a dream and when she awakened her friends would still be there at her side. But not even Master Tallachienan Chroalthone was that powerful.

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From the corner of her eye, Aeris glanced at the man who walked beside her and smiled to herself. It was late, and TC was escorting her back to her chamber. After dinner, they had played Shockwave, a complex game in which one was at the mercy of the bones that were cast and the cards that were dealt. She wasn't that good at it yet, but with some more practice with Pylar during the day, she hoped that she would soon be a worthy opponent for the Master.

Aeris' chambers were not far from Tallachienan's, and it was not much longer before they reached their destination. Aeris paused before opening the door, and then turned to face TC. He regarded her intently and once more she marveled at his youthfulness. His thick black hair was pulled back and tied at the nape of his neck with a velvet cord. Black brows winged over lavender eyes and his mouth delicately sculpted beneath a noble nose.

She couldn't help looking at him. He was quite possibly the finest man she had ever seen. She knew that her perceptions were jaded, for he was a god, and she only a mortal woman. And yet, Master TC was so . . . old. Her mother had told her the stories of her life in the citadel whilst she trained to become a Dimensionalist. That was almost forty years ago. Gods only knew how many years he had lived before that.

"Thank you for another fine evening, my Lord. We must do it again sometime soon." Her eyes twinkled as she spoke, for she already knew his response.

TC let his gaze linger on her full lips for a moment before he replied. "You know that will be tomorrow evening, Lady." TC felt the corner of his mouth twitch upwards as he tried to keep himself from smiling at her silliness.

Aeris nodded and opened the door to her chamber. She then slipped inside, smiled, and then closed the door gently behind her. TC stood there for a moment, staring at the closed door. He then turned and walked back down the hall to his own chambers.

It had been two weeks since Aeris first awakened from her poison-induced sleep. Since then, she had healed nicely. Soon she would be strong enough to return home. But Tallachienan wasn't ready to think about that just yet. It was a pleasure to have her within the citadel, and he knew that Pylar felt the same way. For his bond-mate, it was like having a little bit of Adrianna back again . . . and for TC it was much more. Granted, Aeris was like her mother in many ways; but there were many other things that made her so different.

TC would have greatly enjoyed having Aeris as his apprentice. She was intelligent and always quick to catch on to what he was teaching her. In that way, she was much like Adrianna. She was proficient in her skills and abilities, and TC felt proud to know that it was Dinim who had molded her into such a fine spell-caster.

However, it was more than just pride and admiration that TC felt for Adrianna's daughter. He felt drawn to her. He found himself thinking about her all day whilst he

was instructing his students, waiting for the evening to draw near. Then, when the time finally came, he was relieved to be in her presence and reveled in the happiness her mere presence brought him.

How these feelings had come about, TC was not certain. He delved into his inner mind, exploring the possibilities. Was it because she reminded him so much of Adrianna? If he had the daughter, would he somehow have the mother again? Or was it more simple than that . . . merely that he found her attractive and wanted to have her because of that fact alone? Mayhap it was more complex. He was aware of the origins of their ancient bloodline. Somehow did that blood call out to him in an inexplicable way?

Did it matter?

TC fought the urge to get up and pace the floors. Who would ever have thought that this could happen to him? He felt torn; he knew that he should keep his distance from her because he knew of the effects he had on mortal women. He didn't want her to feel an attraction that would otherwise not be there. But at the same time, he wanted to submit to his desires. He wanted to go to that chamber and claim Aeris as his own.

Finally TC made his decision. He would choose the middle ground. He would neither keep his distance nor stake a claim on her. He would leave well enough alone for now and wait to see what would happen. Yet, in the meantime, he would go to see her in the morning before he met his apprentices in seminar. Perhaps he would invite her to sit in on the discussion and see if she had anything to offer to it.

Aeris slipped beneath the blankets and then pulled them over her shoulders. Her mind was full of Tallachienan and what he had come to mean to her these past two weeks as she recovered from her battle with the behiraz. In both body and mind Aeris had found healing. When she was finally able, she explored the citadel. She spent much of her time in the huge libraries, but even more in the gardens and courtyards. Aeris remembered her mother describing the darkness of the citadel, but Aeris felt none of that oppressiveness. She even liked the stone walls that surrounded her, and preferred it to the treetop daladins of Elvandahar.

On a few occasions, Aeris came into contact with TC's apprentices and journeymen. TC must have told them that she was a visitor, for they nodded to her as they happened by in the corridors. Other than that, they paid her little mind. Most of them seemed preoccupied, and she remembered her own days of intense study. Master Dinim had often been hard on her, but in the end the work paid off. Her training ended a full year before that of her other classmates, and she was free to take her tests in Andahye.

There were a couple of days when TC was able to see her during the day. He put her through her paces, and even taught her a thing or two. His methods were not too different from those of Master Dinim or her mother, and she found the familiarity to be comforting. She also found herself feeling that she was part of something that encompassed much more than the academy she left behind in Elvandahar. And then there was the Master himself.

Aeris sighed softly in the darkness. She knew that she was a fool. She shouldn't be thinking about Master TC in such a way, but she couldn't help it. In his presence she knew contentment like she had never known before, and all she could think was that she

wanted him to pull her into his arms and never let her go. His lavender gaze seemed to penetrate her very soul, peeling aside the layers of her innermost self to expose the love beginning to blossom from within.

Aeris felt the tears that began to burn beneath her closed eyelids. Yes, she knew that she loved Tallachienan. She realized the futility of her situation: he was a god and she a mortal. Yet, it didn't matter much to the heart that seemed to beat just for him. Despite never having felt it before, Aeris knew that it was love. Her soul cried out for him, and when he was near, her skin tingled in anticipation of his touch.

But Aeris knew how he must see her. To him, she was still but a child, the daughter of one who had once been his student. TC had seen the Cycles change, had watched the history of the world unfurl countless times. He was quite probably the most powerful sorcerer that walked Shandahar. There would be no reason for him to view her as anything more than a fledgling spell-caster, nothing about her that would make him want her . . . need her the way she knew she would soon come to need him.

Aeris knew what she needed to do. She was almost completely healed of the wound she suffered from the behiraz. Realistically, she need not remain in the citadel any longer. By staying, she only delayed the inevitable, the confrontation she knew awaited her back home. She also made it more difficult for herself. The longer she stayed, the more her feelings would grow for Tallachienan.

Aeris resolutely turned on her side, took the closest pillow, and wrapped her arms around it. She would awaken early, prepare her belongings, and then tell Tallachienan that she wished to go home. It was that simple, and he would not refute her. Most likely, he would feel relieved that he would not have to entertain her in the evenings anymore. Aeris would go home, and she would forget that she ever met Master Tallachienan Chroalthone.