

# Chapter Four

## Worthy of Being Chosen

Reality roiled into a kaleidoscope of colored lights swimming across Malant Cor's field of vision.

*It's like openin' my eyes under water, but everythin' looks crisp and clear. I just can't tell what anythin' is!*

Irritation mixed with worry welled inside him. After two seasons working with the Essance, he should be better at this. And he could make no mistakes this day if he was to have any hope of earning the last endorsement he needed.

*I must be allowed to go train in Hathoolan. I simply must!*

"Now, Malant. Focus. Bend your mind to see the room around you." Sier Sarlimac, Malant's primary instructor, stood in front of him—an ethereal version of him, anyhow.

*I ain't never gonna get used to that.*

A dizzying array of colors formed everything else Malant saw through the Sight of Sukai.

The soft whisper of his Sier's robes tickled his ears in the otherwise silent room. "Tell me what I'm holding."

Strain as he might, Malant couldn't separate the multitude of swirling colors that represented the room from anything his teacher might or might not be holding.

Irritation morphed into frustration.

Clenching his jaws, he drew a deep breath in through his nose and held it. Too much rode on his performance this day.

He conjured up images of home. His ma and papa laughing and singing in the communal dining hall. Playing Barca with his younger brother, Arderi or cousin Siln. Teasing his little sister, Tary. As they always did, the memories grounded him, reminding him that this Plane was more than what could be seen through the Sight of Sukai.

A calmness washed his mind free of the emotions threatening to overwhelm him, and he regained some of his composure. Letting the breath out through his mouth, he fixed his gaze upon the outstretched hands of his ghostly teacher. Allowing the floating dots—

*Spectals.*

—to differentiate one from another on their own, he stopped trying to force the issue. Within a few heartbeats, a square object emerged, becoming distinct from the background. The item didn't take on any actual shape. Rather, to his mind, connections formed between the Spectals inside whatever Sarlimac held, interacting in a way

Malant still failed to understand. Soon, other patterns emerged, and the room's contents took shape in the bright, multi-colored Sight of Sukai.

Once Malant was certain of his surroundings, he found the confidence to answer. "Ya hold a book, Sier."

"Impressive." His instructor's voice held a tinge of something more.

Malant sat up straighter, a smile curling the corners of his lips. It disappeared as his eyebrows knitted together. "Then why's it still so hard to control?"

"Patience, boy. It normally takes ten seasons or more to fully control Sukai. The Essence doesn't give up its secrets easy." Sier Sarlimac stepped away, the Spectals creating the book he held dissolving into the background as he moved.

Once the man stopped, it took mere moments for the book to discern itself once more. "Do ya still see the book's pattern?"

Nodding, Malant licked his lips. His imagination raced trying to guess what his next task could be. It wouldn't be something as straightforward as picking out the pattern of a book. Sarlimac was too wily for such mundane tactics.

*And I'm certain he'd rather me fail. But I can't for the life of me figure out why.*

Even though the Sier was one of Malant's favorites here at the Acadèmia, the man seemed to be doing everything he could to discourage Malant from accepting the invitation that would open up a whole new way of learning the Essence.

*Methods most Human Shapers can only imagine.*

"See if ya can walk to me without losing the Sight."

And there it was. Malant clamped his mouth shut to cut off an angry protest. No second-season student was required to move while holding the Sight. If this was what the old man required of him, there was no way he was passing this test.

*Why is he tryin' so hard to prevent me from leavin' Mocley?*

His heart sank. All his other Siers had given him their endorsement. Sier Sarlimac was the lone holdout. Over the past tenday, when Malant had approached him to plead his case, the older man had avoided the topic. Or brushed him off saying he had other, *more pressing* duties. The ship sailing for the island home of the Elmorians left in just a few days. What could be more pressing than that?

Malant stood as slowly as he could. He'd be damned if he'd give up now. Still, the simple movement sent the Spectals whirling into a tempest. The area around him once again became a maddened mingling of indistinguishable points of color, and he

couldn't separate them into the patterns that made up the room. Out of reflex, he grabbed the stool he'd been sitting on.

*This is impossible!*

"Hold the Sight, Malant. Here, let me help."

A wispy hand, one that appeared to be made from thick smoke, grasped Malant's elbow, and the unmistakable hint of mint from his teacher's breath invaded his nostrils. Thankful for the aid, but still weary of what awaited him, Malant allowed his instructor to guide him the few steps to the large lab table that dominated the center of the small study. As they walked, the Spectals spun out of focus, making his stomach queasy. If Sier Sarlimac hadn't been holding his arm, he would've either lost the Sight... or fallen.

"Easy. Easy now. There ya are." His teacher grunted. "Don't be too hard on yourself. No Shaper can move and still see things clearly. It's simply a limitation of holding the Sight. But in time, you should master the vertigo, at least."

"Then why make me do it?" Malant spoke before he could stop himself, regretting the bitterness in his tone.

"Cause I needed ya standing here for this next part, and I didn't wanna wait while you regained the Sight." The mater-of-fact way Sarlimac said the statement made Malant feel the fool.

Tension that had built inside him drained away, and he let out a heavy sigh.

"Of course, Sier. My apologies."

Once they stopped, the Spectals snapped back into sharp focus. One moment they were a swarm of buzzing bees whizzing around in an angry mass, the next, frozen in midair as if time itself had stopped.

"Now. The marble table is in front of you." His Sier let go of his elbow and shuffled away. "I want ya to focus on it. You know what it looks like with your normal sight. Now see it as it looks through Sukai."

Malant relaxed while his mind fought to make sense of the chaotic image. "Aye, Sier, large and flat." He studied the table's pattern for a moment longer. "Nothin's on it."

A rustling echoed through the small room. "I'm adding something. Can ya tell me what?"

The answer came quick. "Another book."

"Look closer."

Malant chastised himself for his haste. If he continued to muddle things this badly, he could kiss his endorsement goodbye. And he'd already sent a Crystal to his family telling them he was going. How would he explain himself if that failed to happen?

*Damn fool, is what I am!*

Pausing, he focused on the new object's pattern. A tangled web of Spectals rested on the table's pattern. Mixing and mingling, though also distinct somehow. It seemed similar to the book Sier Sarlimac held a moment earlier, but also different at the same time. Less. "Aye, Sier. Ain't enough there to be a book. A piece of paper, then?"

"Well done." The approval in Sarlimac's voice made Malant's chest swell. It was the same feeling he got when his papa complimented him. More rustling filled the room. "I'm adding a second piece. Do ya see it?"

"Aye, Sier. At first, it also looks like a book. Then I can tell there ain't enough interaction. It's like seein' what at first appears to be a large, deep puddle, only to discover it's shallow."

"A perfect analogy." Sarlimac chuckled. "Now, I'll light one piece on fire. Tell me what ya see happening."

Relief washed through Malant. Jintra had walked him through this very exercise last eve. He could kiss her.

*Well... if she wasn't so damn annoyin'.*

Still, she knew what she was about, and he'd have to give her his thanks later.

A lantern shutter squeaked. The faint aroma of a freshly lit hearth tickled Malant's nose as the sounds of paper crackling and popping echoed in his ears. Inside one of the pieces, the green colored Spectals shifted, their hues morphing into blue. "The paper on the right is the one on fire, Sier. I can tell 'cause its Spectals is changin'." He took another moment to ensure the process unfolded as he expected. "Though I can smell it burnin', I can't see any flames. This is 'cause fire's energy, and therefore cannot be seen through the Sight of Sukai. It ain't no brighter either, 'cause the Essence shows everything at the same luminosity."

"Go on."

"Aye, Sier. The Spectals are vibratin' slower, and many of the green ones have gone blue."

The Sier's shadowy form glided past Malant and one of the plush leather chairs behind him groaned under his instructor's weight. "What's the difference between the two now?"

Malant studied the collective piles of colored Spectals which formed the paper's pattern. "They both still have the look of paper, Sier. The one ya burned seems smaller, however. Somewhat constricted. The Spectals inside have fallen motionless, and there ain't no green no more."

"You may release the Sight."

The Sight of Sukai slipped from Malant's vision like water flowing over a pane of glass. A gloomy chamber materialized around him. Not that there wasn't plenty of sunlight filling the space, but the contrast between Sukai and the natural world was stark. The strain of switching forced him to rub his eyes, but the room soon became clear. He stood a few paces from the large, black and gray marble table that dominated the small room. The piece of paper Sier Sarlimac burnt lay upon it, crumpled and black, smoke still rising from its charred remains.

A light breeze wafted in from open windows behind where his instructor sat. The warm spring air it brought with it was fresh and clean. The late morn sun leaked through the swaying tree branches outside, its light dancing across the room's hardwood floor. Through the portal, the sounds of what must've been tens of thousands of people shouting and cheering exploded in the far distance.

The commotion even captured the attention of his instructor, who rotated in his seat to peer out the window. "Is that coming from the Coliseum? What a ruckus." The aging Sier shook his head.

*The event everybody's been talkin' 'bout!*

Malant had heard of the Games, of course. Though, since initiates weren't allowed outside school grounds, he'd never been. "Do ya think the rumors are for true? 'Bout the lionman, I mean."

Sier Sarlimac turned back with a frown. "I doubt very much the beast is five paces tall with claws like swords and can devour a man's soul by simply looking at him." He scoffed. "Besides, everything about the Games is *barbaric!* Men fighting to the death for the amusement of others... It should be outlawed."

"Most are criminals, right?"

"Does a man lose value as a human being just 'cause he's stolen a crust of bread?" Sarlimac's scowl deepened, and he let out a long sigh. "Never mind all that. You still haven't earned my endorsement, and our time this morn isn't without limits." He motioned for Malant to join him. "Come. Sit."

Malant forcibly swallowed past the lump in his throat as he crossed the room. Bookshelves crowded with all manner of curiosities lined every wall. Bound tomes, rolled scrolls, and a collection of far more exotic sundries—dried and bleached skulls, as varied in size as style; pieces of colored glass or crystal; small carved figurines; and more that he'd never been able to identify, even when he scrutinized them up close. A set of four leather chairs, a half-dozen stools, and the large marble table completed the room's other furnishings.

He'd spent more time in this study over the past two seasons than he cared to admit.

His instructor, Sier Sarlimac, was a plump old man with a shaggy white-gray beard that failed to conceal his multitude of chins. He lounged in a leather chair, his dark blue robes stretched tight over his ample belly. Two golden stripes, a row of red sunbursts separating them, lined the cuffs and hem of his garment, marking the man an Arch Shaper of Sukai.

*One day I'll wear robes like that.*

As Malant approached, an easy expression fell over his teacher. A good sign... or bad?

"What are the two aspects of the Essence?"

"Sukai and Sulok."

"And the difference between them?" His Sier gestured at the chair opposite where he sat.

Malant took the seat. "Sukai is the ability to meld Spectals inside objects, as you and I can. Sulok is the ability to meld Spectals inside livin' things."

With a nod, the aging Sier's expression took on a serious air. "And why does that distinction matter?"

Sitting straighter, Malant maintained eye contact. "The Essence permeates this Plane, infusin' itself as Spectals inside... well, inside everythin'. Shapers, be them attuned to Sukai or Sulok, meld these Spectals and change their states of being. Shapers attuned to Sukai can change the state of objects." Looking over his shoulder, he pointed at the lab table. "Like bein' able to meld the state of that paper to what it was before ya burnt it." He shifted back. "While Shapers attuned to Sulok can change the state of livin' things, like mendin' a broken arm or enhancin' a plant's growth."

His teacher motioned to the table. "Could I light the burnt paper a second time?"

"Nix, Sier." Malant pushed further back into the plush chair, glancing over his shoulder. "It wouldn't catch."

Sarlimac grinned. "Could I write a quick note on the burnt paper?"

"Nix, Sier. It'd crumble."

"Why?"

"Cause it's ash."

"Is that so?" As he often did when lecturing, Sarlimac formed his hands into a steeple and placed the point under his chin on a spot that had no hair, causing several coarse bristles to splay out at odd angles. "Did the paper change to a different pattern while ya viewed it using the Sight?"

"Nix, Sier. Its pattern is still that of paper. The Spectals simply changed color and slowed their vibrations."

Sarlimac gave a nod. "And what would it look like now if ya viewed it using the Sight?"

Malant tugged at his plain gray robe that had bunched at the small of his back. "By now, all the green Spectals would be blue and no longer vibratin'. This is 'cause there ain't nothin' left in it that'll burn. It ain't got no stored energy — *potential* — left in it. The color of the Spectals indicates their potential state. Blue shows that in one of the item's states it has the potential to catch fire, but is lackin' that potential in the state it's currently in."

"An astute answer. You're adept at memorizing your textbooks and reciting them." With a wave of his age-spotted hand, Sarlimac motioned toward the table. "But, what of the lab table? What do the blue Spectals residing in it represent?"

With effort, Malant kept a grin from spreading across his face. "There ain't no blue Spectals inside marble, Sier. Stone ain't got the potential to catch fire."

Having never contemplated this fact from this angle, Malant's mind struck on an idea. "Sier, if I could manipulate the Spectals fast enough, instantly changin' 'em blue and freezin' 'em in place, shouldn't I be able to cause the paper to burst into flames?"

"This isn't *magic*, boy!" Sarlimac laughed aloud, his bellow reverberating in the tiny space. "A trained Shaper could meld it into ash, or rather paper that no longer has the ability to catch fire. But the act of *creating* flames is impossible. As skilled as I am, it would take me several aurns to meld that ash back into a clean piece of paper. Or vice versa. Much easier to simply go to market and purchase a new sheet." He scoffed and shook his head in bemusement. "Even the Elmorians aren't gifted enough to make something burst into flames. Strong as they are, melding the Essence is a tedious and time-consuming process for one and all."

The mentioning of the strange, exotic race sent Malant's mind running down a new path. "How *are* they so much stronger in the Essence than us?" Malant yearned to learn more about the Elmorien people.

*The most powerful Shapers on the Plane, and soon they'll be teachin' me.*

If, that was, he earned Sarlimac's endorsement. And by the Sier's scowl that had suddenly appeared over the question, Malant wasn't so certain of that now.

His teacher started at him for long uncomfortable moments that stretched out longer than they should. Finally, the man shrugged. "The reason for the Elmoriens' skill is unknown, although there are two principal schools of thought." Sarlimac shifted in his chair, the leather creaking as only old leather could. "Some speculate the Essence itself created their race. Or they possess a unique physiology which allows them to interact with the Essence in a more natural way than the other races. This would make them superior to us, whether by creation or by chance of nature. Many Siers reject this hypothesis. They can't accept being born inferior." He sneered. "*They* assume the Elmoriens are privy to some powerful secret. Something they hide from the rest of the Shapers of this Plane and thereby keep themselves superior."

Malant's mind drifted back to something Jintra mentioned last eve. She'd made the claim about there being a third aspect of the Essence, and now he wondered if *those others* who believed the Elmoriens were hiding something weren't as farfetched as his teacher appeared to believe. He didn't voice his musings, of course. Topics like that were things initiates learned quickly to avoid. Instead, he nodded thoughtfully. "Which do you believe, Sier?"

"It doesn't matter which I believe, although..." The Sier cocked his head. With a sigh, he seemed to come to a decision. "What about you?"

"Me, Sier?"

"Aye. Do you have any theories as to why the Elmoriens are more powerful at melding than we Humans? You are, after all, intent on studying under them."

Malant hesitated. Without realizing it, he'd walked onto thin ice. Certainly, him and the other initiates spent many an aurn discussing topics considered taboo by his instructors, but never had a Sier initiated the conversation. If he answered, it might give the Sier what he needed to withhold his endorsement. Still, if he didn't...

*Could this be part of his test?*

Butterflies danced in his stomach. "I— Um..." Rubbing palms gone suddenly clammy onto his robe, he could see no solution that didn't lead to his dreams being crushed. With nothing else for it, he decided honesty was best.

"Last eve at study group, senior initiate Jintra Deln mentioned somethin' that got me thinkin'."

"Jintra Deln." The derogatory manner in which the Sier spoke the girl's name left little doubt over the older man's opinion of the senior initiate. He pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment. "Has that girl not graduated yet?" Exasperation laced his words.

"Nix, Sier." Malant wasn't certain if he should've answered and flinched inwardly.

His instructor grunted, shaking his head with a frown. "Make your point, then."

Malant rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, Sier... Senior initiate Deln mentioned there used to be a *third* aspect. Somethin' she called *Sujen*? And that makes sense." He pointed to Sarlimac's robe where a three-sunned emblem was embroidered over his right breast—one red, one silver, and *one blue*. "The emblem for the Order of Shapers has *three* suns on it. The red is for Sukai and the silver for Sulok, but... is the *blue* sun meant to represent this *Sujen*?"

Taking on a more serious air, the older man leaned forward. "As ya say, our Order's emblem does indeed bear *three* suns. And by all logic, the blue sun might, at one time in the past, have represented a third aspect of the Essence. As to what that aspect was, or even if it ever existed at all... well... who knows? Outside of our Order's emblem and being mentioned in a few ancient texts that survived the Great Darkness, there isn't any references to it. Are ya saying this *third aspect* has something to do with the Elmoiens?"

Shock over his teacher's inquiry held Malant's tongue for a moment. Although, since this was the first time any Sier did more than snap at him over this line of discussion, he couldn't help but test Alza'dysta's Luck. "Well... Jintra speculated that it must be somethin' quite different from Sukai or Sulok. Claimed it might reside between objects? Or mayhap even inside energy like fire or lightnin', which may be why we can't see it."

The Sier squinted. "And *you* believe this?"

Malant licked lips gone dry. "I ain't sayin' I believe anythin', Sier. I'm just sayin' that mayhap she might be on to somethin'. When she brought it up, it got me thinkin' that a third aspect of the Essence could be the Elmoiens' advantage over us."

Sarlimac leaned back, lacing his finger together. "You aren't the first to consider this as a possibility. However, if there were a third aspect, why are there only two moons?"

Malant had heard this nonsense before, of course, but not from a Shaper. The moons had nothing to do with melding. The idea was preposterous to anyone who had studied the Essence for more than a tenday. This was more what somebody back home might think.

When he didn't answer, Sarlimac continued. "I mean, Silvery Sainor must represent Sulok and red Traynor, Sukai, right? So, where is the blue moon for this so called *Sujen*? What says ya to that?"

Malant couldn't accept an Arch Shaper would believe such fanciful tales. His mouth worked, no sound escaping. When he noticed a mischievous glint in the older man's eyes, he gave a sheepish grin. "The moons ain't got nothin' to do with meldin' the Essence, Sier. And you know as well as I, those are just will-the-wisp tales."

His teacher grunted a laugh. "For true." The aging Sier pushed deeper into his seat. "And I'm happy to hear silly country superstitions like that haven't clung to you. But there is a flaw to your line of thinking."

"Flaw, Sier?"

"Aye. Many a Shaper have witnessed an Elmorien melding, both with Sulok and Sukai. If they were using some forgotten third aspect, I should think somebody would've noticed by now. Even if a Shaper couldn't see them using this *Sujen*, surely they could deduce something was happening that was invisible to them."

The Sier's line of thinking was logical. Malant thought about it for a moment before locking eyes with the man. "Then I guess I ain't got no opinion as to why they are stronger than us, Sier. At least, not 'til I learn more of it."

A smile split the old man's face. "Now *that* is an astute answer. One I wish more Shapers followed."

When it seemed the Sier was about to move on to another topic, Malant couldn't help himself but attempt to continue this conversation. "Although... if I may, Sier?"

Sarlimac inclined his head, and Malant continued. "That doesn't explain the blue sun in our emblem."

His teacher paused, his smile dipping into a frown and a seriousness gripping his features. He blinked a few times, his mind obviously at war with something he wasn't voicing. Taking a deep breath, he ran his fingers through his thinning hair. "Much was lost during the Great Darkness that wracked this Plane after the War of Power. And while the *name* *Sujen* has survived in the odd ancient text, and as ya pointed out—" He tapped a finger on his right breast. "Remains a part of our emblem. As to what it did or

how it was used, no one alive knows. At least, I know of no books describing its use." Sarlimac gave a sagely shrug. "If it ever even existed at all. We're simply left with boogeyman stories of secret orders of menfolk you shouldn't bump into at night." He huffed and rolled his eyes. "Wha'ever it was, that knowledge is lost to us."

"How can knowledge of the Essence become lost?"

A puzzled countenance fell over his instructor. "Mayhap it didn't." He rubbed his chin. His nostrils flared, and his somber expression returned. "You and I have the ability to meld Sukai, though not Sulok. People like Jintra can meld Sulok, but not Sukai. We were born with our gifts, and it manifested after we reached adulthood. As far as we've been able to determine, the gift and which aspect can be manipulated by whom, is completely random. It doesn't run in families, and only about one in every fifty thousand may possess it. It's the reason so many ruling bodies have mandatory Testing, as we do here in Mocley."

Sarlimac sat back, resting an arm across the leather-cushioned chair. "As for Sujen, I personally believe it did, at one time, exist. It's mentioned in enough texts that survived the Great Darkness to support that belief." He brushed a hand across the emblem on his robe. "As well as other proof." He harrumphed. "I also believe people in the past could meld it. Wha'ever... *it* was. As to why it was lost? One theory, one I agree with, is that people aren't *born* with the ability to meld it anymore."

It was Malant's turn to see a flaw in his Sier's reasoning. "Wait. If, as ya say, it's random, how would birth fit into it?"

With a shrug, Sarlimac peered out the window once more. "Mayhap it isn't as random as we presume. I 'spect most people, if not all, have the trait to use either Sukai or Sulok inside them. It's simply dormant for the vast majority of the population." He returned his attention to Malant. "They pass this trait on to their children, most of whom can't use it either. Then, for a lucky few like you and I, and for reasons we still fail to understand, the gift becomes... *active*."

He paused, as if collecting his thoughts. "Think of it this way. Most children born to parents with brown hair shall also have brown hair. However, occasionally, brown-haired parents produce a blond-haired child. Or even a red-headed one. Meaning, that inside one or the other parent was the trait for that hair color. We know this 'cause we can trace it back through their lineage." A glint lit his eyes. "Provided, of course, no *infidelity* occurred." He gave Malant a conspiratorial wink.

"Uhh..."

Malant's unease pulled a chortle from Sarlimac. "Two seasons removed from farm life and still shy as a rabbit." His grin slipped as he tilted his head to the side. "To answer your question, if this fact holds true for the ability to meld the Essence, it could mean the trait that enabled Sujen died out before it was passed on to future generations. That it's simply... *extinct*."

Malant could follow that line of thinking. Still, there was something off about it. He shifted to ask another question that popped into his mind, but the old Sier frowned and waved a hand. "Or mayhap the moon theory is true and the blue one was destroyed in some heavenly catastrophe."

Mouth agape, Malant sat stunned by his Sier's words. "Um..."

The twinkle returned, and the aging Sier giggled. The man fell silent, regarding his pupil for a time before relenting. "Our time is up, and you've more than demonstrated you'll give the Acadèmia a fine representation while ya study in Hathoolan. I formally give ya my blessing to accept the Elmorien's invitation."

Relief washed over Malant like a fresh spring downpour.

"As to the nature of your new instructors' strength, I have no knowledge to prove any of these theories correct. I know only what I can do, and that's all that concerns me. Now, come." Standing, he made his way to one of the bookshelves. "I have an errand for ya before your midday lessons."

Malant's heart soared as he followed his teacher to one of the bookshelves.

*I'm goin' to Hathoolan! The birthplace of the Essence!*

Stopping in front of a collection of strange metallic devices, the Sier picked up something Malant had long been curious about. It resembled a brass funnel, though no funnel he'd ever seen looked so bizarre. What appeared to be an empty waterskin covered the large conical end, and a thick needle protruded from where the narrow stem should be. Even in the warm room, ice clung to the device's outside. With a careful hand, Sier Sarlimac plucked it from the shelf by one of its two wooden handles. "I promised the Grand Oversier I'd have this delivered to the council chamber after halfmeal." He motioned toward a small box on the shelf next to where the unusual device had lain. "If ya would, pull that out and open it."

Malant did as instructed. Cloth lined the box's interior, matching the shape of the funneled contraption. The Sier eased the device inside the box and shut it, drumming the top with his fingers. "A stranger device I've never beheld."

"What is it?"

Shaking his head, his teacher harrumphed. "Just an old Sulok surgical instrument. Nothing ya need to concern yourself with, young initiate." His smile took any sting from his words. "Once you've taken halfmeal, I need ya to deliver this to the council chamber. They'll be expecting it. I'd do it myself if I had the time, but I have other commitments I must attend to."

"Aye, Sier." Malant tucked the box under the crook of his arm, though he had to fight the urge to continue questioning his teacher about it. He followed Sarlimac to the door.

Before they reached the exit, his instructor came to an abrupt halt. "Malant?"

"Aye, Sier?"

"I want ya to know that... much to the chagrin of many Siers here, you're the most gifted student we've had at the Acadèmia in living memory. None have ever gained the ability to hold the Sight and discern items one from another in only two seasons. Even talented initiates take four or five to advance so far."

Malant's chest swelled. "My thanks, Sier, I—"

His instructor interrupted him with a raised finger. "You have a long career as a Shaper ahead of you, young man. It would pain me to see that taken from ya." The plump old man bit his lower lip, as if unsure whether to continue. "I won't deny it's a wonderful honor to be invited to train in Hathoolan, and even in the short time you've been with us, you've more than proved ya have the natural ability worthy of being chosen. But... I must warn caution."

"Caution, Sier?"

"Aye. There's a reason I withheld my endorsement till last. And I'm still not certain I'm doing right by you letting ya go."

Malant had only thought he was shocked before. His instructor's words hit him like a ballista bolt.

Sarlimac continued to chew on his lip. "It's a recent thing for the Elmorians to allow Humans to study with them on their island home—just the past two decades or so. Many were suspicious when their ambassador first approached us with this offer. While I'll be the first to admit that most who've gone have returned better for the experience, there have been several... *accidents*."

Malant's throat went dry.

Sarlimac's frown deepened. "The Elmoriens' training methods differ from ours. They're more taxing. A few who've gone to study with them have had their ability burned out. Worse, the last two we sent died under their tutelage."

Malant's eyes grew large.

*Died!*

It seemed that the Sier wanted to say more, but the old man closed his mouth with a click. A forced smile stole over his features. "Forgive me. Mayhap I'm becoming paranoid in my old age. I simply want you to be careful, is all. And always keep in mind—the Elmoriens have their own agenda for inviting us Humans into their sanctuary. One we have yet to discover. Keep on your guard, do as you're told, and ya should be fine."

"Ay—" Malant was forced to swallow hard before he could speak. "Aye, Sier."

After an awkward pat on Malant's shoulder, the aging Sier hurried from the room.

Malant stood holding the small box, too stunned to follow.

*As if I ain't gotta enough to worry with, I now need to be concerned that my trainin' may kill me?*

Though his appetite had abandoned him, his feet began taking him toward the initiate dining hall as his mind churned.

*No!*

He shoved his apprehensions away. He'd walk through the burning halls of Rash'ayel's fortress if it meant he could enhance his abilities to meld the Essence.

Standing a bit taller, he strode forward with the confidence of Maja'kasta himself.

*I'm goin' to Hathoolan!*