

ALONE

Madrindle looked warily around the corner, searching for movement. There was none, but that didn't mean anything. They shouldn't have come here. It was far too dangerous.

"I do not like this," she said, casting another nervous glance behind her. "They should have been here by now."

"They will be here," Sarchonna replied, though not entirely convinced herself. "You must have faith."

"I had faith up until twenty minutes ago," Madrindle rebuked. "I am telling you, something has gone wrong."

Sarchonna tensed her jaw, but said nothing. Her fairy sister was right. The others should have been here by now. They were almost half an hour late, and during these times, that was more than reason for concern. Here they were, alone near the base of the Malyfail Mountains with no one but each other for backup. This wasn't the way it was supposed to have gone. Not even close.

"I told you this was a bad idea," Madrindle repeated, wringing her gloved hands together. A cold wind blew through the small, rocky canyon, bringing a bitter chill. "At the very least, we should have consulted Aldelaine before we..."

"And said what?" Sarchonna snapped, a little more forcefully than she'd intended. "Tell her that, despite her orders, we felt we needed more information? That the very laws that bind us are the same ones keeping us from gaining ground on our enemies? That we think we should take matters into our own hands and check out just what the Kalimai are doing at Malyfail? What do you think she would have said to that?"

"That *you* think we should check out what the Kalimai are doing at Malyfail," Madrindle corrected her. Her tone was becoming rather confrontational as well. "I just came along to make sure you do not get yourself killed. Aldelaine would probably tell us to put a plan together, to examine our options and choose the safest one."

"And where has that gotten us so far?" Sarchonna urged, looking back around the corner. "During times like these, the safest plan is not always the most effective."

"And neither is coming out here without telling anyone, playing some hero role that not even Norayne would be foolish enough to risk"

GREG LAMPMAN

Madrindle protested, finding her own nerve. “I agree that we need to be more headstrong against the Kalimai Regime, but this is a little much. Here we are, alone at the base of the Malyfail Mountains without any of the backup we were supposed to have. Did you even talk to them?”

Sarchonna nodded. “Of course I did. They said they’d be here.”

Madrindle looked around, exasperated, hands extended outward. “So where are they?”

“They will be here,” Sarchonna repeated. “If you are so worried, then feel free to go back to Mount Baloriann. I will be fine here.”

Madrindle actually laughed out loud. “And leave you on your own? Are you insane?”

“I will be fine.”

“No, you will be Kalimai bait. That is the whole reason I came out here with you in the first place.”

“Then be here with me, and stop worrying. They will be here.”

Madrindle shook her head. Sarchonna could tell her that a hundred more times, and she still wouldn’t believe it. Something had gone wrong. She could feel it. They needed to leave now, while they still could.

“Shhh,” Sarchonna suddenly remarked, catching Madrindle’s attention. “Do you hear that?”

Madrindle stopped and listened, trying to pick up whatever had alarmed her fairy sister. All she could hear was the whistling of the wind across the rock walls around them. It was getting stronger, as if trying to give away their position.

Then Madrindle heard it. It was a rough, scraping sound coming from somewhere around the corner. Sarchonna crouched down, her back against the stone wall. Madrindle did the same. A pair of large boulders obstructed her view, but Sarchonna had a clear line of sight.

“What is it?” Madrindle whispered, her voice barely audible over the whistling wind.

Sarchonna repositioned herself, trying to get a better look. She turned back and shook her head.

“I cannot see anything,” she replied, the wind carrying her words away.

But Madrindle knew she’d heard something. Even now, she could hear the scraping getting louder, seeming to come from numerous directions at once. This time, the cold chill that ran down her spine had nothing at all to do with the wind.

Sarchonna’s eyes were wide and fearful. Even she was having second

THE TWELFTH GEM

thoughts. Within a few short moments, the scraping sound overcame the howl of the wind. Something was wrong. They were in danger.

“We have to get out of here,” Madrindle said, motioning for Sarchonna to follow her. “This is too dangerous without backup. We need to regroup and think of another way.”

Though hesitating for a moment, Sarchonna finally agreed. With a shallow nod, she got to her feet, staying as low as possible. Together, the fairies turned, making their way back across the shallow embankment that provided their only cover. As they went, Madrindle tried to remember the way they originally came, but it was tough. Everything looked the same. The more corners they rounded, the more rocks they saw, and it was all startling to merge together. This place was so barren, so desolate. It was as if nothing could ever grow here, the ground far too thick for even the strongest life to penetrate.

“I think we are lost,” Madrindle whispered, peeking around another corner. She tried to hide the tremble in her voice. “Do you have any suggestions?”

There was no answer from behind her. “Sarchonna?”

Madrindle turned around and gasped. There was no one behind her. She looked around, hoping she had just missed her. She hadn’t. Sarchonna was gone, vanishing without a trace.

Madrindle panicked. Had she taken a wrong turn, perhaps wandered off in a different direction? No, that couldn’t be. Sarchonna had been right behind her a second ago. But now she was alone. All alone.

“Sarchonna,” Madrindle whispered. She didn’t dare yell out. “Sarchonna, where did you go?”

Her heart was racing. A million thoughts surged through her mind, none of them good. They shouldn’t have come here. They should have gone to Aldelaine. It was the safe route. It was the right route. It was...

Before she could react, a hand grabbed Madrindle’s arm, pulling her into the darkness of a nearby crevice. She started to cry out in alarm, but another pressed against her mouth, stifling her words. She struggled to see her assailant behind her, but it was no use. Her eyes still hadn’t adjusted to the shadows that engulfed them both, and the grip was too strong.

“Shhh,” a familiar voice whispered from the darkness. An overwhelming sense of relief washed over her.

“Oh, thank the gods,” Madrindle replied, letting her heart settle in her chest. “I feared that you had somehow...”

GREG LAMPMAN

“Quiet,” Sarchonna repeated, loosening her grip. Removing her hand from Madrindle’s mouth, she pointed out, beyond the darkness of the crevice. “Look, out there.”

Following her sister’s gesture, Madrindle saw what she was pointing at. On the other side of the quarry stood a large stone statue, carved from a shiny, black mineral. The structure stood at least sixty feet tall, adorned with odd symbols along its length. It was tough to make out the etchings from this far away, but they didn’t appear like anything she had ever seen before.

“Is that one of the...” she began, but Sarchonna didn’t allow her to finish.

“I think so,” Sarchonna replied. “But why would the Kalimai Regime build one of those standing stones here, so close to their own lair?”

“What do you mean?” Madrindle asked, flinching as another gust of wind brushed against the crevice. It was as if nature itself was searching for them.

Sarchonna shook her head. “As far as we can tell, the standing stones are intended as markers for the Kalimai Regime, signifying territories they wish to take under their control. If that is the case, why would they place one here, where they obviously already hold position? It makes no sense.”

Madrindle glanced back at the structure, its shiny surface somehow reflecting light despite the thick clouds. She had been thinking about the standing stones a lot lately, and something just didn’t seem right. If those standing stones were simply meant to indicate attack points, then why make them so elaborate? Surely, the Kalimai could come up with something a little more basic, perhaps much easier to transport. It just didn’t seem to add up.

“What if they mean more than that?” Madrindle asked, voicing her opinion. “What if they are not simply structures of conquest? What if they hold a much deadlier secret?”

“Like what?” Sarchonna asked, but a familiar sound cut her off. It was the scraping again, louder this time, sneaking through the darkness around them. In fact, it almost seemed as though it was coming from...

The noise suddenly became a thunderous rumbling beneath their feet. Before either fairy could react, the ground erupted, stones and debris flying in all directions. Sarchonna was sent sprawling in one direction, Madrindle in another, both crashing hard to the rocky ground a few feet away.

Madrindle covered her face, stones raining down around her. What had

THE TWELFTH GEM

happened? It all came about so fast. She couldn't possibly...

"Look out!" A voice called out. It was Sarchonna's. "Madrindle, look out!"

Raising her head, Madrindle saw the silhouette of something large descending from above. On instinct, she rolled to the side, just in time to have the object slam hard into the ground beside her. More jagged stones flew into the air, coming down against her face and shoulders. When she came to a stop, Madrindle looked up to see the horrified face of her fairy sister staring down at her.

"Come on!" Sarchonna cried, tugging at her arm with incredible force. "Get up! We have to..."

Before Sarchonna could finish, the same large silhouette swung out, again from nowhere. It hit her square in the chest, sending her flying against a nearby wall. Upon impact, she shrieked in pain, then fell motionless to the ground.

"Sarchonna!" Madrindle cried out. There was no response.

Madrindle didn't know what it was, but again instinct told her to move – fast. She leapt to the side, just in time to see the same heavy object swing overhead. It made a low thrumming sound as it passed inches above her, the force of its momentum slicing through the air.

Coming up on her feet a short distance away, Madrindle finally turned to face her attacker. Her breath caught in her throat. She knew the creature. She'd never seen it before, but she had heard stories. The monster stood no more than twenty feet away, its many legs tensed and ready for action. The brown shell running along its back was scuffed and dirty, the massive pincers at the end of its armored tail covered in what looked like clay. Two large, red eyes bored into her, their sightless appearance haunting in the dim sunlight.

Stagwig stared forward, still as a statue, as if daring her to make the first move. But Madrindle didn't. She knew exactly what it was capable of, given the opportunity. Just look at the devastation it had already caused.

Another moment passed before the beast finally made its move. Rearing back, Stagwig lowered its head and charged, straight in Madrindle's direction. She looked around, searching for a route of escape, but there was nowhere to go. Tall rock walls surrounded her on all sides, none of them nearly low enough to scale in time. But she had to do something.

She looked back. Stagwig's large, armored tail was swinging in the air, gaining momentum. The massive pincers were ready to lash out at any

GREG LAMPMAN

moment. She only had a few seconds until it reached her, maybe less. Whatever Madrindle was going to do, she had to do it now.

She checked around again. *Nowhere to run*, she thought to herself, raising her trembling hands into the air. *I will have to make a stand. Right here, right now.*

It wasn't her first option, but if they were going to survive, it was all she could do. She wasn't sure of her chances against such a formidable opponent, but she couldn't leave Sarchonna here to die. She wouldn't. She needed to do everything she could, if for nothing else than to buy her sister a little more time.

Madrindle had her Venom Gem powers. At least she would have a fighting chance.