

# ENDURING CHAOS

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## SAMPLE

DAMIAN SIRES STOOD at the bow of the ship, her veil and gown rippling softly in the breeze. The river water lapped at the hull close below, the deck of the flat-bottomed barge floating barely out of arm's reach above the surface. To her right, rolling pasture broken up with groves of trees and the occasional rocky bluff stretched to the horizon, flocks of sheep or cattle grazing in the distance. To her left, forest encroached straight to the bank, trees reaching over the river and even growing out of the water, roots submerged beneath banks flooded from the spring melt. The single sail, used to carry the barge against the current, remained furled, the river's flow pulling the ship downstream.

One other person stood at the prow, staring out where the river disappeared in the distance. He let out a breath.

"Well, here we go again."

Butterflies fluttered in Damian's stomach with the thought.

Her father, Claude, turned to her with a smile. She wondered if she reminded him of his late wife, the mother Damian never knew. Damian's movements and manners replicated her father more than her appearance. His hair, now half gone to grey, had given her some of its darkness and its straight texture, though his square and moustached face, darker than Damian's fair complexion, showed only a passing resemblance to his daughter. Both, however, dressed well.

More slender than shapely, Damian's jade green gown drew more looks for its style than for the small curves it enhanced. She had pulled her long auburn hair into a plait with ribbons and pewter clasps for travelling. As for her oval-shaped face with its high forehead and delicate features, that remained covered by a charcoal-coloured veil, patterned with flowers about

the brow and the hem that rippled across her shoulders.

Her father was one of very few people who smiled even when he saw Damian without the veil, when he looked upon the feature she kept hidden from everyone else. The eyes with irises of yellow, as vivid as polished gold.

“Are you ready for another market season?” he asked.

Their home village, Aether, lay three leagues behind them. Bolts of the town’s fine wool and linen filled the hold beneath their feet, the cargo that would accompany Damian and her father across the kingdom of Faneria from one market to the next. Summer would be only a memory by the time they returned.

Damian smiled, trying to look as steady and convincing as she could. “Yes.”

Even as she stood there, she felt energy roiling through her and sparking around her fingertips. She curled her hands into fists, barely managing to keep the sensations contained. Yesterday she left blackened hand prints on a barrel in Aether, embers glowing as she hurried out of the alley where the barrel sat. A week before, the wind had been drawn to her, following her around the town and through the windows into her and her father’s home.

*Nearly a year now this has been getting worse*, she thought. She had been young when she first made fire and it hadn’t taken long for her to realize she could do more. Lightning, a mist of light, voices on the air, even changing wood to stone with a touch. She never did it around anyone else but it became her private escape.

Those enthralled nights spent practising her strange ability alone in her room now were a distant memory. The first time Damian lost control was on the journey last year. Fortunately, she was alone, and it had not happened again until she returned to Aether. Since then her power surged out of her control more and more. Usually the effects were mild, but occasionally it manifested in a greater way such as with the wind last week. It was bad enough at home where rumours about her circled the town even though she hadn’t been caught causing some strange effect on the world around her. With busy markets filling her days ahead, she desperately hoped nothing would happen that would expose her in the weeks to come. Terrible visions had appeared in her mind and troubled her sleep.

Her father’s brow furrowed. “Are you alright?”

Damian averted her gaze, allowing her smile to fade but forcing the fear out of her eyes and voice. “I just feel a little ill.” It wasn’t entirely a lie. A queasy feeling tickled beneath her jaw and behind her temples. Standing at the prow and staring at the horizon seemed to help though she feared it would get worse before long.

Her father’s expression fell. “Oh, no. Seasick again?”

She nodded.

“I’m sorry, Damian. I forgot you got sick last year. You always took the ship fine growing up.”

She smiled wanly. “Yes, I did. I’m sure I’ll be fine tomorrow. And anyway, I’m more worried about your back. You’ve been running around the ship all day. You should lie down.”

“The pain’s been gone more than a week.”

“I just don’t want it to act up again, especially with you being on your feet all day once we reach Trent.”

“I would feel much worse if I was lying back while you were sick. I’ll go see if the captain has any ginger.”

Damian opened her mouth to protest as he walked away but as her innards burred, she stopped herself. Much as she wanted her father to rest while he could, he was as stubborn as her, and she would be glad for some ginger. She felt bad about asking anything of the captain. After running their barge for many years, he treated Damian fairly, and she knew he’d had a bad year. A harsh winter kept him grounded longer than usual, causing him to miss a regular shipment. She vowed to repay him for anything he offered. She hoped she could keep the energy bubbling through her body from damaging his barge.

Closing her eyes, Damian prayed to the Gods of Light for help to control her ability. Perhaps the God of Justice might reward her for pioussness, or the God of Strength would give her his own to control it, or the Goddess of Love would bestow her care on Damian. Maybe this time they would listen.

Opening her eyes, Damian tried to ease her thoughts as she looked toward the horizon. The scenery drifted slowly past as the barge floated silently south. They had passed no other ships in their hours on the water, though she knew that they would meet many once they reached Trent, where the eastern fork of the Ivory River connected with the southbound current that the barge floated down.

Despite the worry over her ability gnawing at her, the thought that they would arrive at the first stop along their market journey in a few days cheered her. No matter how long Damian and her father spent preparing for the journey each year, their departure always seemed to arrive suddenly. After a few hours on the river, Damian could hardly believe that she had woken up in her own bed in Aether that morning. The new year was nearly upon them.

Damian’s thoughts drifted to the days and weeks ahead. After Trent, the barge would carry them downriver until they reached the coast. From there, the travel continued by caravan across the countryside, stopping in cities here and there to sell Aether’s cloth for a few days before moving on. Making their way across central Faneria with only the wagon crew accompanying them, days and nights would pass under the stars or inside inns and taverns she had not seen in a year. There she would visit people who weren’t tainted by the rumours that had circulated around Aether for as long as she could remember. Damian would do her best to draw in those customers passing through the market who looked like local officials,

prosperous merchants, or servants of minor lords and knights, and she could speak with them of the cloth as though she had nothing to hide. Nobody would judge her, all questions would be left behind as she and her father moved on, and the only comments about her veil would be in good humour. Much as she would miss her home and the people who knew her better, if not well, the thought of the journey livened her. She was particularly excited about their first stop in Trent.

Nothing compared to Relhan, the new year festival, in Trent. Crowds thronged Plaza Medalia, where the two prongs of the Ivory River intersected and where the annual market was set up. People from all walks of life and from lands near and far constantly passed back and forth in front of the stall. Exotic sights, sounds, and aromas filled the air and goods Damian saw nowhere else filled the stalls that crowded the market. Bands of minstrels, tumblers, and performers from all corners of Elderra wove down the rows of stalls and once the market shut down for the night the city came alive with lights, dances, feasting, and games.

As the river current carried the barge inexorably toward Trent and caused Damian's stomach to churn, she couldn't help anticipating the journey. The year was almost over. It was a time for rebirth and renewal. Relhan was six days long this year. A lucky year or a year of great change, depending who and where she asked. The market director in Trent used to give her and other children of merchants bright blue envelopes at Relhan, embossed with gold patterns and filled with candy and coins with special surprises on lucky years. Now that she was a grown woman, she knew she couldn't expect such gifts. A wistful look crossed her face.

The sound of footsteps tore Damian from her reverie. Turning, she found her father approaching and clutching something. He smiled apologetically as he held out his hand.

"It's old and this is all he had left, but he said you're welcome to it."

In his palm she found a small, wrinkled knot of ginger root. Damian's stomach roiled, the nauseated feeling in her head stronger than it had been earlier. She raised her hand to take the ginger but hesitated.

"Are you certain?"

Her father grinned. "You need it more than he ever will."

She took the root. "Thank you."

"I asked one of the sailors to bring some water to our cabin and I stoked the coals in the brazier. Would you like me to brew you some tea with that so you can stay here?"

"I will get it. I want to repay the captain for this."

An amused smile crossed her father's face. "Alright. Let me know if you need anything."

Damian nodded. "Thank you, Papa." Reaching up, she kissed him on the cheek, then turned and made her way down the starboard side of the barge.

When she passed by the hatch leading into the hold, she glanced within,

barely able to see the bolts of cloth filling the dark hold. Over the years as Damian accompanied her father on his journey, she had seen their stock and their acclaim grow. Often they would return with only scraps, enough for Damian to sew a bodice, a tunic for her father, or occasionally a full gown. The weavers had outdone themselves this year, producing some cloth that almost looked fit for dukes and earls.

Damian hurried, anxious to reach her and her father's cabin and boil the ginger. As she passed by the captain's cabin a strong breeze tugged at her veil. She grabbed at the lacy edge before it lifted right off her face.

Eyes on the deck in front of her feet while she straightened the veil, Damian had nearly run into someone before she noticed him. She lurched back with a start. "Oh, I'm sorry." She hesitated as she raised her eyes to the man before her. Standing almost a head taller than her, his broad shoulders were swathed in a black cloak that covered his entire body. Light brown hair brushed back from his forehead and hanging down to his shoulder blades rippled in the river breeze as he stared impassively at her.

He said nothing.

A chill rippled through her. Nodding awkwardly, she moved around him and continued down the deck, hurrying around the corner of the captain's cabin. There she paused and peered around the corner at the strange man, now looking silently over the river.

A hand laid on her shoulder. She started and turned to find Morrie Deacon, the oldest sailor among the handful that ran the barge. Morrie nodded toward the black-cloaked man. "Best keep your distance from that one, Miss Sires."

Damian glanced at the man she had nearly run into, still unmoving where he stood when she came upon him. "Who is he?"

"Cap'n hired him on for security on the voyage, what with all the bandits skulking around the woods these days. Don't even know if he can talk. None of us have heard him say a word. We don't even know his name."

She regarded the sailor curiously. "How did you know he was a mercenary if he didn't say anything?"

Morrie shrugged. "Ask the captain. Strange bloke just showed up on board one day after we'd been at port."

With that, Morrie walked off. Damian sent a last look to the silent mercenary, uttering a prayer to the God of Wisdom that the black-cloaked man was as trustworthy as the captain believed.

Yanuk strode leisurely across the courtyard, looking at the activity within. Once an old border fort, it had been abandoned as Faneria expanded into lands that formerly belonged to the neighbouring kingdom of Edan. The fort's rotting palisade, weathered exterior, and distant location beyond the reach of major roads kept them well hidden in the heart of Hesperia, that

most loyal of provinces known for providing the most—and the most elite—knights in the kingdom.

Stocky, shorter than average, with thinning pale hair cropped to his ears and greying blue eyes, Yanuk hardly cut an impressive figure, but here he walked with his head held high. His knees ached as they did most mornings, though the warm sunlight loosened his joints quicker than usual, reminding him that spring was nearly half over and the new year would begin at the end of the week. He never placed much value in Relhan celebrations, nor did many of his fellows, but he knew the apprentices appreciated the ceremony. Whether or not Yanuk believed in adopting an attitude of renewal based solely on man's measure of time, it would be nice to enjoy an early season feast.

Yanuk brushed his hair out of his eyes, his fingers passing over a scar on his forehead. Eighteen years had healed neither the wound nor the deeper hurt it represented. The mark of an outcast. Touching the permanently marred skin brought the memory of that day into his mind. Standing on a balcony looking over the courtyard at the entrance to the castle and the crowd gathered below, hollering and jeering as they glared at him and spewed hateful names. The sharp pain near his temple when a stone smashed his skull. He never saw who threw it. Then it was cheers and darkness as he was led out of the castle in chains, surrounded by guards and shoved into the back of an enclosed wagon meant for transporting criminals to the stocks.

A scowl crossed Yanuk's face, but it faded as he glimpsed another man his age entering the courtyard down the hall. Patrus's arms ended in wooden cups with slender hooks instead of hands. Yanuk had gotten off lucky.

Shaking off the memories, Yanuk looked over the courtyard. The eastern half was covered by the garden, neat rows of vegetables and herbs germinating under the long hours of sunlight, with a few larger than sprouts. The days had grown warm enough that often Yanuk only needed a light cloak over a short-sleeved tunic and the plants revelled in the change. Inside the garden, one young underling cut back some squash that encroached on the plots for other vegetables. Yanuk frowned.

"It seems a shame to trim perfectly good squash. Perhaps we should consider planting outside the walls. Surely there is some way we could conceal it from outside interest."

Fedris, the young man inside the garden, looked up at Yanuk's mumbled words. The curious look on Fedris's face faded into a slightly forced smile when he saw that Yanuk walked alone. The youth smiled and nodded, holding up a hand. "Good morning, master Alganov."

Yanuk smiled in return. "Good day, Fedris." Yanuk walked on as Fedris returned to his task. At the northwest corner of the courtyard, a woman Yanuk's age led their community's small flock of sheep and goats out of the large side room they used as a barn. Lambs and kids bleated and scampered beneath the adults' hooves as they marched through the main entrance to

graze in the open fields.

“I see no reason why we must continue to maintain this derelict facade so assiduously,” Yanuk grumbled, continuing his line of thought. “We have resided here in peace for fifteen years. I grow weary of hiding.”

His attention diverted as he passed an open doorway leading into a small room off the courtyard. Inside, a humpbacked old woman with short white curls and a hard look on her face stood behind a table. Atop its surface sat a brass scale, small jars, and stone weights and she faced two youths behind desks similarly laden.

“We are the last vestiges of magic in this world and we are nearly gone,” she said to the young man and woman. “No matter how skilled you are or how much promise you show, you will never have enough power to cast magic on your own. What we have is the power to release energy from those items that do have it.” She waved a hand over the jars, inside which lay an assortment of roots, stones, animal parts, and other objects. “Unless you prepare your ingredients precisely and speak the incantation properly, your spell will fail and perhaps with catastrophic consequences.”

The young man and woman exchanged an uncomfortable glance.

The old woman’s scowl darkened. “You will learn nothing from each other, you cretins. You may have learned to read, but do not think yourselves knowledgeable. Until you can cast magic successfully you are nothing but labourers here.”

Her students jumped at the sharpness in her voice and fixed their eyes on the old woman with muttered apologies. Yanuk chuckled as he walked on. They would grow used to, if perhaps not comfortable with, Miria’s sharp voice and short temper. They all did.

“That is the bond that ties us together,” Yanuk mused as he strode down one of the open-air corridors lining the courtyard. Here in this old border fort hidden from the outside world, Yanuk and his fellows could practise the gift for which they were condemned and teach it to the next generation. Never again would he and his comrades have to face the judgement of ignorant peasants, nor did they have to bend the knee to any lord who ordered them to use their magic for sinister or mundane purposes. Here they could practise and expand their knowledge at their leisure. This home Yanuk had helped build was not just study, but sanctuary.

Suddenly, a pulse thrummed through Yanuk’s chest. He inhaled sharply, pressing a hand against his heart, then smiled. He slipped into another small room off the central courtyard used as a storage area. Reaching beneath his tunic he pulled out a leather cord hanging around his neck. A crystal the size of his small thumb joint hung off it, cheap and cloudy and rough-hewn but for one smooth, flat side. Covering the crystal with his hand, he uttered an ancient phrase under his breath. A different voice droned out of the crystal in response, distorted.

“Yanuk? Can you hear me?”

Yanuk smiled. "Yes, Rhyslen. I am here. How goes your journey?"

"Fairly well, master. I have located her, but she has just left town. I fear it may be several days yet before I can speak with her alone."

Yanuk could hear the unease in Rhyslen's voice. One of the first apprentices Yanuk recruited into the little community of mages, Rhyslen had learned much and become a senior among the younger generation, despite that he was still less than half Yanuk's age. However, the youth was terrified about venturing halfway across the kingdom and discussing magic, a topic so feared and loathed by the common man. Yanuk feared Rhyslen being discovered as well, but he had faith in his apprentice and the girl Rhyslen sought could be a boon to them or a grave threat.

"Be patient and continue following her. Concentrate first on learning how she was able to find you." Yanuk heard commotion in the courtyard as what sounded like another mage returned from a trip acquiring supplies.

"Of course, master. I will contact you before the week has ended."

Yanuk nodded, though he knew the gesture would not carry. "I shall eagerly await your report, Rhyslen. Good luck."

"Thank you, Yanuk. Good day to you."

"And to you." With that, Yanuk rubbed the crystal, severing the link between it and its twin hanging around Rhyslen's neck so far away.

"Yanuk!"

Yanuk glanced up at the urgency of the cry. Standing, he strode to the doorway. Patrus, the amputee, searched the courtyard from where he stood beside a mule-drawn wagon full of sacks of grain, candles, leather, and other dry goods. Fedris, having emerged from the garden, loitered around the wagon along with the middle-aged man and young woman who had just retrieved the goods. A mixture of uneasy and suspicious looks crossed their faces. Finding Yanuk, Patrus strode quickly over, a small white square clutched to his chest with one hook.

"Yanuk, a message came for you."

Yanuk's brow creased. "A message? From whom? Where was it?"

Patrus shook his head. "We do not know who left it. There is no sender listed on the outside, but it is addressed to you. Apparently it was slipped into the wagon here."

Yanuk tensed and turned a wide-eyed look to Edrand, the man who led the wagon. A few years Yanuk's senior, Edrand's face was badly scarred from escaping villagers who tried to burn him at the stake many years ago. "You were seen?"

The young woman flinched. "No, master, I swear it!"

Edrand shook his head, the salt-and-pepper hair on the side of his face that still grew swaying with the motion. "No one saw us." He gave Yanuk a flat stare. "Aside from those with whom we traded that tin, of course."

Yanuk frowned. Edrand had always opposed the idea of taking things they did not need when they stole the supplies they required to continue surviving



in their isolated home, preferring to never have contact with the outside world. Yanuk firmly believed that some of their necessities could only be obtained through trade. If they could no longer trust their contact, however, then they could all be in danger.

“Neither of us had any indication that we were seen,” Edrand went on. “I do not know how it got there and only discovered it just now.”

Yanuk snatched the envelope out of Patrus’s hook. Yanuk’s name was written in shaky, but clearly practised script on the front. No seal marked the back of the page, only a misshapen glob of wax held it shut. Yanuk’s dark look deepened as he broke the seal and unfolded the letter. Patrus leaned forward and Edrand watched intently as Yanuk’s eyes scanned the short page. Upon reaching the end, Yanuk’s lips pursed into a tight line.

“What is it, Yanuk?” Patrus asked.

Yanuk folded the letter and slid it into a sleeve, gauging the reactions of the senior and younger mages. “Someone knows about us. And wishes to meet with me ‘to our mutual benefit.’”

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