

Chapter Twenty One

Over an hour before the third bell, Kevik arrived at the Tower of the Magi. With staff in hand, he entered the Hall and found a good place to sit while he waited for the appointed time. This time of morning, there were few others than himself within the hall. There were two magic users engaged in a heated discussion not too far from where Kevik sat. The third and final person in the Hall was quietly sitting in a corner, reading near one of the glowing spheres the Tower uses for light.

He was ready. With a good night's sleep and a light breakfast earlier this morning, he was primed for what was to come. He ran through the spells he planned to do for the Magi and was confident they would give him little trouble. After all, if he could cast them during the heat of battle, doing so before the Magi shouldn't be too difficult.

After sitting there for some time, he noticed two robed individuals entering the Hall from the front entrance. One was young, maybe even younger than he was while the other was much older. It dawned on him that the younger must be another Apprentice who was taking the Test today. The older magic user would then be his master. They quickly found a place off by themselves and took their seats.

Two other Apprentices with their masters joined Kevik and the other pair in the hall before the appointed time. He couldn't help but feel saddened by how fate had robbed him of his master. Master Mage Allar by rights should be here to stand by his apprentice. Now he could only do so in spirit. Kevik vowed to himself that he would do his master proud.

When three bells finally arrived, the large door opened and a Seeker stepped forth. He took four steps into the Hall and announced, "All Apprentices seeking to be raised to Practitioner, please come forward."

Kevik immediately came to his feet and crossed the room. The other Apprentices with their accompanying masters did the same. Once he and the others stood before the Seeker, the Seeker said, "Follow me." Then without further preamble, the lad turned about and passed through the door. They fell in line behind the departing Seeker, each Apprentice walked beside their master. Kevik found himself behind the second such pair, with the final pair bringing up the rear.

He had never been in this part of the Tower before. The few times his master had business beyond this door, he had been forced to wait in the Hall until his return. Now though, here he was. It didn't look much different than the other areas he'd frequented with his master. Doors lined the hallway through which they were passing, with the odd adjoining hallway here and there.

The Seeker went down for a ways then turned into one of the side hallways. Lined with a reddish purple carpet, this hallway was much better accoutered than any section of the Tower Kevik had yet seen. There were niches in the walls on either side that held a variety of items. The ones to the right contained busts of men, most likely important magic users of times past, while the niches on the left each held a single item. By the time they arrived at the ornate double doors at the end of the hallway, he had seen a dozen different items ranging from a rather plain looking scroll, to a gem encrusted amulet which must have cost a king's ransom. He was sure they were magical in one form or another and wondered what they did.

Once the Seeker stood before the double doors, he turned around and waited for them to join him. "Beyond these doors is the Well of Thought," he explained. "Once you enter, speak not a word unless you are addressed by the Magi. Each of you will be allowed a single chance to prove your skill."

He glanced to Kevik and noted the absence of a master but said nothing. Turning back to the door, he passed his hand in an arc before it and spoke a single word. At the utterance of the word, the inscriptions on the door flared with a silver light. Then the double door opened in the middle as each side swung inward.

The opening of the door revealed three robed men facing the entrance from where they stood at the other side of the room. These must be the three Magi before whom Kevik must prove himself. As the

Seeker stepped to the side, he motioned for them to enter and silently directed them to stand near the side of the Well.

Before Kevik passed through the doorway, he had anticipated finding magical symbols engraved into the walls and floor of the Well. He was somewhat surprised to note that the Well was but bare stone. It held no inscriptions of any kind.

The Well itself was a hundred feet wide and circular. Glancing up, he saw that the Well extended far above him until finally disappearing into the darkness. *Might be the heart of the Tower*, he thought.

The three Master Mages before whom they would each exhibit their skill said not a word as the Apprentices and masters filed in. Once the last of them had passed into the Well, the double door closed with a soft thud. Not until each of the Apprentices was standing to the side with their masters behind them was the silence broken.

Then without preamble the Magi on the right said, in a voice that reverberated throughout the Well, "Apprentice Kaji, step forth."

Kevik watched as the Apprentice to his right, a fair haired lad of about seventeen winters, stepped forward and moved to stand before the Magi. The Apprentice's face showed confidence, and to Kevik's mind a touch of arrogance as well. With staff in hand, Apprentice Kaji came to a stop before the Magi.

"Who stands with Apprentice Kaji this day?" the Magi on the left asked.

"I do," replied the master of Apprentice Kaji. "Master Mage Ungi."

The third Magi who stood in the center, and looked a decade older than the other two, nodded to Apprentice Kaji. "Begin."

Apprentice Kaji held forth his staff. "This is Beregoth." If he had been expecting any sort of reaction from the Magi he was sorely disappointed, they remained impassive before him.

"Let there be light," he said and the tip of his staff flared. A globe of light formed at the tip. Holding up Beregoth, Apprentice Kaji held it before the Magi. Then he cancelled the spell and exclaimed, "Lightning!" Pointing his staff toward the upper dark recesses of the Well, a bolt of lightning shot forth from its tip. The bolt of lightning began to arc up into the darkness when it suddenly disappeared.

Apprentice Kaji was taken aback by the abrupt disappearance. He stood there in indecision for a moment when one of the Magi said, "Continue." Glancing to the Magi, he couldn't tell how they were

responding to his magic, their faces remained impassive. Shaking off the startlement, he reached into his robe and produced a frog, one common to the lakes and rivers of the area. Tossing it to the ground, he pointed his staff at the animal as it kicked off from the ground to leap across the floor.

“Immobile!” he exclaimed. This time the staff appeared not to react. But when the frog returned to the floor, it didn’t land properly. Rather, it bounced. It had been paralyzed in mid hop. A second later Apprentice Kaji cancelled the spell and the frog resumed hopping as it regained its mobility. Apprentice Kaji quickly retrieved the frog and once again secreted it within his robes. Turning back to the Magi, he waited.

“Continue,” again came from the elder Magi in the center.

Kevik then watched as Apprentice Kaji cast the five spells he needed to be able to perform without his staff. First he created a fiery ball upon the palm of his hand, then he produced a pebble and caused it to rise from the floor. Kevik was most impressed by the spells he was seeing performed. Sort of made the ones he had chosen seem weak in comparison.

Then Apprentice Kaji caused bolts of red energy to fire from his fingers. And just like what happened with the lightning bolt earlier, they didn’t travel very far before disappearing. That made Kevik begin to believe there may be defensive magics at work here to prevent an Apprentice from harming themselves or others.

For his fourth spell, he again removed the frog from his robes. He set it on the ground by his feet. Then saying a word, he encased it with green goo. Kevik recognized the spell that he himself had cast so many times before. After dispelling the goo and returning the frog once again to his robes, Apprentice Kaji readied himself for his fifth and final spell.

Confidence exuded from every pore of his being as he removed a stick from his robe. Tossing it to the ground, he cast his spell and the stick turned into a green viper. Immediately, the viper began slithering across the floor. It traveled almost a foot before it returned to being just a stick. Apprentice Kaji retrieved his stick and once it was back in his robes, turned to face the Magi.

Still with no discernible expression on their faces, the Master Mage in the middle nodded to Apprentice Kaji. “Well done, Practitioner Kaji.”

With pride and a triumphal grin, Practitioner Kaji returned to stand with his master. His master too was exhibiting pride in his apprentice. He gave his apprentice a pat on the shoulder and a nod of congratulations. Kevik felt a bit empty inside, he wished his own master were here too.

“Apprentice Teryn, step forth,” the Magi on the right said.

Where Kaji had been exuding confidence, this Apprentice seemed scared to be here. Of the four Apprentices within the Well, he appeared the youngest. Kevik figured he couldn’t have seen more than fifteen winters, maybe even less. Frankly, he was surprised he was even here. But then it wasn’t age they were concerned with here in the Well of Thought, just skill. His master must have felt he could do it else he wouldn’t be here.

Once Apprentice Teryn stood before the Magi, the Magi on the left asked, “Who stands with Apprentice Teryn this day?”

“I, Magic User Lyndra,” his master said. Magic Users were the lowest rank that could take Apprentices. A Magic User was just beneath Master Mages.

Kevik was surprised at the feminine voice that came from Apprentice Teryn’s master. She was the first female magic user he had ever come across. Oh sure, he knew many women followed this path, it was just the unexpectedness of encountering one here that startled him. His master had even once commented that women made better magic users than men though he never said why.

The third Magi nodded to Apprentice Teryn and said, “Begin.”

Apprentice Teryn nodded in reply and held forth his staff. The staff itself was rather plain and stood a good six inches taller than the one who held it. The whole effect made him seem even smaller than he was.

His first spell from his staff was a ball of light that hovered before him. After allowing it to hover for several seconds, he dispelled it. Next, he created a hazy purplish phantasm that looked for all the world like a miniature dragon. The phantasm belched a plume of fire before dissolving into nothingness.

Licking his lips, Apprentice Teryn glanced to the Magi but they remained as impassive as they had with Kaji. He then cast a look to his master who nodded encouragingly. Turning back to the Magi, he struck the floor with the base of his staff and a cloud of smoke began to materialize from the point of impact. The cloud grew several feet in diameter before it was dispelled.

“Continue,” the middle Magi said.

Confidence somewhat bolstered by having successfully demonstrated the power of his staff, he then went into the five spells. The first one was a gust of wind, very similar to the one Kevik had planned to do. The second one was bolts of energy such as Kaji had done. He began the casting of the third spell and seemed to pause in the middle of the incantation as if he had forgotten the words.

Kevik glanced to Apprentice Teryn’s master and could see concern etched upon her brow. Something wasn’t going right. He no sooner turned his attention back to Apprentice Teryn than there was a ‘snap’ in the air. Whatever Apprentice Teryn had done, or had done wrong, caused him to be thrown backwards where he struck the wall with a thud. He sagged to the floor before getting himself back to his feet.

The look on his face said it all as he came to stand before the Magi once again. He bowed his head as he heard the words he knew were coming.

“Apprentice Teryn,” the center Magi uttered. “Perhaps next year.”

Kevik watched the dejected Apprentice return to stand with his master. Would that be him? Kevik wondered. When it came his time, would he blow it too? What confidence he had was waning in the face of the doubts that now insinuated themselves into him.

Once he had rejoined the others, the Magi on the right said, “Apprentice Keag, step forth.”

Apprentice Keag did much better than had Apprentice Teryn. He adeptly did the three spells from his staff then whizzed through the five that came from within himself. The final spell was a dazzling display of multicolored sparks that impressed Kevik. As the last spark faded away, Apprentice Keag turned hopeful eyes towards the Magi.

“Practitioner Keag,” the middle Magi stated. “Well done.”

Practitioner Keag bowed respectfully to the Magi and then practically strutted back to rejoin his master.

Then it was Kevik's turn. Heart pounding in his chest, he awaited the words that were to come.

"Apprentice Kevik," the Magi said, "step forth."

Taking a deep breath to settle his nerves, he stepped forward, but not before catching a glimpse of the face of Apprentice Teryn. The boy looked sad and dejected which did nothing for his own self confidence.

Once Kevik took his place before the Magi he heard the Magi on the left ask, "Who stands with Apprentice Kevik this day?"

"Uh," began Kevik. "My master died several months ago." For the first time the thought occurred to him that he may not be permitted to take the test without a master. You could imagine his relief when the Magi said, "Begin."

Taking his staff in hand, he cast his glowing orb. His confidence grew when the orb sprang to life and cast its radiance about the Well. Then he took out four items he had brought from his Tower; a book, a rock, a copper coin, and the silver ring with the red jewel that had something to do with magic. He set them before him on the stone floor of the Well and then stood back up. Casting his second spell, the one which would detect magic, he was relieved to see the ring bearing the jewel begin to glow a deep blue. He glanced to the Magi but as with the Apprentices before him, they remained impassive. Canceling his spell, he retrieved his items and returned them to one of the pockets within his robe. Now for the last spell from his staff.

Raising the staff high, he caused sparks to shoot forth from the tip of the staff. Canceling the spell, he felt his confidence grow further now that he was past the staff portion of the test.

"Continue," the Magi said.

Now for the final five. First came his bobbing light spell. He had always liked it despite Riyan's and the others' reactions to it in Algoth. Then he cast his goo spell, his wind spell, and the energy bolts as well. True, none of these were very flashy, but then they didn't have to be.

He took a few calming breaths before he did his last spell, his excitement was getting the better of him. One more to go and he'd be a Practitioner. Once he tamed his exuberance, he removed a diamond brooch and set it on the floor before him. The brooch was one of the items he had yet to identify. It was formed in the shape of a crescent moon containing over two dozen small diamonds. For his last spell, he was going to identify the brooch.

Last night before he had gone to bed, he had agonized over what he should bring to identify. Should it be something which he already knew what it did, or something as yet unknown? He had settled on this diamond brooch. If it was cursed as had been the flowering necklace, what better place for him to discover it than here where master mages could help should things go awry. A risk to be sure, but that's why he chose to do this spell last.

He concentrated on the brooch and then cast the spell. The blue glow enveloped the brooch and the vision formed...

Diamonds lay on a table in a neat row as each waited its turn to be set into the brooch...The feeling of time passing, then...Darkness broken by the light of a single torch. Rock walls close by as the bearer of the brooch descended into the earth...Then...Light, myriad colors of light warp and twist. At its heart lies the diamond brooch.

Coming back to himself at the ending of the spell, he took a moment to get his bearings. At times the magic user can become disoriented when identifying items, though usually only when the item was particularly powerful, or the vision intense. Once he regained his composure, he picked up the brooch and faced the Magi.

"Well done, Practitioner Kevik," the middle Magi stated. The one on the right looked to Kevik and said, "Your master would have been proud."

Surprised and pleased at the statement, he was beaming as he gave the three Magi a bow then returned to join the others.

The middle Magi stepped forward and said, "For those of you who have risen in the Guild, congratulations." Then he turned his gaze upon the lone Apprentice still among them. "Perhaps next year young Apprentice," he said. "You showed much skill."

Apprentice Teryn gave him a bow.

The double doors opened and the Seeker who had escorted them earlier entered the Well. "Good luck to you all," the center Magi said.

They each gave the Magi a respectful bow before leaving the Well. Kevik had a lilt in his step as he passed through the double doors. The other two Practitioners were ecstatic as well and once they passed from the Well, began talking jubilantly with their masters. Apprentice Teryn on the other hand remained silent.

The Seeker escorted them back to the Hall where he took his leave. Kevik paused just within the Hall for a few moments, relishing his newly acquired rank. Practitioner! He had done it! Despite the fact that there were people around, he couldn't help himself. He jumped into the air and kicked his heels together. A few looks were directed at him, all but one were those of amusement. He was fairly certain that everyone knew what they had just gone through. Kevik wished someone would have announced to the Hall that he was a Practitioner, just like Bart had told him they did for Riyan and Chad at the Warriors Guild. Different Guild, different customs. What does it matter? He's a Practitioner!

He was about to begin crossing the Hall to the short hallway leading to the exit when a hand grabbed his arm from behind. Glancing backwards, he was surprised to find one of the Magi from the Well of Thought had hold of him. It was the one who had stood to the right. "Yes Magi?" he asked.

The man gave him a grin and said, "You can dispense with calling me Magi. That title is only used during the testing. Call me Master Mage Frell."

"As you wish Master Mage Frell," replied Kevik.

"Seeing as how you don't have a master at this time, I thought to take it onto myself to pass on some information which you may need," he said. "If you have a minute that is."

Kevik was surprised by this. "Uh, yes," he replied. "I do have some time." Bart was waiting for him outside but he was sure Bart wouldn't mind waiting a little longer.

"Excellent young Practitioner," Master Mage Frell said. Still having hold of Kevik's arm, he walked with him toward one of the tables within the hexagon of columns. They walked in silence as they crossed the Hall, and it wasn't until they were within the columned area that Master Mage Frell resumed the conversation.

"I was a friend of your master," he said.

"You knew him?" he asked.

"He and I go way back," he explained. "Why, we even stood together in the Well when we were Apprentices." He got a far away look on his face. "That was a long time ago."

"My master never mentioned you," Kevik said.

The Master Mage chuckled. "That sounds like him. Always with a nose in a book or working on another spell."

Kevik grinned at the description of his master. It was fairly accurate. "What did you wish to tell me?" he asked.

"I suppose you already know where the library on the ground floor is?" he asked. When Kevik nodded, he said, "Good. That's the only library Practitioners have access to here in the Guild until you advance further. It has many books which will aid you in the researching of spells. There are even half a dozen books which contain some of the more basic spells that you may copy and use as you wish."

"Thank you," he said.

Arriving at one of the tables, Frell indicated for Kevik to take a seat.

Kevik sat in the chair directly across the table from the Master Mage. He glanced up at the columns rising to the ceiling around him and was awed at being where he was.

A Seeker had positioned himself near one of the columns directly in the Master Mage's line of sight. The Master Mage signaled the Seeker and they were soon enjoying hot tea and pastries. Taking one of the berry filled pastries, Frell said, "One of the more pleasant benefits."

Having already consumed one of the delicate pastries, Kevik could only nod in agreement. Looking longingly at another but afraid to ask, he saw Frell nod for him to help himself. He took his time with this one as he wanted to savor it for as long as possible.

"What is going to happen to Apprentice Teryn?" Kevik asked.

"He'll have to wait another year before he can again try for Practitioner I'm afraid," he said. "His master, a powerful magic user in her own right, rushed him." He removed another of the pastries from the platter and took a bite. They sat there in silence while Frell finished his mouthful. He set the remaining half back on the platter and then took up his tea cup. Sipping on the warm beverage, he continued.

"I'd first like to say I'm sorry for the loss of your master." Taking another sip he gazed to see Kevik's reaction. "It's quite remarkable that you were able to learn what you needed to in order to advance to Practitioner on your own."

Kevik nodded. "My master was a very good teacher," he explained. "I appreciate all the Guild has done for me since his passing."

"You mean basically giving you his estate and all?" Frell asked.

Kevik nodded again.

Frell grinned. "I had a hand in that young man," he admitted. "I knew Allar's feelings about such things, he would have wanted it to go

to you.” He paused a moment then added, “He thought very highly of you.”

“He did?” asked Kevik. He was surprised that his master would have spoken of such things to another magic user.

“Yes he did,” confirmed Frell. “In fact, he said you were the brightest apprentice he ever had.”

The words he was hearing made him feel quite good. He always knew his master had thought well of him, but to hear it confirmed by another...well it just felt good! “I hope to live up to his praise.”

“You already have my young Practitioner,” Frell stated. Setting his teacup down, he picked up the remaining half of the pastry and placed it in its entirety within his mouth. While he chewed, he kept his eyes fixed on Kevik.

Kevik on the other hand wanted another pastry but despite the nod to go ahead from Frell, he declined. He didn’t want to come across as a greedy glutton.

“Do you have any questions for me?” Frell asked.

“Not really,” Kevik replied. “I’m not sure what is required to advance from Practitioner though.”

“Ah yes,” he said with a grin. “I was sure that would be uppermost on your mind.” He took up his tea cup again and quietly took a couple sips before replacing it back on the table. “As you’re aware, the next rank is Wielder.”

“So my master had informed me,” replied Kevik. “He said that it would be more difficult going from Practitioner to Wielder than from Apprentice to Practitioner.”

Frell nodded. “That’s right. For an Apprentice to rise to Practitioner, all he must do is show that he is capable of performing magic with some degree of competency.”

“Is that why we must construct our staff and be able to perform five spells?” Kevik asked.

“In part,” he replied. “The symbol of the magic user is the staff. No one who practices the art can be without one. That’s why we make it a requirement during the initial advancement.”

Kevik nodded understanding. That made sense.

“The test you must take next, which by the way you must wait at least one full year from now before you can make the attempt, is more rigorous.”

“Rigorous?” Kevik asked. He definitely didn’t like the sound of that.

“Indeed,” replied Frell. “You see, for a magic user to advance above Practitioner, he must have an agile mind. The test you will face will require you to think quickly and any misstep will result in failure.”

“What do you mean by ‘think quickly’?” questioned Kevik.

Frell grinned and sipped his tea for a moment before answering. “Unlike the test for Practitioner where other Apprentices are likely to be there with you, for Wielder you will enter the Well alone. You must defend yourself with magic. If you survive the encounter, you are raised to Wielder, for you can wield the magic.”

“You mean I might die?” he asked.

“Unlikely, but it does happen,” he explained. “It’s no longer permissible for the testers to use excessive force. They will cast magic and you must be able to counter the spells.”

“I see,” replied Kevik. He didn’t like the sound of that.

“But I wouldn’t worry about that,” Frell assured him. “You have a year and plenty of time to practice.”

“I suppose so,” agreed Kevik.

“Of course, there’s nothing that says you must make the attempt in precisely a year,” he explained. “Some Practitioners put off testing for Wielder for years.”

Kevik sat back in his chair and thought about what lay ahead for him. Then a thought came to him. “You mentioned that in the library here on the ground floor are books with basic spells in them,” he said. When he saw Frell nod in agreement, he added, “Then can I assume that the spells contained within those books would be beneficial for a Practitioner to know when he enters the Well again?”

Frell grinned at him. “Allar always said you were smart,” he said. Not exactly confirming Kevik’s suspicions, he didn’t deny them either.

“That’s about all I needed to tell you,” Frell announced. “Do you have any other questions?”

Kevik shook his head. “No. You’ve been most helpful.”

“Owed it to your master,” he replied. “If you ever have any other questions about the Guild or anything else, come see me.”

Realizing he was being dismissed, Kevik got to his feet. “I will, and thank you.”

Master Mage Frell gave him a nod in reply.

Turning about, Kevik made a beeline for the entrance. Before he left the Hall, he glanced down the hallway that led to the library. He figured that he was going to have to spend a lot of time there over the next year. Still a little bit giddy at being a Practitioner, he left the Guild in search of Bart. He simply had to brag to someone.