

Chapter 20: Discussions

The waves continuously beat against the large rocks littering the seashore, pounding out against the earth with their own internal liquid rhythm. The scene was anything but calm; the ocean's waves were aggravated by the heavy seasonal winds, turning the gentle currents into miniature tidal waves that continued to crash against the rocks along the shore, sending sheets of water flying into the air as they hit the stones.

Even a few feet back, Brittany could still feel the water and was in danger of becoming rapidly drenched by the tidal spray. She had come to this spot of shoreline in order to find some solitude in which to think, but the tearing wind and crashing water only served as distractions. They also served as an excellent reminder of the predicament her group found themselves in. With such weather, it looked as if no sailor or captain would take the chance on transporting the three of them to the Eastern Continent.

Another heavy gust tore at Brittany's clothes as she turned to look at the town behind her. It lay about a quarter mile in the distance, seemingly small and insignificant against the endless stretch of ocean running beside it. Unlike the city of Derrek'Thar, this small village had no walls for protection; its small stature kept it safe from raids or attacks, those individuals preferring to go after one of the larger ports to the south where it was easier to navigate the ocean's waters. The massive reefs in this area were another reason that many ships stayed away and the town remained small.

Such a small town however, was an ideal hiding spot, for it would be likely that any dark sorcerers would search the larger cities to the south for Brittany and her companions. It had been three days since they arrived here, and so far no sorcerers had yet attacked them.

That had been the fear plaguing Brittany ever since they departed from Derrek'Thar over a week earlier. It was obvious, to her at least, that the dark sorcerer had been after her, and all the sorcerers and guards being murdered were merely a distraction. Feeling a bit guilty for the deaths of all his companions, she mentioned this to Whitebridge while on the road. To her surprise, he did not immediately agree with her.

"Perhaps not," he replied in his thick accent after a few moments of contemplation. "It is very possible that the dark mage was after you, but I hesitate to make that the only reason."

"What other reason would there be?" Brittany asked, at last beginning to understand Whitebridge's words through his accent.

"These dark mages, they would be working for the one who calls himself the Dark Lord, yes?" He apparently asked a rhetorical question, for he did not wait at all for Brittany or Mal'Zyn to answer, "The mages of the Citadel have had some...disputes with the Dark Lord in the past."

"How far in the past?" Brittany asked, trying to gain a better perspective on events. "Was it around the time we arrived?"

"Oh, no. Not at all." Whitebridge immediately answered. "This was far before then, probably thirty or forty years ago, if not more. If I may be completely truthful, there have actually been a number of ... incidents with the Dark Lord. The first occurred when he was still a student as the Citadel."

"What?" Brittany almost shouted, before continuing on in a more normal tone. "You mean, the Dark Lord was a student? But he's evil. You guys are...were...good sorcerers." she finished quietly, cognizant of the fact that all the "good sorcerers" were by now most likely dead.

"Not everyone is entirely evil," Whitebridge answered, unfazed by Brittany's use of past tense. "Even the Dark Lord is not completely evil. I do not believe he would think of himself as evil. But even then, most of his more vile activities took place after he was expelled from the Citadel. Only three people have ever been expelled from the Citadel during the hundreds of years it has existed. Now that I think about it, it seems all three of those people ended up becoming ruthless conquerors."

"Ironic, isn't it?" Brittany chimed in, "Maybe you guys shouldn't have expelled them then. They might have turned out alright in the end."

"I do not think so," Whitebridge respectfully disagreed. "The Dark Lord was expelled for murdering two other students."

"How did that happen?" She asked, "didn't you try to turn him in to the authorities or whoever?"

"We would have, if we could have said for certain that it was his fault." Whitebridge replied, "Of course, 'we' means the head mages, for I was still a student back then. But there was no solid evidence to try him on anything, even though we did have suspicions."

"What exactly happened?" Mal'Zyn asked, the first words Brittany had heard from him in some time. Even though it looked as if he was almost entirely concentrating on navigating the path ahead of them, she was sure he was listening to every word Whitebridge said.

"Well," Whitebridge replied as they walked along, "The whole matter began when the Citadel received a new selection of books. Now, we not only have mages within the Citadel, but

also employ some of our mages outside the city, in order to search out and find items that may be of use to the mages and students. We have mages in place on both continents, and nearly all of the major island chains." he proudly mentioned before continuing on.

"One of our mages on the western continent had come across the ruins of a great temple a few years previous and since had spent four or five years excavating it with the help of some fellow mages. Eventually they discovered a large library, comprised mainly of spellbooks, or rather, books with instructions on how mages could vastly increase their skill level.

"Once these books were received at the Citadel, it was obvious most of them were too powerful for the students to access, and in some cases even for the mages themselves to study from. They were immediately placed under lock and key, but the students, including myself I am forced to admit, remained curious."

"And the Dark Lord's curiosity proved too much for him to control?" Brittany spoke up, at which Whitebridge nodded.

"Yes. He felt that the students should be able to at least look at the books, even if they were not able to perform any of the exercises from them." Whitebridge said. "He even took this matter up with the head mages, who promptly denied him access and put the books under even greater security. In the months afterwards, the Dark Lord gathered around him a number of similar-minded students who also wanted to see the books and the spells for themselves."

"Were you one of them?" Brittany asked.

"Oh no." Whitebridge quickly replied, actually stopping for a moment to vehemently shake his head. "I was interested in them, it is true, but so then were almost all of the students at that time. I, however, knew to stop wondering and obey the commands of the mages. The Dark Lord and his group of followers, instead of following orders, decided to find a way to get access to the books and take a look for themselves."

"By the way," Brittany spoke up, "Not to interrupt your story, but what was the Dark Lord's name? You obviously couldn't have called him that before he became the Dark Lord." Whitebridge paused for a few long moments before answering.

"It is true, he did have another name." he finally admitted, sounding for all the world like he did not want to be talking about this minor detail, "But he comes from a rather well-to-do family. All the members of this family, with the exception of him, are upstanding citizens, good people. That is why we at the Citadel have erased his name from our records and persist in calling him only the Dark Lord. It would be a shame to connect the Dark Lord's blight to such a

family."

"Fine. Don't tell me." Brittany muttered, deciding not to mention that she was from another planet and so didn't care at all about the honor of various families she had never met before. Whitebridge continued on.

"The books were kept in a guarded room that was located within the central library. You saw the library while we were staying there," Whitebridge pointed out. Brittany indeed had seen the library, although to her dismay all the books were in languages she could not read. "The Dark lord and perhaps five of his fellow students managed to sneak in past the guards, undo both the physical and the magickal lock in place around them, and make off with a single volume."

"Why only one volume?" Brittany asked. "Didn't they want to look at all the books?"

"We're not sure," he replied, "Either they satisfied their curiosity within the guarded room, or else deemed the other books to be useless to them. At any rate, the book the Dark Lord took was the most powerful in the collection. It contained, among other things, a special rite that would apparently allow a reader to cheat Death and achieve immortality."

This revelation cause to Brittany to actually stop in her tracks and glance at Mal'Zyn, who was looking back at her with some surprise.

"Wait. Is the name of the spell the Rite of EL'Ran'Kasheen?" she asked.

"Yes, I do believe that is what it was called," he answered as the group began moving once more. "Of course, I am not certain, for I have never seen the book or the spell itself. We learned it all only later, after the murders occurred."

"So did some fellow students threaten to tell about the theft and the Dark Lord killed them?" Brittany asked.

"Not at all," Whitebridge replied. "The theft was never discovered by the mages until after the two students were killed. They thought the books were safely guarded the entire time. And they were, except for the single book the Dark Lord had stolen. As far as we can tell, one night he and a couple of his friends attempted the Rite of EL'Ran'Kasheen."

"What?!" Brittany exclaimed. "But...from everything I have heard, that spell is too powerful for any normal sorcerer to use."

Whitebridge nodded.

"Yes, that is the same information I have heard as well. But you must understand, the Dark Lord was no ordinary student or fledgling mage. He excelled in the magick arts, and was the best student in years, perhaps even centuries. Had he not later been expelled, it is certain he

would have far outstripped any of the mages who taught him."

"From what he has been doing lately, it seems he already has," Brittany murmured.

"Perhaps so," Whitebridge overheard her words, "but in any case, he believed that he had enough skill to perform the rite correctly. It does without saying that he was not skilled enough and the spell, quite literally, blew up in his face. Once the explosions settled down, he was severely injured and his two companions were dead."

"So... it was an accident, then?" Brittany asked. "You said they were murdered."

"I did." Whitebridge agreed. "Because the two students were not burned or blown up in any sort of explosion. Their throats were cut. Most of the head mages theorized that in order to gain some more power for the spell, the Dark Lord killed his two companions."

"How would that work?" Brittany asked.

"At that time, the Dark Lord did have some minor skill in Necromancy and other death-related spells," Whitebridge explained. "It is our belief that he killed his two friends in order to draw additional power from their corpses. However, the mages never discovered a murder weapon, and the Dark Lord denied having met with them that night. So the only thing we could do was to expel him for disobedience and reckless uses of magick. He could not deny that, for everyone in the Citadel had felt the waves caused when he began the first section of the Rite, although he was never able to complete even that much. However, we never could find the book. It had completely disappeared, even though we searched through the entire Citadel multiple times. I am assuming that the Dark Lord managed to hide it, and in all probability still has it with him in his fortress in the Sunken Isles to the south."

"Seems likely, since he is trying to do the rite again," Brittany answered.

"What did you say?" Now it was Whitebridge's turn to be surprised. "The Dark Lord is attempting the Rite once more?"

Brittany nodded, and with a little help from Mal'Zyn, spent the next half-hour explaining why they were here and how the Dark Lord was trying to collect a number of powerful artifacts to perform the Rite. Once they had finished, Whitebridge nodded.

"Well, perhaps the Citadel is not the sole reason for that Dark mage to attack. If that is true, however, then I am surprised by how easily the three of us escaped."

Brittany agreed, and soon the talk turned to lesser matters. Hours after their discussion about the Dark Lord's origin, the three of them had arrived at this small village, and in the three days since had spent most of their time trying to find passage across the Great Central Ocean.

For the last three days, Brittany had been questioning Whitebridge as to why this voyage was necessary, and all of his answers seemed to be rather unsatisfactory.

Now, as she stood at the edge of the ocean watching the water crash violently against the rocks, Brittany resolved to take the matter up with their guide once more. And this time she would not leave without a decent one. Beginning the trek back to the village, Brittany realized this task might be made much easier if she had Mal'Zyn by her side. However, the albino had left early in the morning to explore around the village and the docks, even though it seemed to Brittany that there wasn't much to explore. Nevertheless, he was nowhere nearby, and so she would have to do without his presence.

Minutes later, Brittany passed into the village, although there was no discernible boundary to where the village began. Unlike well structured cities, this village just seemed to grow out of the wilderness in increments; first a single house, then a small farm, then a cluster of houses, until at last one was surrounded by buildings. These buildings were nearly all constructed in the same squat, rough fashion. It looked to Brittany as if the villagers had just torn down some small trees and pieced them together to make dwellings. All except for one building, the hotel to which Brittany was now headed. This village only held one hotel, and being on the low end of the tourist trade, the hotel also functioned as town meeting hall, courthouse, blacksmith, tavern, and should the need arise, village jail. Unlike the other buildings here, the hotel looked as if some thought had been used when constructing it. It was the only building in the entire village that was two stories tall, and the walls were made of a red lumber that might have been shipped into the village from afar. Perhaps a testament to an earlier time when the village had better prospects than it did now.

Entering the hotel, Brittany looked around and immediately found Whitebridge sitting at a table in the main hall, drinking a glass of ale. Brittany did have to admit that it was good having Whitebridge along with them, for he did have money on him, and did not seem hesitant to use it. He had purchased the hotel rooms, and had previously said that he would pay for passage on a ship, provided any ship could ever be found. Brittany's gratitude for this, however, did not stop her from marching up to the table and sitting down next to Whitebridge.

"We need to talk." She began.

"About the voyage?" he inquired, taking another sip of his ale, "I do realize how difficult it will be to get a passage, but hopefully we will be able to find a ship in the next few..."

"It's not about the voyage." Brittany cut him off, "It's about the reasons for the voyage."

"Did we already have this conversation?" Whitebridge questioned.

"Yes, but I can tell that you aren't telling us everything." Brittany answered. "There is some other reason you are taking us to this other continent, some reason besides just escaping from the Dark Sorcerer."

Whitebridge did not answer for a moment. After a while, however, he sighed and nodded his head.

"Yes, there is another reason," he admitted, "After you mentioned that day about the Dark Lord wanting to redo the rite, I have been thinking. If he is, as you have said, been collecting items in order to gain enough power for the rite, then there is one item he would need above all the others. It is a very powerful object called the Spirit's orb, and it is to this object that I would have taken us."

"Spirit's orb?" Brittany asked. "What does it do?"

"No one is really sure," Whitebridge admitted as he took another drink. "No one has ever been able to bring it to the Citadel, or otherwise remove it from the cave it's located in. But it apparently channels energy between this world and the afterlife, which could provide a user with a source of endless energy. If the Dark Lord needs power, he would go for the orb."

"How do you know he hasn't gotten it yet?" Brittany asked.

"I don't," Whitebridge said. "but I do know that the orb has stayed in the same area it has always been in. It casts out a unique magickal wave, that although very faint, is possible for me to catch onto and find its location."

"Interesting." Brittany mused. "So is there anything we could do with this orb, besides not letting the Dark lord have it?"

"Again, I do not know." Whitebridge responded. "If you are able to tap into its power, it is possible you could do just about anything."

Their conversation was interrupted by Mal'Zyn, who entered into the main hall and made his way over to their table.

"I believe I have come across a ship," he said as he pulled up an extra chair and sat down next to them.

"Where?" Brittany asked immediately.

"Down by the docks a new ship just came in. I believe the name is The Fury. From what I could understand, it seems they will travel to the western continent within two days time after finding more supplies."

While Mal'Zyn was speaking, Whitebridge slowly shook his head.

"No." he began the moment Mal'Zyn finished, "Not The Fury. Any other ship would be fine, but not that one."

"Why not?" Brittany asked.

"That ship is cursed." Whitebridge answered. "Or has such bad luck that it might as well be cursed. On every single trip since its maiden voyage, something bad has happened to The Fury. Over the four years its been sailing, over a hundred crew members have been lost."

"But we have to get to the western continent before the Dark Lord does." Brittany pointed out, "And besides, its probably just bad sailors, not an actual curse."

Whitebridge continued to shake his head.

"I do not know," he said, "The only person to ever stay on the ship beyond three voyages is the captain, Bishop Briar. Some say he is mad."

"What chance is there of any other ship coming in here for weeks?" Mal'Zyn asked, shifting his sheathed swords into a more comfortable position. "If the Fury is traveling the direction we wish, then it seems to be our only option."

Mal'Zyn's calm words had the right effect on Whitebridge. After finishing his ale in a long gulp, Whitebridge put the glass on the wooden tabletop and stood up.

"I suppose you are right," he said to the two of them. "I will go see if we can procure a spot on board. But I warn you, with The Fury there is as much a chance of ending up on the western continent as there is of ending up on the bottom of the ocean."

With that, he turned and left.