BENSON: The Shrine of Ben-Nmiido

CELWA MAYDEN

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Chapter One, The Sacrilegious Stone

I stepped slowly towards the light before me, my heart racing and my breath shaking. As my body moved against my inner will, I realized I could hardly remember a time without this light, burning from within this sacrilegious Stone. It had awoken me every morning and lulled me every night. I could feel my Jentia’s tension behind me and sense her holding her breath, also. Her fingernails rapped sharply against the glass fan I had never seen her without. My fingers reach out, quivering with every pulse of the beaming light. The Stone began to crack, splitting the deadened silence and the light shone brighter. My heart was caught between a fluttering and a pounding so intense. In a sudden moment, a brilliant flash, the stone shattered and the light imploded, filling the air around me as my virgin fingers met magic for the first time. My Jentia stiffened as we made brief eye contact, the light encircling me and glowing, burning. My chest rose and fell in convulsive motions, but I tried to force a steady inhale. The smell of smoldering incense flooded my awareness, filling my nostrils with potent scents. The light collapsed into a low beam, protruding from the Stone and crossing the distance between it and I. I slowly turned away, my feet reluctantly placing me against the light and I felt it contact the back of my neck. My heart continued to pound and large, thick sweat droplets began to fall from my skin as the intensity of the heat only grew with the seconds.

In a moment, I would know. The question that must be answered, the test each must pass; would I find a secret to keep or a virtue to hold? The light intensified and my Jencia turned, fleeing the room, slamming the door shut behind her. I took a deep breath and waited painfully long. *One-one thousandth, two-one thousandths, three-*. I screamed as the magic-drenched light seared into the back of my neck. My vision faded and then the world around me went black as my body shut down. My eyes throbbed and my head dropped down against my chest. I struggled for breath and waited for it to come. I felt as though I would implode, just as the light did beat forth from the Stone. In an instant that had passed like an eternity, the burning was gone. I fell to my face on the floor, gasped for air, clutched my throat as though the searing pain was yet to subside. My Jentia burst through the doors and slid to her knees next to me. My hair had fallen down in strands and knots, matted with sweat, but she brushed it away gently from my neck. I cried out as she moved and a tear of hers fell for my pain. She pulled her glass fan and began to wave icy Northern air onto my neck. Her arms quaked and her lips trembled as she softly rubbed burnt skin away and read the word, the answer, that has been sealed upon my neck. My Jentia gasped and I stared at her up over my bent shoulder. The indescribable expression on her face left my heart dead and sunken inside my chest, but I could still feel the fluttering of hope inside me that it may have implied. She shook her head slowly as the sharp sound of footsteps resounded through the stone walls of my Academy. A woman, keenly dressed with tight black and gray-streaked hair pulled back into an elaborate twisted rope of knots, stalked into the open doorway.

“My Lady,” my Jentia hastily wiped tears from her pale face and left me to kneel before the Mistress.

“What is she?”

It was a sharp, snapping voice that came from the Mistress’ thin and tight lips. The words echoed, resounding through the old and smooth, stone-built room. My back shuddered and I waited, my body trembling in apprehensive excitement for the reply. Instead, my Jentia spoke, not aloud, but rose from the floor and approached the Mistress, bending slightly to whisper into her ear. A stifled gasp was all that could be heard upon receiving an answer and I could almost feel the Mistress reciting the litany against her emotions in her mind. *I feel nothing. All feelings pass above me and around me, but never through me. I am free from the bondage of emotions. Yes, I am free. I feel nothing.* Despite her efforts, I could hear the deep emotion in her voice as she breathed a sigh…of relief. My own heartrate quickened in turn, for relief in her voice could only mean one thing for me.

“Well,” she said quickly. “Leave her. To see for herself.”

My Jentia hesitated, but not for more than a moment, and then left behind the Mistress, closing the door behind her once again.

My body had calmed, but the burn remained strong. I took only a second more on the cool floor, before turning hastening to my feet and stumbling to the large mirror adjacent to the pale-lit windows. The blue light of the moon outside reflected harshly off the glass, casting a hazy glint around the room. I turned and pulled my frizzy, caramel hair back from my neck, my thick curls now dampened with sweat. The burn, now revealed clear in the mirror, reflected off the foggy windows and I exhaled sharply as my eyes caught sight. A small cry of relief and a quiet gasping for breath was all I could manage.

I had a virtue.

Burned into my pale skin with the light of the Hecate Trial was one word, elaborate in script and full of life. A word that meant I was safe.

“Scribe.”

Scribe Six

RAEGIS | HECATE COURT | *13789 103 248-2608*

“It is with my deepest pride and greatest pleasure that I report our sixth scribe has been elected by the Holy Stone. Celwa Mayden of Column 521 was favorably branded early this morning *(internal note – 06321, Mara 2, Yinye 458)* and now sits at the last desk of our council records *(internal note – formerly empty following the events of the Ted-Mihra in which Roderick Torin was exiled – 14763, Mara 9, Yinye 442)*. After this hearing, we will compare her written record with the standing five scribes. Provided all is found agreeable to you we will proceed-…..”

YVONNE | HECATE COURT, HECATE THRONE | *13792 103 248-2608*

“Enough. Has she been instructed to record mere words or the speaker and tongue, as well? Can she translate? How many languages? What are her averages? How are her classes? Talent will earn her nothing in her proceedings. Only skill.”

RAEGIS | HECATE COURT | *13793 103 248-2608*

“Yes, Your Regency *(internal note – Yvonne does not hold official title or rank of queen, nor ruler of Mageia, but belongs to the Elevated, a class of the highest-ranking magicians known to our kind.)*. She has excelled for the past thirteen years in all classes. She is fluent in every dialect and can record in three languages simultaneously. She has the highest intellectual score in the academy.”

AMANDA ahenoOl | HECATE COURT aefinlkjEk avlurnYj | 13793 103 248-2608

“And what of her record? Has she been convicted?” ‘adnE gvikK asejLf filgDi oelnL nfegienLej? dfnfIl sgruiL ngfGl glyerJ sginjakrLn’

RAEGIS | HECATE COURT | *13794 103 248-2608*

“Goodness, no. Her ledger is clean. Indeed, she was the highest candidate.”

YVONNE | HECATE COURT, HECATE THRONE | *13794 103 248-2608*

“Impressive. That will be quite enough. Maugruis! Command the scribes to leave us. That will be all the records needed for this session.”

MAUGRUIS | HECATE COURT, SEAT OF THE SCRIBE DIRECTOR | 13795 103 248-2608

“Scribes, pens down.”

I placed my quill into the ink tray, gently, as the Scribe Attendant continued. He spoke something of the following nature. “That will be enough for the records. Return to your quarters.” He gestured at the first three men seated at scribal desks. “The rest of you return to your classes immediately.” Yvonne spoke up from the thrine she occupied at the head of the court.

“Not the sixth.”

Maugruis turned at her command and motioned is head in the affirmative, compliantly. “Go and see the Headmistress, Celwa.”

I looked into his face and read the nigh imperceptible traces of concern. Standing silently to my feet and replacing the chair inside the writing desk, I thought to myself, ‘Cautious, then.’ My eyes locked briefly with my Jentia and I saw feeling beyond concern, beyond even fear. I calmly looked away and came to stand before the headmistress, curtsied low.

“My lady.”

“Come closer, child. One should not have to use the Sight to see a servant clearly.”

I rose and approached to within a meter of the High Throne.

“My lady,” I repeated, dipping my head respectfully.

Yvonne studied me carefully, her dark eyes squinting, her thin lips pressed tight together.

“Lady?”