

Mage's Call; an excerpt

Ulrek glared at the staff, willing it to do something; *anything*. "Blasted piece of felled wood! I spent countless hours searching for you! Weeks, shaping you into perfection! Months, imbuing you with the wizard's touch, and this is how you repay me?!"

If he was surprised by a lack of response, he didn't show it. In fact, Ulrek went on cursing and demeaning the section of lumber as though it cared. Finally, he ceased his tirade and snatched a large crystal from the middle of the staff. The moment he did, it collapsed in on itself, becoming nothing more than a pile of wood chips.

Ulrek held the crystal before his aged blue eyes, squinting in consternation. "It isn't the wood, is it? It was never the wood. It was *you*."

The crystal remained as still as the wood, as though they'd formed a pact of silence. Despite his anger, Ulrek walked over to an ornate pedestal and gingerly placed the crystal within a fireglobe. "There. If you will not cooperate, then you can rot in stasis until I decide you are worthy of my attention once again!"

He began to turn away only to detect a glimmer from the corner of his eye. He faced the crystal again, a grin splitting his craggy and weathered face. "So, changed your mind, have you?"

Ulrek's hand was poised over the crystal, preparing to pluck it from its prison like a satisfied jailer, when a thought occurred to him. A frown replaced his smile, and he dropped his hand in disgust.

"Mara Windsill."

A moment after grumbling the name, a soft knock came from the door.

"Enter!" he yelled in anger, but not at Mara. It certainly wasn't her fault crystals responded to her presence. And the young slip of a girl had no idea how or why she was sensitive to magic at all; neither did Ulrek.

"Ulrek!" Mara dashed across the room and embraced him.

Not one to be fond of children, he laughed nevertheless and returned the hug. Besides, Mara was no child. She'd reached her seventeenth-circle just last summer.

"And what brings you to an old dark and menacing spell caster this early morn?"

"Dark and menacing? You? Don't be silly!" Mara said, laughing.

"I noticed you didn't include *old* in your response..." He glared at her, feigning anger, but all too soon, a smirk broke his stony stare, and he laughed aloud as well.

"You are my dearest friend, Ulrek, but you *are* old."

"Bah! Two hundred and thirty-seven circles are hardly old. I have at least twice that ahead of me, young lady."

"Only if the township is lucky."

Ulrek sensed a sincere admiration that coaxed a gentle smile out of him.

Ulrek had many acquaintances in the township of Ackenlaw, but none as close as Mara. Their relationship came about reluctantly. Despite their friendly banter, Mara had an intense fear of the wizard before they were even introduced, some four-circles ago. Ulrek had a reputation for being aloof, short-tempered, impatient, and among many, a quack, none of which the caster would've denied. For Ulrek, he wanted to be left alone. The practice of magic often required a solitary lifestyle, and that suited him just fine. He had also never been

very good at building relationships of any kind, particularly those involving children. Having a child of thirteen thrust into his life wasn't ideal.

"You're too kind, my dear. Now, what brings you here? I was in the middle of a critical experiment, you know."

His attempts at self-importance appeared to be lost on Mara as she walked around the room, trying in vain to avoid all the clutter. Ulrek's collection of scrolls and books were scattered about the circular-shaped laboratory that doubled as a study. Despite the floor-to-ceiling bookcases lining every wall, he habitually found himself far too busy to replace the literature once removed.

But the scrolls and books were a minor nuisance compared to the amount of magic-related paraphernalia adorning the room. Mara couldn't avoid knocking over decanters filled with organs from exotic animals, insects, and a multitude of other strange items. Plants of varying sizes (some sentient, others not) teetered on their ledges before Ulrek saved them from a shattering end. Mara ignored these things, drawn instead to several portal-like openings Ulrek had scattered haphazardly throughout the room.

In one, she saw nothing but her reflection against an opaque swirling mass of gray and black nothingness. She squinted, her light brown hazel eyes mixing with the darkness beyond to create a smoky clay-like mud color. Against the graying midnight background, her chocolate brown hair also took on a foreign color. Even with her familiar dimples and dainty chin, the Mara on the other side looked like a stranger.

Moving on, she sidled near another one, hypnotized by foreign landscapes and scenes.

"Where on Arath do these...holes lead?" she asked.

"Not holes, Infinity Windows. And, they lead to a host of places. Some, not on Arath at all." Ulrek was purposely obtuse, a little irritated Mara had ignored his question.

"How did you create them?!"

"Mara..." Ulrek sighed and shook his head. It broke his heart to keep reminding her of shortcomings best left unsaid.

"I just want to *know*."

"To what end, my dear? Come. Tell me why you're here instead."

After a heartbeat, Mara relented, thankfully stowing her curiosity for another time. "My eighteenth-circle approaches soon."

"Yes, yes, I'm well aware of that."

"I was wondering if maybe...if you could...well you see..." Mara stalled, having suddenly lost her nerve.

"Out with it, girl!"

Mara jumped and blurted, "Will you come to my circle party?"

A pause. "Me? You want *me* to attend your eighteenth-circle celebration? Well, I...I've never..."

He was utterly taken aback. He hadn't been to a party since his youth, long before he decided to practice magic. After that, he became a recluse, immersed in study and practice. That Mara invited him to an event usually fit only for the closest of friends and family affected him deeply.

"I...I don't know what to say, Mara." He reached up and wiped at eyes that were soft and moist with emotion. Even his unkempt silver-gray beard and bushy eyebrows seemed to sag with humble gratitude.

"Say you'll go."

"Of course I'll go! But..."

Mara raised her eyebrows, waiting.

"I haven't a thing to wear!"

Mara clapped her hands and laughed. "Ulrek, you are more a joy than you'll ever know."

He grumbled under his breath. "If I didn't know better, Mara, I'd say you're having a bit of fun at my expense..."

"And what would you have me do? Stand idle and let an opportunity pass by?"

He was reluctant to agree, but she had a point.

"I suppose not," he said, but it came out more like a growl.

"So, you'll really come?"

"I will indeed, my dear, but you must send me an official invitation. With a wax seal, mind you! I won't be treated like a doddering old fool who doesn't know a proper notice from a wanted poster."

Mara opened her mouth to speak but Ulrek, suspecting another gibe, cut her off. "Hold your tongue, lass, or you might find yourself slithering on your belly!"

"Oh, don't be such a toad."

"Bah," he said, then harrumphed and mumbled, "Toad...indeed."

He turned to berate her, but Mara stood before the crystal he'd bickered at before her arrival. It glowed like a drop of dew from the sun. Ulrek saw the look on her face and sighed. It was the same expression she bore for as long as he'd known her—a mixture of longing and frustration.

"Why, Ulrek?"

"I wish I knew, my dear. But it's never changed, has it?"

"No. Magic is drawn to me like bees to flowers, and yet, I cannot harness or command it."

Mara's family brought her to Ulrek when it was clear she had some kind of connection to magic. Creatures sensitive to the arcane had an unnatural affinity toward her. And, like the crystal she stared at, magical artifacts reacted to her presence.

But years of tests and training proved fruitless; Mara was never able to control magic herself. The intricacies of the craft and the knowledge necessary to harness it eluded her. She was an enigma, one in which Ulrek was sadly unable to bring to light. It was clear within the first year of training that their efforts were for naught, and yet, Ulrek had grown fond of the girl and was unable to turn her away. She often visited and talked and mused about life, but Ulrek, sparing her the pain of failure, withdrew his teachings.

"Magic is not everything, my dear," he said, draping a grandfatherly arm across her shoulder.

"This, from a wizard who's dedicated nearly every waking hour to it."

"Everyone has their own destiny, Mara. Mine happens to magic. You have to find yours, but be patient; it'll come."

Mara turned and gripped him in a tight hug. She sobbed against his robes as he stroked her hair, trying to keep his own tears from flowing. He pitied her. His vain attempts to ease her mind weren't heartfelt, and she probably knew it. Truth be told, working with magic was exhilarating. He'd told Mara it wasn't everything, but to him, it was; nothing else mattered.

"There there, it'll all work out, you'll see," he said.

She nodded into his chest, but the gesture was feeble.

"I should go," she said, pulling away and hiding her tears while heading for the door.

"Mara," Ulrek waited for her to face him before continuing. "Thank you for the invitation."

He offered a humble bow and removed his hat with a sweep. Mara, surprised by the grand gesture, giggled, waved, and left.

"Fool girl," he said, shaking his head as though he really believed it.



Ulrek strolled toward a loose pile of scrolls, fancying the notion of perhaps doing a little research into Mara's unusual circumstances. He tripped over a book and an elbow connected with the pedestal that held the crystal. Ulrek thrust a hand forward, and the fireglobe halted its downward fall, suspended in midair while the rest of the pedestal crashed to the floor, shattering. A gesture lowered the globe gently to the table. Ulrek leaned in and inspected the crystal; it was intact.

"I should've let you fall with the rest of the rubble," he said, remembering the failed attempt to craft the staff. His angst was real, but he lacked the conviction to actually do anything about it; this particular crystal was too rare and valuable to waste.

He began cleaning up the remains of the pedestal when a summons drew his attention. He walked over to the window and gestured toward the sun. Borrowing a ray of light, Ulrek pulled it into his laboratory and concentrated. He formed it into a circle and mumbled the spell necessary to create a mage-link.

A heartbeat later, the ancient and worn face of his fellow mage, Yerta, a powerful Wiccan of the fifth-sphere, appeared behind her own mage-link—a large branch, twisted and bent into a roughly circular shape.

"There you are, you old goat of a Light Forger!" she said.

"Everyone seems to be interested in my age these days..."

"What's that?"

"Never mind. I take it you have news?" Ulrek asked.

"Only if you consider hearsay and false-truths news." Her sharp purple eyes narrowed, and her nose crinkled in disgust. "I summoned you because oftentimes lies and rumors have their roots in truth."

"And if anyone knows about roots, it's you..." he said with a smile.

A pause. "Are you trying to be funny?"

Ulrek's foolish grin evaporated under her stern glare. He coughed and excused himself, hiding his embarrassment. "Uh...of course not. Please, continue."

"My spies tell me the Necromancers are nervous. Their beloved Death Knolls weaken."

"Spies? Not the marsh worms, I hope..."

"Gods no. I've learned my lesson," she said, shaking her head.

Ulrek had warned her that the disgusting creatures lacked intelligence and a sense of purpose, making them poor candidates for mind control, but Yerta wouldn't be swayed. *You let me worry about Wiccan business, Light Forger!* she'd scolded. Ulrek was no Wiccan, but like all magic disciplines, there was a fair amount of overlap in their respective crafts, and he was quite knowledgeable in that aspect of spell casting.

Yerta had argued that marsh worms were tenacious and could bore through just about anything. That alone made them valuable spies. But Ulrek's assessment proved true, something he'd taken great care never to mention. The worms' ignorant and flippant nature

was disastrous. Yerta's hold over them was tenuous at best. They'd often get distracted and end up gods knew where. Or, they'd make it to their destination only to abandon their task for something more interesting.

The final straw snapped when Yerta attempted to use the senseless creatures to spy on a band of bloodthirsty trolls. Despite explicit instructions, warnings about the vicious nature of trolls, and a potent spell from a fifth-sphere Wiccan, the marsh worms lost their way. That's not to say they didn't find the trolls; they did, but it would've been best had they not.

The worms bore just beyond the surface, as instructed. But the trolls were preparing grub stew. The marsh worms sensed their cousin's imminent death and shrugged off their master's commands. Surprisingly, and perhaps for the first time in their pitiful lives, the marsh worms stuck together, holding to a purpose. Unfortunately, they were still stupid.

Trolls weren't creatures to be trifled with. The worms may have been battle-minded at the time and driven by some fanciful idea of saving their brethren, but their enemies were utterly delighted to have an extra ingredient land right in their laps. The trolls captured, cooked, and devoured every single one of them.

"I'm glad to hear it. And what did you replace them with?" Ulrek asked.

"Rock Cravens."

Ulrek stared at her like he'd never seen her before.

"Have you mulch for brains, Yerta? Cravens? How can you possibly rely on beasts that are afraid of their own shadows?"

"Hear me out, Ulrek. Fearful they may be, but they're cunning, loyal, and damn smart. Besides, their cowardly nature is what makes them the perfect spies. They can move as quietly as a wraith, and they're only seen when they want to be."

Ulrek sighed but decided not to get into it. For some reason, Yerta always insisted on including the most unlikely candidates for her spell casting. It was unreasonable considering there were plenty of worthy options and there was important work to do. Still, as a wizard, he also understood the importance of experimentation and sometimes choosing an unorthodox path.

"You've made your point. You were saying something about the Death Knolls?"

"They've weakened. The Cravens have sent word that Necromancers beyond Ackenlaw valley have sought answers from each other. They're panicking, and I don't blame them."

"Indeed. And, the Wiccan Ley Lines?"

She lowered her eyes and shook her head. "No change. We can still draw power, but it feels...feeble and strained, not free and abundant like it should."

Ulrek nodded once. "It is the same with the Rune Stones. Could it be the Hell Mages?"

"I haven't been able to infiltrate them, but I don't think so. If Hell Mages were responsible, they couldn't resist gloating; pompous toadstools."

It was hardly a laughing matter, but Ulrek couldn't resist a chuckle. Wiccans detested Hell Mages as a matter of practice, but Yerta held a special kind of distaste for them.

"Besides, why would they do harm to Necromancers? If anything, those blasted demon-lovers are having the same problem but are too prideful to admit it, even to each other."

"Let us hope then that they choose to handle this differently from their usual manner. Otherwise, we can expect some fool Hell Mage to unleash fire rain first and ask questions later."

"Hmm; fair point."

"Perhaps a little dialogue is in order..." Ulrek said, awaiting the backlash he knew would come.

"Have you let a Rune Stone fry your brain, Ulrek!?"

"Yerta..."

"And what would you say? 'Greetings, evil brothers, what a lovely day we're having. By the by, it seems the magic founts for three of the four wizard disciplines are waning. Thoughts?'"

"Do you think me a fool?" he said, glowering with lowered bushy brows and a scowl that would cower an ogre. "They'd be on us quicker than a blood bat on a hemorrhaging horse."

"Well, you can't very well ask them about the Brimstone Pillars. You'll only raise suspicion; they'll get defensive."

"They're a volatile lot, to be sure. But I believe a bit of tactful diplomacy directed at the right person can make all the difference," he said with a knowing wink.

"Who've you in mind?"

"I was thinking about contacting Truant."

"A lesser Hell Mage? You'll get nothing from him," she said, a flip of her hand waving away the suggestion.

"Not so. He's been elevated to the third-sphere."

She guffawed. "And you think a medial mage is any better?"

"I believe so, yes. Don't you remember what it was like to rise to the third-sphere? It's a crucial point in a wizard's life. Exhilarating and scary as hades at the same time."

"I remember..." Her voice was quiet, solemn. "Once initiated, there's no turning back."

"Aye..."

Ulrek paused, recalling his own initiation. That was many moons ago, more than he cared to count. But time was powerless to diminish the memory. Regardless of wizard discipline, attaining the third-sphere brought with it a lifelong decision. It was here that a mage began to learn the most powerful archaic spells. Because of this, the apprentice must vow to protect their knowledge with his or her life.

The magic must always come first, Ulrek, an elder had said to him. Sometimes forsaking friends, family, even lovers. It may even come to pass that your very life is forfeit for its sake. Think long and hard about your choice, for once it is made, it cannot be undone.

Ominous words and Ulrek hadn't taken them lightly. He'd struggled with it for weeks, but in the end, it was always the magic; he'd sooner cut off an arm. And so he accepted the responsibility, but it wasn't to end there. Admittance into the wizard's fold wasn't based solely on a mage's desire. Nor did it rely on one's word, for human beings were fickle creatures, prone to bouts of indecision and changing one's mind. No, to remain in the third-sphere and move beyond it, one must endure the binding to be initiated. Ten fifth-sphere mages knitted a complex spell that forever tethered the apprentice to their new master; the magic. The spell was lengthy, arduous, and caused substantial pain. Though determined, Ulrek had felt his sanity slipping away during the casting until the torture came to an abrupt and merciful end. He never regretted his choice, but the memory of it now was a stark reminder of the requisite commitment during the third-sphere. It also served to prove his point.

"By now, Truant will have endured the binding," said Ulrek. "That alone grants him more prestige, but his renewed dedication is what may serve our purpose. Besides, for a Hell Mage, he's a surprisingly likable fellow."

"Well, I'll defer to you on this. Keep me posted. If Truant proves useless, we may have to resort to something more drastic."

Yerta faded away as she broke the connection, and Ulrek set about summoning Truant, all the while wondering just what his colleague's definition of "drastic" was.