

THOMAS W. BRUCATO

A wizard wielding incredible power causes dissension among the members of the Wizards' Council. War Master Ariana nas Landlin seeks to learn the true origin of this wizard's power, and her search leads her into some dark and unexpected places.

# Sword and Soul IV: Dark Legacy

By Thomas W. Brucato

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# SWORD AND SOUL IV DARK LEGACY

THOMAS W. BRUCATO

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NON-FICTION

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#### **Chapter 1**

The sky was hazy, hazier than a spring day on the eastern borders of the kingdom would normally ever allow. The nearly gloomy conditions were in part due to the blowing of the sand across the horizon that was the backdrop of the desert-like barbarian lands. The rest was due to a blackish, wispy wafting of smoke from the nearby village of Urshala. The smoke would not clear for some time; in fact, it was about to become much worse.

Facing that horizon, in silent anticipation of that worsening, stood a war wizard. Garbed in the black robe of her station, her hood was raised against the stinging of the sand, the red stitching around that hood and the red cord cinched tightly at her slim waist attesting to her Order. Her face was difficult to see within the creases of that hood, and her arms were folded in front of her and were also invisible within the voluminous sleeves.

But no one was watching her anyway. She, in fact, was the one doing the watching.

And what she was observing was a long, straight row of X-shaped wooden constructs that had been hastily erected and around which a couple of hundred villagers were busily rushing to and fro. There was little sound in the air, and most of that was brusque and businesslike as those villagers spoke instructions or various questions or affirmations to one another while going about their work. The other sounds were moans, groans, and various muttered or sometimes shouted imprecations, but those sounds did not originate with the villagers.

Rather, they were emitted by around fifty other human figures, all of whom were either currently adorning or about to adorn the X-shaped constructs. Arms and legs were being lashed to planks with tight, sturdy ropes, the feet being left well above the ground. All these figures were bedraggled in appearance, wearing tattered desert robes that were designed to protect them from the sun but little else. All were adults, most of the men sporting unkempt beards and both the men and the women glaring out through long, unwashed, and mostly matted hair.

Some were spent and hung listlessly. Some were injured, and these were mainly the ones doing the moaning and groaning while their blood slowly spilled onto the sand below them. Others were angry and struggling mightily against their bonds, but the villagers had shown determination in making certain that none of the ropes would give way. These angry figures yelled every kind of insult against their captors, but no matter how offensive, vile, or debauched their words, they were soundly ignored. The villagers were comprised of both men and women, and they worked with a quiet, almost rushed intensity. All appeared indifferent to the throes of their captives, and they used various combinations of chains, pulleys, and ladders to first confine and then hoist their prey onto the X's awaiting them. Those who had not yet been so fastened waited in the sand with hands bound behind their backs and feet lashed together. Three or four at a time were taken from this group by various teams of villagers and were then unceremoniously raised to their ignominious positions.

Villagers who were not immediately involved in the actual crucifixions walked up and down the part of the row that was finished, reviewing the handiwork and ensuring that not a single rope was coming loose, that not a single captive was gaining even a slight chance of freedom.

The heat was oppressive despite the wind, and both captives and captors sweated profusely while the preparations played themselves out. The war wizard stood stoically as might a statue, seemingly bothered by neither the activity nor the heat.

In spite of her unimpassioned stance, however, she was watching everything carefully, and she grew even more silently interested when the last few of the waiting group were hustled from the sand and brought to the last few X's. There they were unchained, hoisted, and then tightly lashed, a few of them having the strength to yet struggle a bit but being quickly overpowered by the villagers' greater numbers.

At last the final ropes were tied, the final hands and feet finding themselves largely immobile and completely helpless to alter their owner's situation. Villagers drew back to observe their handiwork, some of them nodding in satisfaction at the task now completed, and a number continued to stroll up and down the sand to make sure that all was as intended.

One of those villagers, a stocky man of about five foot six with a thick black beard, now turned from his work at the last X and approached the waiting war wizard. His footsteps made little sound in the yielding sand, and when he reached his goal he stood eye to eye with the female mage, sweat running in rivulets down his face. "It's finished," he stated simply in a rather gruff voice.

The arms of the wizard uncrossed, and delicate white hands revealed themselves from the sleeves as they rose and gently pushed the hood back. Green eyes looked back at the man from a narrow, pretty face, and light brown hair, braided at the back, was exposed to the sun. "Wait here," said Veronica nas Stillsong in a youthful voice. "I'll get her." The man gave a simple, respectful nod and stepped back, then he turned away and went back to supervise the collection of tools.

For her part, the twenty-five-year-old war wizard turned her back on the X's and stepped within the multitude of horses being held by various youthful villagers. As she approached her own Onarian Warmblood, the handler dutifully stepped forward and continued to hold the reins while she hiked up her robes and skillfully mounted. Without a word she then took the reins and turned the horse's head toward the village of Urshala, the outlines of which could be seen about a half mile in the distance, smoke still billowing in lighter and lighter tendrils from its skyline.

Her mount did not much care for the shifting sand beneath its hooves, and that terrain had in fact made this exercise far more difficult than it would have been under other conditions. The equipment, including the wooden planks, the pulleys, the ladders, and other materials, could not have been carried by wagons because those wagons might have quickly found their wheels entrenched in the sand and would have therefore been immobilized. So everything had had to be carried nearly half a mile by single riders and by walkers, not an easy task and not a pleasant one in the current day's heat. But those had been the instructions, and so that was what had been done. And it had all been done efficiently and without complaint.

It took nearly fifteen minutes for Veronica to make the trek back because of the sand, but soon she found herself within the village and once again facing the unpleasant sights of the recent battle. Dead bodies and discarded weapons lay strewn about, and while the fires had largely gone out, there were still some smoldering walls and other wooden constructs that continued to emit a bit of smoke skyward.

The hard, sturdy ground of the village was a much welcome relief to the sand, although Veronica knew that that relief would be short-lived.

All the houses in Urshala were low-lying, with the majority being composed of a single story. Veronica turned to the left and made her way to the largest of them, this one also single-storied and yet far more expansive than the next-largest, which would have been found on the other side of town.

This one was in excellent repair, its wooden walls painted a sun-like yellow and its inviting front porch sporting a clean and bright white railing. It stood two blocks from the village square, and its back looked out upon the desert's edge. Veronica stopped before the raised porch and dismounted, and at that moment a figure emerged from the front door and descended the couple of steps to meet her.

Also wearing a black robe, with identical red stitching and an identical red cincture indicating war wizardry, this woman was around forty years of age and yet retained a youthful, almost noble beauty. Her charcoaled eyes were brown, her lips a natural almost-ruby, her hair between dark brown and black as it cascaded just past her shoulders. Around her neck she wore a number of necklaces, large jewels adorning the pendants of most of them, while bracelets jingled at her wrists and rings bedecked several fingers. She strode forward with a regal air of calm expectancy.

"Everything's ready," Veronica stated simply.

Trylara nas Granton nodded in satisfaction, then turned to her left and called over her shoulder, "Ice!"

Compelled by her magic, a creature emerged from the small stable affixed to the side of the house and slowly, gracefully, made its way toward her. Any onlooker unfamiliar with Urshala of late would have been stunned, perhaps even fearful, at its appearance. For white leopards were unknown in this part of the continent of Davanon, and white leopards that were at least three times the normal size of such cats were unheard of in the entire known world.

This one walked forward with sinewy strides, its fur an almost pure white, its spots and rosettes a contrasting black. It held its huge head low as if it were stalking prey, and its powerful muscles bunched as its massive paws moved soundlessly over the ground. Matching the size of Veronica's horse at the shoulder, it let out a purr as it reached its master, but in a creature of such size the purr came out as more of a low, vibrato rumble.

Both Veronica and her steed were well-accustomed to the nowfamiliar sight, so neither reacted as the leopard drew even with Trylara and stopped. For her part the older war wizard stroked its head for a moment and then easily mounted the narrow saddle strapped to its back, taking the reins in one hand. "Let's go," she said simply, and as Ice started forward Veronica remounted her horse and turned to follow.

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"All is ready," said the mayor of Urshala, a tall, thin, balding man in his mid-fifties, as he bustled up to Trylara. The war wizard gave a brief nod, barely sparing him a glance as she handed Ice's reins off to a waiting handler. With Veronica at her side, she then strode across the sand until she was in full view of the mounted figures on the X's. The villagers who were striding up and down in front of their captives noticed her and now hurried out of the way, forming a large semicircle behind her. The sounds made by the villagers gradually quieted into an expectant hush. Noises continued to come from the lashed captives, but those were increasingly pitiful and were ignored by all. Few of the prisoners, in fact, took note of Trylara's presence, most hanging with their heads bowed, unkempt hair falling down before their faces.

Trylara now spoke to them, pitching her voice so that it would carry to all fifty. "So-called warriors of..." Here she paused, briefly searching her memory, then she waved a negligent hand. "...of whatever barbarian tribe you say you come from. Today you have made a very grave and very costly error. Today you have taken it upon yourselves to attack the village of Urshala." A few of the captives had raised their heads to look at her, but most did not react. "My village," the war wizard emphasized. "You came here to kill, to rape, to pillage. You have killed and you have harmed my people. I take such actions very seriously." She waited a beat for effect, then continued, "Of course, by now, you have already received adequate instruction in the error of your ways. But take heart, because you have now gained a new opportunity. You will, in fact, serve a noble purpose. Because here, near the entrance to our fine village, you will now become a warning to whomever may yet remain of your pitiful tribe. Here, you will stand for something. When they see you thus, they will think twice before ever again engaging in the rash behavior that you yourselves exhibited today. So rest easy, because your sacrifice here will, in the end, preserve their lives."

There was little reaction from the captives, aside from a few muttered obscenities that were barely audible. In an aside to Veronica, Trylara said, "That's enough talk. These people are dead anyway. That was all for the villagers' sake." Without further ado, she raised her right hand before herself, pointing at the rightmost of the X's. She quietly muttered arcane words, and a huge fire stream abruptly shot from all five fingers of her hand. Beyond the intensity of anything Veronica could accomplish or even anything she had ever seen another war wizard accomplish, the stream engulfed the first of the X's and then, as Trylara moved her arm from right to left, quickly swept across all fifty X's.

A massive conflagration now rose up before the assembled spectators, and horrific screams arose from those lashed to the crosses.

Trylara lowered her hand and watched as the fires burned, noting with quiet satisfaction what all the others noted as well: The flames were engulfing flesh and clothing, but the wood of the constructs and the ropes used for lashing were not burning.

The screams were animalistic in their intensity, and they seemed to fill the very expanse of the desert itself. The reactions of the villagers were varied. Some watched eagerly, smiling, cheering silently and barely able to restrain themselves from doing so openly. Others were stoic, watching grimly but making no outward show of exactly what they felt. Still others grimaced, averted their eyes, cried, or even turned away completely.

Trylara noticed none of these reactions, and she did not care to notice them. She simply watched while ignoring the grotesque cacophony, registering but not reacting to the smell of burning meat that quickly permeated the air.

She waited for several minutes, waited while the screams intensified, some of them morphing into strangled gurgles or other, less describable sounds. She waited while the villagers continued to display varied reactions, some of those who had turned away daring to sneak a peek and then wishing they hadn't, some of them even leaving the companionship of their fellows to rush to an isolated patch of sand and retch. She waited while the noise slowly began to diminish, becoming less and less intense and then eventually petering out.

At that point she raised her left hand and made a sweeping motion from right to left, and as quickly as they had appeared, the flames completely vanished.

What remained were ominous wisps of black smoke, tendrils that snaked their way into the desert air and then performed a mimicry of a macabre dance as they were carried by the wind. What also remained were fifty charred, blackened, mostly skeletal corpses upon the row of unburnt X's, still firmly lashed by undamaged ropes where they had been placed. Here and there could be seen the remains of crisped hair, teeth, bones, and, in a few cases, out-of-place eyeballs. The smell would have been utterly nauseating had the wind not been mainly carrying it in the other direction. Here the X's would remain, standing as a testament to the foolishness of attempting to bring harm upon the village of Urshala and as a warning to any who might entertain the slightest thought of doing so again.

"There," Trylara muttered to Veronica. "I think they're all dead. If not, they will be soon."

Turning her back on the gory scene, she strode back to her mount, Veronica following in her wake. Once she had climbed to Ice's back, Trylara was once again approached by the thin, balding mayor. "Mistress Granton!" he breathed almost urgently. "Thank you! Thank you for saving our lives."

Trylara calmly turned Ice's head back toward Urshala. "You're welcome," she said over her shoulder, and she and Veronica then moved away from the crowd and set out once again for home.

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Luckily for the villagers, Trylara thought to herself, the attack had occurred in the morning. It was not the first time that barbarians had attempted to raid the village, but it was certainly the first time they had done so in such numbers. In the past, five or six barbarians at a time might have attempted to creep in and steal something, or harm someone, or do whatever it was that barbarians did when they got bored and decided to offend civilization with their presence. It was something of a two-edged sword when it came to the freedom of Davanon from oppressive rule and the scourge of the barbarian tribes. In old Davanon, raids had not been uncommon upon bordering villages. With the rise of the evil Empire of Penten vol Krellis, those raids had not stopped completely but had been severely curtailed, in part because the Emperor had taxed his subjects into poverty and there simply wasn't much for the barbarians to steal any longer. Now, with the fall of the Empire and Davanon's recovery, barbarian raids were on the increase.

Urshala was situated in the southern region of the eastern kingdom of Onar. By all rights, the Onarian military was responsible for protecting all of the kingdom's cities, towns, and villages, but practically speaking, there was no way for the soldiery to attend to every out-of-the-way hamlet and settlement. Trylara did not begrudge them that; in fact, she didn't actually need them anyway.

The previous small raiding parties had always been thwarted by Trylara, and it had never taken much to stop them. She could only assume that the barbarians had incorrectly reasoned that a full-scale attack in great numbers would overcome her, an idea that was laughable in the extreme. It was a lesson they had learned and would impart through their burnt corpses to the rest of their tribe, not to mention to any other tribe that might have similar foolish aspirations. Yes, it was good that the attack had occurred in the morning because it had allowed an entire day for the populace to carry out her wishes...wishes that were, of course, designed to do the villagers the most good. They had first had to repel the attack, and that had taken a little time only because of the number of barbarians attacking and the fact that they had spread themselves out in the village. Had they initially made their presence known in a large pack, it would have been a simple matter to snuff them out all at once.

So there had been time spent defeating the barbarians and stunning and capturing the fifty survivors. Then she had come up with the idea of the X's, and getting all of that accomplished had taken most of the rest of the day. Now everything was finished and it was almost dusk, but there was still some work to be done. The dead barbarians littering the village would have to be disposed of, and the dead villagers would have to be accorded preparations for suitable rites and burial. Injured villagers were already being attended to by healers who had stayed behind to care for them in lieu of helping with the crucifixions; the absence of life wizards in Urshala made their work that much more tedious. Damaged structures would have to be repaired or replaced, although such mundane matters could easily wait until the morrow. It was the disposition of bodies that would still need to be carried out this evening...that and the dowsing of any wood that might still be smoldering.

So it was good that there had been plenty of daylight for everything. The villagers even now were returning from the site of the immolations, and their next task would be attending to the dead.

While all that was happening, Trylara and Veronica relaxed with glasses of red Onarian wine in the spacious living room of Trylara's house. Ordinarily on an evening such as this, when the oppressive heat had given way to a very cool and pleasant breeze, they would have sat on the front porch and enjoyed the atmosphere. Neither wizard desired to witness the cleanup of the village, however, so they made do in the comfort of the house's interior.

Trylara rested on a somewhat ornate, cushioned, high-backed chair, while Veronica sat on the sofa against the wall. Lush carpets covered the wooden flooring, and numerous windows allowed the waning daylight to softly illuminate the room. A painting of a mountain adorned the wall opposite Veronica, while crocheted artwork from villagers decorated the others along with unlit candles in various sconces. "This attack was actually fortuitous," Trylara was saying, swirling the dark red liquid slowly in her glass, enjoying its fruity aroma. "It finally enabled me to demonstrate my skills in a true combat situation, as opposed to those isolated tiny raids and bandits and such. Granted, not full-scale combat with army opposing army, but still..."

"It was most impressive," Veronica gushed, recalling the multitude of different spells Trylara had employed to crush the barbarians and save uncounted villagers. Her eyes were shining. As an apprentice Veronica had been assigned to Trylara, until she herself had attained the rank of full war wizard about a year ago. Even with that rank, however, she still admired her former mentor's abilities and desired to learn even more from her.

"Yes, and it felt good, I have to say," Trylara agreed. "There's simply no way to measure one's true skill level in lesser situations."

"You certainly put the fear of magic into them," Veronica almost chuckled, not even bothering to mention the fact that she herself had ably assisted in subduing the raiders. Trylara's spells had been so much more...impressive.

Taking a sip, Trylara mused, "It's always satisfying to see the light of realization dawn in an opponent's eyes. The realization that everything that opponent had thought and expected to happen was the exact opposite of reality."

"The realization of defeat," Veronica concurred. "The sudden knowledge that evil is *not* going to prevail as it has in the past."

"Well said."

"It will be interesting to see the manner of gifts that appear on your porch this time," Veronica said with amusement.

The villagers had made it a tradition to leave gifts outside Trylara's door each time she rescued the town from a raid, whether that raid be conducted by barbarians or by roaming bandits or other such outlaws. Normally such attacks were small and Trylara had to save only an unlucky few who happened to be the first to fall victim to such assaults. Those rescued were then the ones who would take it upon themselves to leave gifts outside her house, gifts that she would normally find the next morning. Trylara had never insisted upon this practice, and in fact it had not been her idea in the first place. It had become a tradition among the villagers, however, and that tradition included Veronica on those occasions when the younger wizard lent a hand in such rescues.

So this time, the rescued were not just a few, not just a smattering of individuals who had been unlucky enough to be the first ones chanced upon

by the invaders. This time, she had truly saved the entire village from a host of bloodthirsty savages. There had been loss of life in the village, but that had been unavoidable and the villagers knew that.

It would indeed be interesting to see the extent of the villagers' gratitude this time around. Granted, the village was not wealthy and so the gifts usually took the form of food or handmade trinkets or clothing or blankets or other similar items. It would be interesting just the same. "I might need a bigger porch," Trylara joked. "As might you, my young friend."

Veronica smiled and took a sizable swallow. After a moment she said, "So what's next? You mentioned this new Wizards' Council that's to supplement the Circle of Sorcery. You would certainly merit a seat on that. And they meet in a few days, as you said. You feel you're ready, don't you? I think you just proved it."

Trylara hesitated before replying, and that hesitation surprised Veronica. The younger wizard had thought the other woman would be wholeheartedly prepared to venture forth and proclaim her eagerness to apply for acceptance into that body.

"Consider something," Trylara said instead. "The Wizards' Council is to be an advisory body. They can make recommendations, but not decisions. The true power still lies with the Circle of Sorcery. Five wizards, and five alone, make all the real decisions for the rest of us. The Five Masters."

"As it was in the past," Veronica agreed.

"How old are you, my friend?" Trylara asked. "Twenty-five?" At a nod she continued, "Now consider the fact that the War Master—the War *Master*—is about three years your junior. Your *junior*. Does that seem fair to you?"

Veronica considered, not having expected this question. "But in ability she's—"

"And what about me?" Trylara continued, cutting her off. "I have a lifetime's experience more than the War Master. Does that seem right?" Veronica struggled to find a response, but then Trylara added, "A twenty-two-year-old is running things for all war wizards. She's barely out of diapers, no offense intended. Do you think that, once the Empire fell, decisions were made perhaps just a bit hastily?"

Veronica had never considered this. "So...you're saying..."

"Veronica, do you think the War Master is more powerful than I am?"

Eyes wide, Veronica shook her head. "Oh, no, Mistress. You've become so much more powerful than *anyone* else. You're the strongest wizard I've ever seen."

"So you acknowledge that I'm more powerful than the War Master?"

Veronica nodded and smiled, beginning to see where this was going. "Yes. And so...you should be..."

"The War Master. At the least."

"The least?" Veronica's eyes were wide as she took another mouthful of wine.

"It will be a start."

"And...and then?"

"Well...we'll see where things go. I've always thought the Circle of Sorcery itself should be run by a...well, by a High Mage, perhaps, something like that. Certainly there must be room to consider new ideas, instead of trying to reconstruct the way things were in the past. There's value in that, but we're not living three hundred years in the past. We're living in the *now*."

"A new position," Veronica breathed.

Trylara forestalled whatever she had been about to say next with a raised hand. "I've said too much, Veronica. One thing at a time. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. We'll start with War Mastership, and only then will we consider any possible next step."

Veronica nodded. "War Mastership," she repeated. "So we're going to the Academy for the meeting?"

"We're going," Trylara confirmed. "In fact, I think we should go a day or two early so that I can get my name on the docket. I don't want to surprise anyone."

"This is so exciting! So...will you recharge the amulet first?"

Trylara glanced down at the multitude of necklaces adorning her robe. She took one of the pendants in her right hand, the hand not holding the wine glass, and turned it to face her. The backing was silver and in the shape of something that resembled a snowflake. There was a round, glossy gem in its center, a gem that was perhaps two inches in diameter. Normally a rich, ruby red, the gem was now a deep blue in color. "It certainly needs it after all that," Trylara remarked.

"So we should do that first," Veronica stated. "You should be at full strength when we get to the Academy."

"Mm, I'm not so sure," replied Trylara, setting the pendant back to rest against the front of her robe amongst the others. "As I say, we should go early so that I can get on the agenda." She began fingering another pendant, this one similar to the first in both size and design but containing a sky blue gem against a gold background. "While there, we can mingle a bit, fraternize with our brethren. I'm sure I'll have some interesting and informative conversations. Conversations that will let me know what some of our compatriots are up to at present, and will thus make it much easier to find a suitable location for recharging. And then, of course, we'll return to the Academy for the meeting...at full strength."

Veronica nodded her understanding and took another sip of wine. "The villagers will miss you while we're away."

Trylara gave a half-shrug. "They rely on me too much as it is. On *us*, I should say. But hopefully that—" She waved toward her left, which was the general direction of the back of the house and thus the desert and the row of X's she had recently set afire. "—will deter any further raids in the immediate future. If not..." She gave another half-shrug. "Well, they really should learn to take care of themselves."

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At twenty-one years of age, dark-haired Reece Landlin still found himself feeling very much like a little boy. While his responsibilities were great, inwardly he still felt like the child from the tiny, distant village of Amber who overslept most mornings and who had been raised by his older brother, Terek. He could still scarcely believe that he had become something of a master swordsman, and yet the well-balanced, finely honed blade in the scabbard at his left hip attested strongly to that very fact. He could still scarcely believe that he was the King of Fersstan, and while none of his present garb attested to that fact—he didn't wear the crown unless he was on official business, after all—it was something of which he was reminded every day of his life by almost everyone with whom he came into contact.

But most of all, he could still scarcely believe that he was married to the tall, incredibly beautiful woman in the black robe who was now rushing him down the hallway by the arm. Ariana nas Landlin, her long, flaming red hair one of her most striking features, was a year his senior and was not only the Queen of Fersstan but the War Master of the Circle of Sorcery as well. The red stitching around her hood, which was currently gathered behind her neck, and the red tie at her slender waist proclaimed her as a member of the Order of War, and the red stitching at the cuffs of her sleeves indicated her singular rank as the Master of that very Order.

When they had first met, Ari had been a little taller than Reece, but he had since grown and filled out and could look her straight in the eye. Even so, however, the way she was dragging him down the current corridor did nothing but reinforce that inward feeling of immaturity, of being the little boy who was constantly ordered about. He could only grin at the thought, because it was certainly not Ari's intention to make him feel this way. He almost laughed, in fact, because she was acting out of excitement and passion and he was delighted to see her so.

"And these," she said now, stopping before a pair of doorways, "are currently being used for the beginners."

She stepped aside so that he could poke his head inside, and what he observed were mainly rows of desks. He nodded in feigned interest.

"So that just leaves the two unfinished wings," Ari told him. "Everything else is fully functional. Now, come this way. I want to show you something."

*Something* else, *you mean*, Reece wanted to say out loud, amused, but he restrained himself.

Some time ago Reece had donated this land to the wizards and had recognized their autonomy. Situated on the outskirts of the village of Arton, it was about two days' ride east of the Fersstanian capital city of Vormass where Reece and Ari made their home. This was the site of the new Wizard's Academy and was located around ten miles north of where the original academy had lain over three centuries prior.

The Academy's buildings had gone up rather quickly and were now nearing completion, thanks to a cooperative venture between the construction workers and the wizards, who assisted them with their magic.

Every so often Reece paid a visit to see how things were progressing, and on each occasion Ari gave him a tour and updated him on the latest happenings. To his chagrin those tours usually involved many of the same sights he had already seen, along with the new ones, and he tried hard to show as much interest in the repeats as he had the first two or three or four times he had seen them. He wasn't sure if Ari simply forgot what she had already shown him and what she hadn't. He had his doubts, and rather strongly suspected that she was simply excited with the progress and felt somewhat incomplete unless she showed him the total package. That package included everything she had already displayed, all over again. Already built were numerous classrooms along with a meeting hall, a library, a gymnasium, practice rooms, and other things that Reece could only remember as if he had seen them in a whirlwind. Two wings yet remained to be finished on the far side of the courtyard, and he could not quite recall what those were to be. A library extension? Records room? More classrooms? It didn't matter. Ari would remind him for the umpteenth time on his next visit.

The location of the Academy had been carefully chosen. Arton was a sizable village, so its proximity allowed for the easy acquisition of any needed supplies. The fact that it was only two days' ride from Vormass meant that, if ever Reece was unable to obtain transportation through a wizard's transport spell, he could still get here relatively quickly if necessary.

As it was, the transport spells made things extremely convenient for Ari. She was able to live full-time at the castle in Vormass while still venturing here on an almost daily basis. How much better it was, Reece thought, than the times she had had to attend wizards' meetings in the city of Julankas, when he had had to spend weeks without her. If only she had known the transport spell then!

Requiring significant power in order to be cast, the transport spell could not be performed by all wizards. The vast majority of those who could do so, in fact, were either war wizards or necromancers. These mages were always willing to assist their brethren who might be in need of transportation, but there were also stables and places for wagons on site for those who had to travel by more mundane methods.

Reece continued to be led by Ari until he found himself outside in the main courtyard. The main building surrounded them except on one side across the way toward the right, and in that direction Reece could see the foundations of the two unfinished wings. Other, smaller buildings lay scattered beyond those, in addition to the stables and several wide fields used for practicing magical arts.

On the adjacent wall to his left was the main entrance to the courtyard, its arched opening revealing a tunnel easily wide enough for horses and wagons to pass through. There were many alternate entrances adorning the other walls, however, including the side door through which he and Ari had just passed. Directly across from him was another arched opening that appeared identical to the main one. This one, however, was actually quite different. While the main entrance's tunnel connected to the roadway outside, this one let out onto a field and was not easily accessible

by mundane travel. This entrance was in fact used solely by those arriving via transport spells.

A transport spell by its very nature could be extremely dangerous. If a wizard attempted to transport to a location not familiar to him or her, there was every possibility that that wizard could transport into a tree, or into the wall of a building, or even into another person. So the spell required first that the wizard be familiar with the destination, and second that the wizard be certain there would be no obstruction upon arrival.

Therefore, all wizards arriving at the Academy via transport spell were asked to use this entrance. All were familiar with it, and the entrance was manned at all times by a student with the rank of Apprentice. That student took up position in a small room inside a wall of the tunnel, and proper procedure dictated that a wizard wishing to arrive via this method contact the student by magical means first to make sure the way was clear. Upon a wizard's arrival, the student was then responsible for ensuring that he or she vacated the tunnel as soon as possible, just in case another wizard might break the rules and attempt to transport in unexpectedly.

All of these things Reece noticed only peripherally, because he had seen them all before. He had also seen the main courtyard before, and was not surprised to see numerous wizards populating it, some of them sitting on benches and conversing, some of them reading scrolls or books, and others practicing minor spells. This space, as Reece had been told, was perfectly acceptable for the practice of small spells, but anything larger and potentially more violent would have to be practiced on the bigger fields outside the main building.

Ari finally dropped his arm and turned to face him. "Okay," she said animatedly, "I've learned a new spell."

Reece tried to look excited and succeeded only partially. Ari was *always* learning new spells. In fact, most of the wizards were, ever since the Emperor had been overthrown and his three-hundred-year ban on the practice of magic with him. Ari's personal treasure trove included the spell books of the vaunted Illic nas Verjil, the war wizard of Captain Evvan Stryker over three centuries ago. With all the different sources of magical knowledge now available, Ari had not yet gotten through all of Verjil's books. Granted, there were quite a few spells in those works with which she was already acquainted. But she was regularly discovering new ones.

"Okay," Ari said. "So, you know the invisibility spell?"

She was not asking whether Reece personally knew how to cast the spell, but was rather rhetorically asking if he remembered it. "Yes," he answered.

"Here, take my hand."

He was always happy to take her feminine, delicately tapered hand, and he did so now without hesitation.

*"Noma harrin thess*," she intoned, and she instantly disappeared from his sight. His own body disappeared from his sight as well, and it was a disconcerting feeling. He could still feel the warmth of Ari's hand in his own, but he could see neither her hand nor his own and always felt a little dizzy when he was unable to orient himself because his body had become transparent. Ari had assured him that that vertigo was all in his mind, but to him it didn't matter because he felt it just the same. There was the grass beneath his feet—or at least where his feet should have been—but he couldn't see the feet and therefore didn't even know if he was standing up straight. He continued to hold her hand, even though he knew that the spell, once cast, would still hold if he let go.

"I said I knew it," he complained, "so why are you showing me this again?"

"Okay, now wait." Suddenly she reappeared, and to his vast relief so did he. There was his hand in Ari's, there were his feet on the ground. She had broken the spell, and he would be perfectly happy if it stayed broken. He blew out a small breath. "For this one," said Ari, releasing his hand, "you don't have to be touching me."

Reece glanced at his now-empty hand. But I *like* touching you, he wanted to say with disappointment, but he refrained. Ari was now gesticulating with her right hand, making a small, imaginary circle over their heads, and she said, "*Noma harrin letotha kar thess.*"

Reece waited expectantly, not sure of what was about to happen, and when the result seemed to be nothing at all, he began to look around. There was the courtyard, the walls, the grass, the other wizards, everything. There was Ari. There he was, still visible in his own body. He could even still hear the sounds of the other wizards as they went about their business. "Uh," he said, "whatever your new spell is, I don't think it worked. You wanna try again?"

Ari beamed at him. "We're invisible!" she announced happily.

Reece's brow wrinkled, and he held his hands out before himself and turned them over a couple of times. "What are you talking about?" he asked. "I can still see myself *and* you." "But no one else can!" she informed him. "See, this is a different kind of invisibility spell that I found in one of Illic's books. It sort of casts a bubble around you. So anyone or anything *inside* the bubble is still visible *inside* the bubble, but not visible *outside* it!"

Reece frowned. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," she giggled. "Come here." She took his hand again and led him across the grass in the direction of a rather heavyset, blond wizard in his early thirties with blue stitching around the hood of his black robe and a blue cincture. He had his back to them and was watching someone else practice, but Reece immediately recognized him as one of Ari's closest friends, sky wizard Senna sor Clees. "Senna!" Ari called as they approached, and the other wizard turned and then began to glance about.

"Ariana?" he asked.

"Yes!" replied Ari.

"Are you invisible?"

Well, thought Reece, there's something you don't hear every day. Unless, of course, you hang around with wizards a lot. Or are married to one.

"Yes," Ari said again, in answer to Senna's question. "It's a new spell I learned from Illic nas Verjil's books."

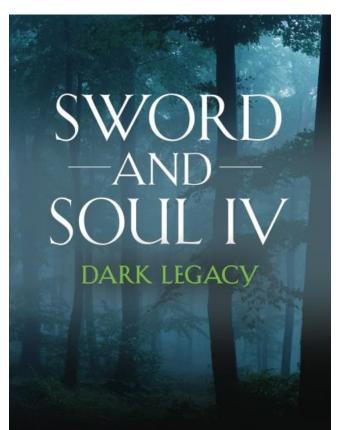
With a gesture she made the two of them visible again, at which point Senna said, "Oh, King Reece! I didn't realize you were here. It's good to see you again."

"I think maybe you mean that literally," Reece quipped. "It's good to see you, too."

Reece had made it well known that, when he was visiting the Academy, he would prefer that no one stand on ceremony. There were to be no bows or curtsies or flowery *Your Majesty*'s in his presence, especially from friends of Ari's. Of course, there were always those who insisted on behaving thusly, and he was never sure what spurred such sentiments. But in the main, his wishes were honored and he was happy for that.

Ari quickly began explaining the spell to Senna, even though, as a sky wizard whose specialty was the weather, Senna would not have been able to cast it.

Reece could not help a grin as he listened. *Hey, buddy*, he wanted to say, *if I have to hear it, so do you*.



THOMAS W. BRUCATO

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