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# Episode 2: Travels and Travails

K. Arsenault Rivera

From set *Secrets of Strixhaven*

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“Pay close attention to the sounds of your surroundings. What do you hear?”

Professor Fel’s voice was as rich as fresh soil and as cool as loam. Lluwen liked it. Envied it a little. When Fel spoke, people listened. As the others turned their attention toward the cacophony of nature around them—the bray of unseen and unknown birds, the rustle of the leaves, the distant music from the town not far away—Lluwen found himself lost in thought.

*Do the lumarets I saw have schools, too? Maybe they favor some kind of private tutoring? The first one had a map, so that means they must have some system of writing, and some system of sharing it. But what is it like?*

Another thought followed on the heels of this one, a thought with wicked teeth and killing intent.

*Who cares?*

His eyes flicked back up to Professor Fel. The sting of yesterday’s words was still there, mingled with the strange admiration he felt for the man. Even now, part of him wanted to solve the puzzle presented to the students. What were they meant to hear?

Lluwen closed his eyes.

“The gray-throated thrush is singing beautifully today, Professor Fel, wouldn’t you say? Someone told me you love bird songs—”

“Incorrect,” came Fel’s answer. He didn’t bother to clarify which part was wrong before continuing. “Next.”

Another student answered—an owlin. “Um ... I hear some creatures, I think? I don’t know what kind—”

“Then don’t bother,” said Fel. “I was told this was a promising crop of students. Why, then, am I faced with dregs who cannot answer a simple question?”

Lluwen’s throat went tight. *I want to give the right answer*, he thought. Somehow. Even with the sight of Fel’s displeasure burned onto the back of his eyelids, he wanted it. Maybe then, people would respect him.



Art by: Piotr Dura

*All right* , he told himself. *I won't focus on the talking.*

The best way to do that was to put distance between himself and the rest of the class. Their voices were distracting enough. In the hush he heard Ivarin, one of the other elves, whisper to a friend.

“Look at that. Our little lost goat is wandering off again. Do you think he’s looking for somewhere to graze?”

Lluwen gritted his teeth.

He’d left out the worst parts of what the others had said to him, about him, when he was writing to his friends. *For the best* , he’d told himself. If Kirol heard what was going on, they’d come speeding right over.

*Grazing. Yeah, right.* Lluwen had spent all of his life before coming to Strixhaven as a hunter. He was beginning to think it was best to show Ivarin just what that meant. The elves of Arcavios were softer than the youngest of his clanmates. What would one of his real kind do if they found a blemish on Ivarin? An imperfection? Lluwen smirked at the thought.

He ran his thumb over the hilt of the knife concealed in his belt. The right thing to do, he was pretty sure, was not mark Ivarin. But the next best thing was to give him a chance to take it back. It was only fair.

“Do you want to repeat that?”

Ivarin turned away from the others. He gathered himself up and stared right down at Lluwen. “I *asked* if you wanted to *graze* , ram-clan.”

Let no one say that Lluwen had not offered him a chance.

In one rough, sharp movement, Lluwen bashed his horns against Ivarin’s chest to knock him off balance. He dragged the knife across Ivarin’s chest. Blood welled up in its wake, trailing down and soiling his clothes. Lluwen shoved him to the ground.

“I don’t graze. I reap.”

Ivarin’s scream set the birds around them aflight. Lluwen didn’t want to admit how much pride it brought him. As the other elves looked at him in horror, he wondered if they would at last recognize his strength.

But they did not.

No, they called for Fel instead. Soon, everyone was calling for the professor. He was there before Lluwen could even find his footing, a presence that sprang forth like an arrow from the dark. *Something* pinned the back of Lluwen’s coat to the base of a tree. When he looked up at it, he saw that it was ... a thorn. A massive, hand-sized thorn.

“Cultures across the Multiverse may disagree on many things, none of which excuse what you’ve just done,” said Fel. His eyes had gone hard, and he studied Lluwen for only a moment further before turning toward the others. “Call for a healer. Ivarin will need care.”

“Why does he get care?” Lluwen snapped. He couldn’t stop himself from that, either. “He called me ram-clan. He’s been tormenting me for *weeks*. But I strike back, and now *I’m* the problem?”

“You will learn to control yourself, or you will learn to find another home,” answered Fel. He waved a hand, the thorn retreating into the tree. “Leave us. Find something to do with your time that’s more productive than this ... or don’t come back.”

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One breath. Two. This was ... This was bad.

He had to find something now. He had to. If he didn’t, he was going to get kicked out of the school, and if he got kicked out of the school ... what was he going to do?

He shouldn’t have done that. Why had he done that? He’d just been so angry.

There was nothing for it now. Either he found something or ...

Breathe in, breathe out. He had to steady himself. Maybe he could try focusing on his surroundings. There must have been something he’d missed, something everyone had missed.

Several different birds. The bands playing. Chatter from the shoppers down below. In the distance, the voices of one of the other student groups. Some furry, clawed creature scampering through the trees.

He took a step forward. Maybe there was something to this creature that was moving around? Fel seemed to want to know what it was in specific. *Which* way ...

Another step. Vines groaned, leaves crunched. The creature’s claws scoured against the wood to which it clung. He ran through the options in his mind. A sloth? That was the friendliest of them. If he could hear the thing growl, maybe he could get an idea of its size ...

And it was then, when he took the third step, that clarity came to him.

For with the third step, he heard it loud and clear: a hollow ring under his feet that thrummed all the way up into his body.

The titan no longer held any marrow.

Lluwen grinned. This had to be it. He turned on his heel, away from the creature, and began to run.

But just as he did, he discovered another thing Fel might have wanted him to know: hollow bones could be brittle, even when they were as large as the titan’s.

Lluwen fell into the dark.

*What do you hear?*

The words echoed in his mind as consciousness returned to him. Amid the pain, they served as a polar north—he could orient himself if he only paid attention. But it was very hard to pay attention.

Lluwen did his best. What did he hear? Words in a language he could not understand. Voices interwoven, such that each of these strange syllables blended into the next and pulled the previous alongside it. A wall of sound—no, nothing so blunt and uncreative as that. This was something else. Though he didn't know what he was hearing, when he let his attention linger on the voices, he felt as if he was becoming a length of thread himself. Here he turned this way, here that, pulled and shaped and ...

The call of a bird outside saved him—a scissor through the fabric he'd stumbled into. Lluwen opened his eyes.

The sight before him was only a little less unbelievable than what he'd heard. Within the great hollow of the titan's bones, six enormous figures, each with too many limbs undulating in time, sat gathered around a thick snarl of magic—archaics. The walls of this place (could he call them walls?) flickered with light. Thirty-two hands moved in intricate patterns that threatened to overwhelm him as much as the sounds. None of the archaics moved alone; each one's movements were coordinated with the next, interlinked and overlapping but never intersecting.



Arcane Omens | Art by: Antonio José Manzanedo

With a small grunt of effort, Lluwen pushed himself up off the heap of vines and leaves and wood.

*This has got to be something no one else has ever seen*, he thought. While his gaze followed the lines of the archaics' hands, he tried to remember if he'd ever heard of anything like this. Not that he'd been here very long. But it had to be unique, right? People would have written about this.

Professor Fel couldn't brush *this* away. No. It was way too big.

As he gathered himself up on his haunches, he took out his sketchpad. But the second his pencil skated across the paper there was trouble. Six eyeless heads stared up at him all at once. Six sets of skin stretched over arcane sockets. Six mouths that were not mouths threatened to scream silent screams.

Thirty-two hands stopped in their perfect orbits.

He knew it. He could feel it at the back of his neck. Whatever had brought him here, he was no longer welcome.

Lluwen didn't need to be told twice. Heart hammering between his ears, he shoved his sketchbook into his pack and grabbed the nearest vine. All of the muscles in his body activated at once to help him climb back up topside. As he hauled himself up, the chanting, the praying—whatever it was—only grew louder and louder, until the words themselves hit him like bludgeons.

He was having trouble breathing.

It didn't stop him. It *couldn't*.

He pulled and pulled. Empty air sizzled with magic beneath his feet; there was nothing to climb atop when he was dangling in the air like this. Something within him began to scream.

*I can't give up here. What would Kirol say?*

Lluwen tried to picture his friend at the top of this makeshift rope. Even if no one else doubled back for him, he knew Kirol would have. *Come on, Lulu, you're almost there!*

He sucked in a breath. Kirol wasn't actually here, so he'd have to do all of it himself.

"Come on, Lulu," he said. "You're almost ... there."

Over and over, his very own mantra, pulling higher and higher. His arms were sore, but soon enough, he really was almost there. And when he finally hauled himself up onto the edge? He was grinning.

"Thanks, buddy."

"I am no one's 'buddy,' Lluwen. But it is good that your foolhardy behavior hasn't gotten you killed."

*Oh no.*

Professor Fel hauled Lluwen up by his scruff. It didn't even seem to trouble him much to do so. With a detached air, he brushed the dirt off Lluwen's shoulders. "I hope you have something to impress me."

Lluwen's fear bubbled up inside him again. When he blinked, he saw the faces of the archaics overlaid on Fel's—the eyeless eyes, the mouthless mouth. The echoes of the strange chant he'd heard became Fel's words: *don't waste my time.*

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"So ... you didn't tell him?"

Lluwen hung his head. Tam didn't mean anything badly by it; he knew she didn't. But it still stung to hear it put that way. Had he been wrong to trust her with the story? He scraped the empty jar of his courage and found something to say. "I don't know. I got scared—scared it would be something everyone here, on Arcavios, already knew about. Then I would look foolish."

Tam perched her head on her hand. In the relative privacy of Lluwen's student accommodations, they didn't have to worry about interruptions. Well, except from the birds outside. They had a lot to say about everything.

"I think I know what you mean," she said.

Lluwen glanced at her. She did?

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said. “I’ve had reviews with Professor Vess; I know the feeling. It felt like nothing I said to her could possibly be impressive enough to win her over. Like there was always something she would find that was wrong.”

Lluwen nodded. “Yeah. That’s what it’s like with Professor Fel.”

Tam touched a finger to her lips as she considered their options. Behind them, words began to appear on the scribing board. From the precise strokes, Lluwen guessed it must be Abigale. He stood to get a look at the words while Tam had her think.



Friends and companions,

I’m so sorry to hear of your troubles. And I’m sorrier to say that I had some of my own. There was a bit of a translation error the other day. When I meant to say, and what I *did* sign, was a polite request for one person to speak at a time. And it turned out that some Arcavian signs resemble rude gestures to Kamigawans. It took all day to sort out the misunderstanding. But on the bright side, I’ve learned a lot about Kamigawan culture.

Hoping that your expeditions are looking up.

Best,

Abigale

Tam looked up from her contemplation. “Do you think you could talk to Oracle Jadzi about what you saw?” Tam said.

The sound of her voice surprised him from his thoughts, though her tone was as collected as Fel’s.

“You think she’s heard of this sort of thing before?” he said.

“If anyone has, it would be her,” said Tam. “When I was speaking with her, she told me that all archaics used to be oracles. Time is the only difference.”

Lluwen tilted his head. He’d done what reading he could to try and catch up to the others—but there was only so much you could do when you were from a completely different plane. “Do you mean Oracle Jadzi will become one of them someday?”

Tam shrugged. “From certain points of view, she already is. Water, ice, and vapor are all the same thing existing in different forms. Oracles and archaics are similar. The difference is that instead of removing or adding heat, you’re manipulating time.”

He tried to picture Jadzi’s warm face becoming like those gray, unknowable creatures, and he decided very quickly that he no longer wanted to try.



Art by: Martina Fačková

“Honestly, the existence of archaics on Arcavios has always been something that fascinated me. Can you imagine? Living your whole life out and then being flung back in time ...”

Tam got up. She, too, looked over the letter Abigale had just written to them.

For a little while, it was quiet.

Then a question sprang into Lluwen’s mind.

“What would you tell yourself?” Heat rose to his cheeks. “If you got flung back in time, that is. What would you say to your past self?”

Tam touched the ink on the paper. “I don’t know.”

Oracle Jadzi liked to get her tea from one of the shops in town. Lluwen had seen the logo on her travel mug. He figured if there was any place he might find her for a quick chat, a tea shop sounded just right. Plus, he knew plenty about tea.

A little after sunrise the next morning he headed out to the shop—too early for any of the students to be there, but just early enough for professors and instructors looking to escape the rush.

But Lluwen’s luck was both better and worse than he expected: as he left his room and stepped out onto the landing, he heard Jadzi’s bright voice worn low, and Fel’s voice threatening to boil.

“Who are you to tell me what I can and cannot do?” said Fel.



Art by: Lie Setiawan

“Let’s not waste time answering that one. You already know who I am, *and* you already know how wrong it is to use students for your little scheme.”

Lluwen pressed himself against the threshold. Something in him braced for the fire of Fel’s reply. They couldn’t see him, could they? *Queen’s dreams*, he hoped so.

“That you would stoop so low as to call it a scheme ...” Fel said. Glass shattered. “What could possibly be more important to me than this? You ask me to cast aside the very blood that runs through my veins; you ask me to forsake the seraphic brightness I reach for every moment of my accursed life? No. No, I swore an oath of devotion, Jadzi. A sacred bond that transcends life and death. Call it selfish, if that is what you think of it, but never name it a scheme.”

A silence fell across the air. Every blade of grass and every branch was rapt with attention. Lluwen could feel them trembling in time with Fel’s words.

“Have you come simply to exercise authority over that which you do not understand, or do you have something worth saying?”

How could he speak to Jadzi like that? Still, whatever he’d been talking about earlier felt *personal*. A thing not meant for everyone’s ears. Certainly not an errant student. Lluwen wasn’t sure whether he wanted to melt away into the gloaming or if he wanted to hold this secret precious as fresh dew.

The fear won out again. Even if he wanted to move, he couldn’t.

“Oh, here we go, Dellian.”

“Professor Fel.”

“Fine, if the title is so important to you,” came Jadzi’s answer, exhausted but not unsympathetic. “Look, no one is questioning your devotion or your expertise. Just remember, you aren’t the only person in the world. You’d think for one of you Planeswalkers that would be easy to remember. Arcavios is fortunate enough to have externalized examples of the future in the archaics, and all over the plane they’ve been acting strangely. Doesn’t that frighten you?”

Another pause. Lluwen's heartbeat was almost painful within his chest. He hadn't been seeing things, then.

"I have my own thoughts as to the causes. Professor Vess and I were due to discuss them," Fel answered. The fire was seeping out of him.

Jadzi winced. "About that. You're going to need to reschedule."

"What do you mean?"

"Unless you have some secret means of speaking with her you haven't revealed to me yet—"

"No. Not with her." Lluwen heard Fel starting to pour something. Tea, maybe.

"Then you won't be able to reach her, either. Believe me, I've tried. Sent her more requests for a meeting than I can count, went straight to her office, you name it. But nothing's worked. No one knows where she is," said Jadzi.

A low grumble from Fel. "No message left behind? She's not the impulsive type."

"Nothing," said Jadzi. "The others are trying to keep it from becoming ... a public concern. After the business with Professor Kasmina, another incident might cause a stir."

People said the name Kasmina on campus the same way Lluwen's clanmates used to whisper *Oona*. What he knew about the situation wasn't much—some gossip about the first class of interplanar students like himself and Tam—but it was enough that Jadzi's comparison hit him like a rock to the temple.

*This is bad. I shouldn't be here*, he thought.

"Forgive my earlier bluntness," said Fel. "The situation is more serious than I realized."

"If I had a coin for every time someone said that to me, I'd be rich," said Jadzi. "Everyone likes to think they don't put themselves at the center of the timeline, but we all do. You should have met me when I was younger."

As Jadzi launched into a story about her youth while attending the university, Lluwen took a breath. He risked a glance at the pair.

The tension was gone. Only two colleagues having tea together. Fel regarded Jadzi with the same curiosity and admiration Lluwen did—though his was tempered and muted by comparison.

Gone, the cage of fear around his heart. The twitch of his fingers told him he could move again. Could he tell them? Could he walk over there and tell them what he'd seen?

Lluwen imagined himself doing it. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. *I saw the archaics, too. Start easy.*

But he couldn't make his imagined self say even that. Jadzi was kind and attentive and safe, but Fel? Even if he had apologized to Jadzi, he was clearly not here for the right reasons. And if he really was willing to use students for his own ends ... what did that mean if those ends were dangerous?

Manipulation was as familiar to Lluwen as the morning. The thought of being back under someone's thumb, of being judged again ...

No. He couldn't tell Fel. Whatever the professor was up to, it was too risky.

Lluwen turned on his heel and headed back to his room.

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*Are you sure this must be done, Teacher?*

*It's a hopeful thing to ask that kind of question. I wish that I could—*

“Tam?”

Lluwen's wasn't the voice Tam had wanted to hear. Their camp at the outskirts of the dig site didn't afford them much in the way of privacy. In fact, it was something of a miracle that they'd gotten any privacy at all. Most of the others were restricted to the group cabins. The only reason they had a tent of their own was Lluwen's little blowup. Fel thought it wouldn't be good for the others to have to share space with him.

But Tam had wanted to keep her friend company, so she'd moved her bedroll over. It was more than big enough for two—more like an outpost than a camping tent. The post keeping up their little canvas home away from home was a good eight feet tall, and the tent itself was about nine by eleven feet, if she didn't miss her guess. Big enough to feel livable. Both of them had set up their travel lecterns. Tam had even set up what she assured him was a traditional Shandalar washbasin.

Staying here had been nice. They were close enough to the site that it required only a short walk, and though the others would sometimes toss things at the tent (there were stains all over it from rotten fruits), a little magic got rid of the smell easily enough. They could also hear the goings-on around them, which meant that they got to hear a lot of the town gossip. Tam liked that.

She just wished he'd come back a little later. Swallowing down the ball of nerves that had gotten stuck in her throat, she offered him a smile.

“You're back soon,” she said. “I hope that means we have nothing to worry about when it comes to the archaics. Oracle Jadzi can be so reassuring, can't she?”

And this wasn't a lie. Jadzi really could be reassuring. Tam loved that about her. On the precious few occasions they'd spoken, all the storming seas of her heart had died down to gentle ripples. Truth be told, she envied how much time Lluwen got to spend with her—and to spend with her alone. She hadn't exactly been honest about that earlier.

*But it's fine*, she told herself. Lluwen was lonely. Jadzi must have sensed that about him. Probably didn't even need magic to see it, either, with the way he'd been skulking about recently. If you called his name, he was just as likely to flinch as he was to smile.

A moment of quiet. Was he going to ask her what she was doing? Or about the bowl in her hand? Maybe the rings she adjusted on her fingers as she spoke—polished silver worked into overlapping scales, like those of a saw-toothed viper.

She looked up at him, and she wondered, wished, hoped he would ask. That *anyone* would ask. Because of her powers, the odds were often in her favor—even if she wasn't actively manipulating them. Not today, though.

“She can,” Lluwen said. “Even Fel isn't immune. But I think all of this might be worse than we thought.”

Tam winced. “Their behavior is unprecedented, then?”

“Worse. I'm not the only one who's noticed the archaics acting strangely. That's the whole reason she's here.”

Tam steepled her fingers. *That certainly complicates things, doesn't it?* She ran through the options in her head, each facet of the problem part of a fractal she could turn this way and that.

“What did she say about the chanting? It sounded important.”

Lluwen looked away. “I, uh ...”

“You didn’t tell her.” It wasn’t a question this time. “Lluwen, you know we can trust her. And if you didn’t tell her, how do you know why she’s here?”

He pinched his nose. “I just ... Fel was there, and there was some yelling, and—look. I wish I could tell you that I was brave enough to talk to her, but I wasn’t. That’s just the way it is. I’m a coward. I ran away from home, and now I run from simple conversations.”

Tam was up before she knew it. Pulling him into a hug, she made sure to give Lluwen a good squeeze. He needed it. Maybe she did, too. “You aren’t a coward. Nor was it a simple conversation.”

He leaned his head against her shoulder. Lluwen smelled of moss and bark. She’d always liked it. “Thank you,” he whispered. Then, “I think we should tell the others. Maybe Kiroł’s heard of something like that, or maybe if I can get the rhythm down, Sanar will recognize what it’s used for. We need to figure out what kind of magic we’re dealing with.”

“With archaics, it’s hard to be sure. We definitely still need to speak with Jadzi about it but ... telling the others is important, too,” she said. But that wasn’t what was on her mind as he picked up the quill. “Hey, Lluwen?”

He glanced over his shoulder. “What’s up?”

“You don’t ever write home, do you?” she said.

She wanted to know his answer. Maybe he could understand what it was like. Maybe they could talk about it, in their own way—the isolation, the obvious differences, that feeling of not knowing where to put your foot for the next step.

But before he could answer, the ground shook.

Lluwen’s carefully collected specimens and Tam’s models fell right off their hooks and clattered to the ground. Outside, the cheers and music of the camp broke into screams. The lanterns provided the only light as darkness rolled through.

Tam ducked out of the tent. A massive figure blocked the gold of the moon. In its shadow, the whole world held its breath.

To call this an archaic would be to compare a sparrow to an owlin. A new species? Or simply some sort of mutation? Tam couldn’t fathom the answers right now. No, even her inquisitive mind was too focused on a single primal thought to wander too far astray.

Run.

She needed to *run*.

Everything in her told her so. Her synapses firing at once, the small, animal part of her brain. With her heart racing and her breath short, her body was more than ready.

But she couldn’t run.

There was too much at stake.

All around her, the researchers were scrambling, screaming, shoving at each other in desperation; her fellow students either scattered or failed to muster any magic in the face of such horrifying size. Overhead, miniature galaxies wreathed the massive, unknowable thing—each in and of themselves containing multitudes she struggled to understand. The shadow it cast alone made the research encampment so dark that some of the human students had trouble finding their way. In this umbral

chaos, the only light was that which the subjugated stars cast upon them. It wasn't until Tam let her eyes go out of focus that she realized she was looking at star arches hovering around the creature like jewels in a crown.

Tam needed to run. Tam needed to do something.

But caught in the middle, the only thing her body permitted her to do was freeze.

The thing stared down at them. Eyeless eyes, just like Lluwen had said. How stupid she'd been—of course he'd been afraid.

Tam bit into her tongue, hard. She needed to force herself to get moving somehow. Just as she did, Lluwen barreled toward her. A rough slap on her back helped bring her the rest of the way to her senses.

"What is that thing?" Lluwen said.

"I don't know," she said. "It looks like ..."

Words failed her. Impossible. Words didn't fail her. Thoughts didn't fail her. She could solve any problem she could turn around within the confines of her mind; her teacher had made that point clear.



Archaic's Agony | Art by: Joshua Raphael

But she couldn't think of words for this. How was she supposed to ...

"It's standing up!"

She swallowed. *That thing was big enough to blot out the stars, and it wasn't even at full height?* Once more she forced herself to look upon it and realized that Lluwen was right: It was standing. Compared to the ribs of Titan's Grave, it looked natural, where most things seemed infinitesimal.

And then, all at once, it was over: The creature turned its unknowable face from them. The body soon followed. With steps large enough to cross between towns in a single bound, it walked away.

The trouble was over before it began.

Not that it stopped anyone from panicking. The camp was a mess already, and it was only getting messier. Yet she could hear, now, the professors trying to rally their students, the guards trying to restore order.

Slowly, surely, Titan's Grave let out a breath.

It was not until later, when Fel pulled them away from recovery efforts, that they realized the gravity of what had happened.

His eyes burning, Fel asked the two of them if they had seen Oracle Jadzi.

That was the moment Tam remembered the old saying about plans. Sooner or later, they always went to waste.



Code Oona. I repeat, Code Oona.

The second Kirol saw the words forming across the surface of the page, their breath caught in their throat. When the five of them had come up with the phrase, they'd hoped that it would be years before any of them needed it.

*I guess heroes don't get to live quiet lives*, Kirol thought.

Three in the morning or not, Lulu was in trouble, and that meant it was time to go.

Kirol scrambled out of bed. Outfits were a secondary concern, except for their row of shoes. It would have to be the good, ass-kicking boots. No other option. Throwing a cloak on, they barreled out of their tent.

*I'll steal a cart and maybe a horse. No, I can't do that, that's a crime! Wait. If I requisition it, that's not a crime at all! Hah. Good thinking, Kir—*

The rest was lost in a grumbling *oof* as they walked straight into Ajani Goldmane.

Kirol blinked. "Sorry, buddy, but I've got somewhere to be—"

"At this hour?" rumbled Ajani. He tilted his head. "And where might that be?"

*To explain or not to explain?* Kirol knew they could take on anyone who got in their way. But they trusted Ajani—at least, they were pretty sure they still did—also, Ajani was huge.

"Promise you're not going to try and stop me."

A deep laugh. "You know I can't do that."

Kirol hung their head back and worked a circle into the dirt with the ball of their foot. "Lluwen and Tam might be in trouble. Oracle Jadzi *definitely* is. Some kind of huge archaic showed up and carried her away, and Professor Fel is acting really weird and talking about eternal oaths of devotion, and—"

Ajani quieted them with a hand on the shoulder. "Your friends are in danger?"

“Do you think I get out of bed at three in the morning if they’re not?” Kirol said.

There was no arguing that point, and they both knew it. Ajani nodded. “You did the right thing to tell me about this. I’ll investigate what’s going on—”

“Alone?” said Kirol, their voice cracking a little with urgency. “No, you can’t! You need someone to watch your back, and I need to make sure my friends are okay. I have to go *now*.”

“What you have to do,” began Ajani, narrowing his eyes, “is stay safe. We can’t act without knowing what the ramifications might be. Running face first into danger is a good way to get yourself hurt. What will you do then, young warrior?”

A fire rose up in Kirol’s belly. Despite the height difference, they squared their shoulders and stared back at Ajani. “I’ll win.”

To Kirol’s mild surprise, Ajani really did back down. He looked away and sighed. “I know that look in your eye better than most. There were times I would have cast aside anything in the world if it meant keeping my pride safe—and later, my friends.”

The buzz of the magical air only seemed to highlight the silence that followed. Kirol had the feeling it was better to let him talk ... as long as he got out of the way.

“I’ll offer you a compromise,” Ajani said. “Let me speak with the other professors and see what I can learn. An hour, at the most. After that, we can leave together.”

Kirol rubbed their chin as they considered how this fit within their grand plan. You had to make a show of considering the things people proposed to you. They’d learned that much from their family’s business dealings. “Sure.”

They held out a hand to shake, and Ajani obliged.

“In the meantime, see to it that our carriage is prepared for travel. We don’t know what we might encounter when we arrive. But don’t go wandering off. Trust me, Kirol—nothing worth doing is worth doing alone.”

“Fine,” Kirol said. “I don’t want to end up with another demerit, anyway.”

Ajani stepped out of the tent. Kirol turned and set about picking up their pack. The next time Ajani checked in on them, fifteen minutes later, they would already be gone.

From atop a requisitioned horse, Kirol grinned back at the camp.

They were a *genius*.