

Chapter Two

“When the Ancients rose to power, they made use of their science to erect giant cities. Over time, their science unbalanced the Sephirs, and so they explored new avenues in which to grow. They discovered the ability to pass into the Currents from within their own minds. The Ancients used this newfound ability to walk the Currents and communicate with both the spirits and the Archons. Together, they balanced the Sephirs and restored order. Despite their vast knowledge of both science and magic, the Ancients maintained strict discipline in using their power.”

~From A Current History of Ictar, as told by Nidic
Waq

A glimmer of gray daylight splintered through the sitting room window, bringing Darr awake with a headache centered in his temples radiating down his face. He'd never experienced anything like it. He lifted his frame halfway up on the sofa, holding his hand to his forehead.

The spirits came to him, their presence sudden and intrusive.

Erec and Jinn must've returned during the night, he thought. He'd simply overheard a conversation with their father. Darr clamped his eyes shut. The voices came from within him, from the part of his mind connected to the Currents. The voices of the spirits flooded through him, their messages jumbled, but insistent. They wanted to be heard, whatever they were saying. Darr struggled to an upright position, fighting past the pain in his head. Perhaps this invasion by the spirits caused his headache, though he couldn't be certain since nothing like it had happened before. The spirits only came when he thought about them, and they

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were never this persistent.

He took in deep breaths, sending air into his midsection in steady motions. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the silence in the house. The confusion of sound in the Currents and the throbbing of his head made them difficult to ignore, but not impossible. The air he breathed, and the comfort of his home, became his sanctuary. After a few minutes, Darr's body and mind begin to relax, and with it, the voices disappeared. His headache became a dull tingle behind his skull, but with the spirits no longer present, he could function.

Cautiously, Darr rose from the couch, testing to see if either his headache or the spirits would return in force. His father was gone, departed before dawn as he always did. Darr hurried through the house to the sparse bedroom he shared with Erec. The Summoner washed up in the water basin between the two small beds and threw on brown pants and tunic. He ran his fingers through the brown tangle of his hair to straighten it out halfway to presentable. Dressed and refreshed, he bounded down the hallway to leave the house.

He stepped out onto the porch and examined the overcast skies. A sharp coldness bit into his cheeks and nose. He promptly reached back into the house to grab his heavy cloak. As he started out across the field towards the Tyfran General Store, Darr puzzled over the mysterious onset of his headache. The feeling persisted, nothing more than a minor inconvenience now, but it bothered him that such unexpected things still happened.

Twelve years ago, when his summoning abilities first surfaced, Darr would wake in the middle of the night, screaming out unintelligible words, mimicking the jumbled messages of the spirits. There were some more serious moments, when the spirits would come unannounced during the day, flooding his mind and leaving him crumpled on the ground, screaming until they stopped. His father grew worried and went to the village elder, explaining the attacks.

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The elder couldn't help directly, but he knew of a man living in the foothills of the Valimere who could assist. The man, Aeranth, came at once.

Aeranth was a Summoner himself, a kind but shy man, he spent almost two months teaching Darr how to shut out the spirits when they came spontaneously. Deep breathing techniques and focused meditation were the primary forms of control. Rather quickly, Darr noticed a change in both his body and mind. He learned how to shut the spirits out of his head when they came to him, and how to summon them if he chose to listen. Darr chose to do the former because even Aeranth couldn't see any real reason to listen to the spirits. The spirits spoke in jumbled words and fragmented images, and they did so in unison. Deciphering those messages became something short of hopeless.

Aeranth taught him of a city called Navda, far south and east of the Dwarf Borderlands. Spirit Summoners gathered from all over Ictar to study and learn about themselves, the Currents, and the spirits. Some of the Summoners there were rumored to listen to the spirits and communicate with them.

Darr thought if he ever left Tyfor to travel the world, Navda would be the first place he would want to see. He'd always questioned the purpose and function of Spirit Summoners in general, and in particular, because his own experiences seemed pointless. He thought maybe he could find his answers among others who shared his ability, and by learning to understand the messages of the spirits, he might understand the purpose of being one. He might have learned more from Aeranth, but his reclusive nature made him uncomfortable around others. After he'd left, Darr never saw him again.

He came up along the front of the Tyfran General Store. The old building's weathered but sturdy plank siding and roofing stood strong. Large wooden barrels sat out front below the windows to encourage a quick sell, some contained grains, others had seasonal fruits and vegetables. Signs

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meticulously designated the contents of the barrels, an indication of the intense amount of professionalism his father put into his work.

Darr walked past the barrels and opened the wood plank door. The smell of lemon oil struck him first, his father's cleaner of choice for use throughout the store. After all these years, that smell hadn't grown old. Inside, at the counter near the far wall, his father talked to a couple of farmers from the coast and two trappers he'd never seen before.

His father looked up momentarily from his customers and smiled at him. Darr walked to the counter and stood alongside one of the trappers and listened.

"Well, I don't know anything about an army, but I do know you'd all do well to mind that warning about the Seekers," one of the trappers said, a dark skinned man, a Dwarf from the looks of him.

"Bah! Nothing but a bunch of ghost stories," Tyer said, an apple farmer from Tyfor's south end. "Everyone knows magic doesn't exist anymore. It can't, not with the Divine monitoring the Sefhirs."

His father nodded in agreement. "If the Seekers were going around hurting people, well that'd be one thing. But, rumor has it they're using magic, and no one's seen magic used in over two hundred years. It's been banished by the kings for spirit's sake."

The farmers grumbled their approval. Confined to silence, Darr found himself unable to make an opinion. The other trapper, this one most definitely a Dwarf, marked by his stocky build and his dark brown skin, took a step towards the two Tyfran farmers.

"Aos--you people are blind," he scolded, his voice so rough it startled Darr. "You only see what you want to see. I've seen them though. I've seen the Seekers with my own eyes when they killed one of my own. Saw 'em from a distance, you know why? Because if I didn't, I wouldn't be here telling you."

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The Dwarf turned sharply and started for the door. “You people have no idea what’s comin’ for you,” he called out over his shoulder. He opened the door and stepped out onto the street. The other trapper nodded curtly, thanked his father for his services, and followed his companion.

“Who in chaos do they think they are, Hydle?” Tyler started, but his father silenced him with a raised hand.

Still in shock, Darr stared out the door after the two trappers. Whispered secondhand accounts and word-of-mouth stories were one thing. Hearing someone had actually seen the Seekers upset Darr. Someone dying from the encounter was more disturbing.

“Darr,” his father grumbled, “I want you to go down to the storeroom. It needs to be cleaned out to make room for the winter supply order.”

The Summoner recovered his composure, nodded politely to Tyler and the other farmer, before he walked to the back of the building where the storeroom entrance sat underneath the foundations. He used a key to bypass the lock, and once the doors were thrown open, he went down the steps. The only light in the storeroom came from the tiny cracks in the floorboards above. Darr could still hear the muffled grunts and protests from the men gathered there. He stumbled around long enough to light an oil lamp, filling the storeroom with an orange glow.

He began work immediately, pulling unused crates free from piles on the basement floor and hauled them up to the field behind the store. A few minutes into his work, the Summoner was sweating freely despite the cold, and he stripped off his cloak. After clearing the room of pallets, he began the tedious project of reorganizing what little supplies were left.

The project didn’t bother Darr much despite the tedious sorting. He liked jobs that required attention and forced his mind to focus. The memory of the two Dwarf trappers who’d been in the store earlier lingered. He’d seen a few Dwarves in

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his life, and never any of the other races like the Elves or the Ogres. The Dragons, he'd heard, were only a legend. Darr wanted to know more about the races who he shared the land of Ictar with. He didn't know much about the Dwarves being that Tyfor was so isolated. Besides, the Cortazian men who shared the Dwarf Borderlands didn't welcome outsiders, a prejudice left behind by Aeon Wars.

Darr's thoughts strayed until the spirits came rushing back into his head with a numbing jolt.

He braced himself, letting his mind clear, but he'd claimed only a moment of silence before an explosion rumbled in his ears. While distant, Darr knew instinctively the sound must've come from somewhere close by. The Summoner turned for the door, but lost his footing and tripped over his feet, awkwardly crumpling to his hands and knees.

He began clawing for the steps leading out of the storeroom, when a second explosion rocked him to his belly, this one stronger and much closer. Darr struggled to his feet and fought to regain his breath, choking on dust shaken free from the building's foundations. With new intensity, the spirits began a tirade of whispering petitions, but he ignored them and raced up the steps, trying to muffle the spirits with his heavy breathing.

Outside, smoke wafted on the air. He took in deep breaths. Simultaneously, he took in the scene and tried to silence the spirits. For whatever reason, the voices wouldn't be dispelled, so Darr ignored them and ran around the building to the store's front where his shield of calm faltered before falling away completely.

Across the road, next to Arn's Inn, flames engulfed the village blacksmith's shop. Tyfran's citizens ran in every direction around the scattered remnants of the building. Some carried buckets of water, while others shoveled dirt in wide swatches where the flames weren't so high. The building itself looked hollowed out, as if the fire had

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consumed everything inside in a matter of seconds. Darr watched in horror, imagining what must've happened to the blacksmith and his apprentice, both of whom were close friends.

Taken aback by the spectacle, Darr turned. The front of the Tyfran General Store had caught fire. It appeared a piece of debris had flown from the blacksmith's shop and into one of the windows, leaving flames licking up the cedar paneling in its wake. The Summoner carefully looked inside through the opening.

An angry orange glare gleamed back at him.

Darr called out for help. Without waiting for a response from anyone, he threw the door open and leapt inside. Heat rushed against his face, stinging his eyes and nose, filling his nostrils with the acrid smoke. Fear rose up, but Darr forced it down, covered his mouth with his tunic, and forged ahead into the smoke. Flames licked greedily up the left wall of the store, fighting for position and racing towards the ceiling. The piece of debris from the explosion had shattered shelving and set products ablaze, sending them flying in all directions. It appeared everything inside the small building had caught fire simultaneously.

A man writhed on the floor near the counter, his body covered in flames. Darr charged towards him as the man's screams of agony reverberated through him, turning his bones to ice. An image of his father burst into his mind. Darr's hesitation gave the spirits a chance to flood in once more. Their voices buzzed urgently, a warning.

Darr reached up for his travel cloak to use it to smother the flames, but he'd left it in the storeroom. The man's screams were growing more frantic. The fire ripped through the victim's flesh and his fingers clawed at the charred floorboards. Darr searched along the counter in a frenzy to find something else to smother the flames, and instead, came face to face with a ball of flame. It floated in the air. The spirits howled.

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Shock paralyzed the Spirit Summoner. The ball of fire had form. Blunted legs ran up to a thick torso, and pointed ears jutted out of its head. Two pinpricks of white-hot fire glared out at him.

Darr had heard of creatures such as these during his lessons on the workings of the Currents.

The creature before him was a conjuring from the Currents, an elemental. A firehound.

The firehound stared at him from across the span of a few feet, waiting for its prey to make a move. Indecision coiled about Darr, a prison chain of fear. The spirits' voices pounded in his head, preventing him from thinking clearly.

Darr reacted out of desperation, running for the door. He needed help. The firehound's massive body crashed through broken shelving and snapped at the back of Darr's legs and boots with the quickness of the element it embodied. The raw heat of it seethed through his pants and tunic, searing his skin. The soles of his boots were burning. He'd barely reached the door when the firehound leapt over his head, a living cloud of flame, cutting off his escape and sending up a new curtain of flames in its wake. Darr doubled back, heading for the counter and the window located in the back of the store. The firehound chased him, its fiery paws clawing up hot ash with every leap.

The Summoner crawled over the counter in time to see his last chance at escape fall away. He looked back through the curtain of flames. A tall, white-robed figure stood in the doorway. The spirits abruptly stopped their tirade, the voices shattering with the fragility of brittle glass. Perhaps he might have been frightened by its suddenness had it not been for the charging firehound.

The robed figure stretched out his arm.

Blue light gathered on the stranger's fingertips and the air about him rippled outward like the surface of a pond. No, not the air. A sheet of water had materialized before the robed figure, its surface heaving outward by some unseen force.

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The stranger dipped his hand into the glassy surface, stirring it, causing it to shudder before a rippling geyser of water exploded across the charred ruins of the Tyfran General Store. The geyser found its mark in the body of the firehound, as it leapt at Darr. The elemental froze, its maw split wide and its body contorted in upheaval. Then it fell to the ground and evaporated into smoke and steam.

Dumbfounded, Darr clutched the top of the counter for dear life, staring open-mouthed at the stranger. He could see him clearly now, incredibly tall, his face hard and set, dominated by piercing green eyes set above his wide nose and close-cropped beard.

The stranger raised his other arm, and the white robes around his body shimmered softly. The same blue light, this time laced with tiny sparkles of yellow, swirled around his hands and arms. The man gathered it up and sent it spinning upwards to the ceiling. Darr jerked away from the motion, but the chill of a misty dampness caressed his face. When he looked up again, the flames were beginning to die away. A downpour of rain fell all about the room. The raindrops swirled about the interior of the store, a miniature squall hanging on the ceiling, and yet visibly there wasn't anything of the sort. At the center of the maelstrom, the stranger held his arms up high with glowing fingertips.

When the rain had washed away the fire, the stranger lowered his arms and his conjuring ceased. With eyes fixed on Darr, he started forward. The Summoner found he could only stare at the stranger's face from his perch on the counter.

I know this man, but from where?

Without a sideways glance, the stranger walked to the man who had been on fire. Stunned, Darr rushed over. The Summoner lowered himself down beside the kneeling stranger. The stranger's hands moved over the withered form, touching it, checking it in places. After a few moments, the stranger looked up, and his piercing gaze found the

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Summoner's own. Untold knowledge glowed in those eyes. This man knew things no mortal could comprehend. A chill descended over him.

"Do not worry, Darr Reintol," the stranger said, his voice oddly reassuring. "This man isn't your father. It's unfortunate, but there are worse ways to die these days."

Questions flooded Darr's mind, but he forced them away. The man's charred remains lay before him, and a feeling of sadness and guilt washed through Darr over his relief that it wasn't his father.

The stranger rose, his white robe enfolding him, armoring him. He walked to where a shelf had been overturned near the front of the store and carefully tipped it away. His father lay underneath it, his clothes covered in ash and soot, his face bruised. Despite being unconscious, his father's chest rose and fell steadily with each breath.

Darr ran to his father's side, checking the old man's body to see if there were any broken bones or permanent damage on the surface. It appeared his father had been knocked out, but was otherwise all right.

When Darr looked up to thank the stranger, the man had vanished, gone as suddenly as he'd come.