

Broken Pillars

A preview of chapter 1 of my upcoming novel

The orange and silver tint of sorcery wove through Valus Regald's arm as he released his spell. The thief blocking the road flew back as the flash of color struck his chest, but Valus never saw him land. The moment the energy left his body, five pillars of flame erupted from the ground and shot into the sky. An ambush!

He staggered back with a shout, raising his arms against the heat. His sword extended from his armguard in response to his surging heart rate. He fell to his knees, and gray, colorless grass rose up to meet him, melding into an equally lifeless sky at the horizon. What was this? Where was the road? And the wagon? Everything except the flames and himself had vanished. Instinct drove him to lash out with his blade at some enemy that wasn't there.

The fires crackled and snapped. Valus stood, risking a closer look. One column burned blue and green, another orange and red. Turning in place on shaky legs, a flame of silver rolled into view, a white and gold one next to it. The final pillar burned purple and black. None of them produced smoke, nor burned the grass from which they'd erupted.

His mind raced, feeling as if he were watched. Something else was coming, or already here. If he didn't act fast... he didn't know what would happen. Every moment he hesitated, panic grew. He took a

step, looking for an escape. The flaming columns flared, driving him back to his knees in a futile attempt to recoil as the heat threatened to burn his chin stubble. A moment later they vanished. Snuffed out.

Dead.

Trembling and stunned, he blinked several times. The air had cooled, and all sound ceased. But for his sight and the scent of grass, he might have thought he'd lost all his senses. Breathing came in haggard gasps, and he feared to move or speak.

“Hey.”

Valus started, tangling himself in his half-length red shoulder cloak and nearly falling out of the wagon he'd been defending. The highwayman he'd blasted picked himself off the ground and ran, now unable to grasp his knife thanks to the lingering energies scrambling his hand muscles.

The driver gave him a sideways look, eyebrows high. “Nice shot, but, uh, are you okay? You went crazy just now.”

Was he okay? How could he be? That was the third vision attack this week.

“Uh, yeah.” He checked the quiver in his voice and cast his gaze away from the driver, pretending to check for more trouble. His hand reached up to brush his pitch-black hair. “Fine.”

The man nodded and flicked the reins to get the horses moving again. Dirt, grass, and trees rolled by as the wagon clacked along, jittering at the occasional bump. Unlike the gray landscape in the vision, these displayed the normal greens and browns, and the sky its familiar blue.

The driver glanced at him again. “What exactly did you do to that guy, anyway?”

Movement in the bushes caught Valus's attention, but it was only a rabbit fleeing into cover. He felt rather like one himself at the moment.

“A trick I picked up from Everlive's peacekeepers. One of them once used a spell to trigger nerves and muscle spasms in a thief who tried to run. I just put more energy into it and targeted the joints.”

Silence as the man thought about it. “Looked like you got yourself with it too.”

He meant the hallucination. Valus didn't know what his body did during that time, but from the driver's words, he must have been moving about.

"Just... lack of practice, I think. First time I've actually tried it myself."

The conversation dwindled, and Valus willed the horses to go faster and his harried nerves to settle. Given this moment of peace, he rested, albeit with his eyes open. He didn't want to re-imagine that vision.

When the city Everlive emerged from the treeline one mile away, Valus knew there would be no more trouble—they were close enough now to be within view of the city guard. As the wagon crossed the main gate into the city proper, Valus collected his pay for guard duty and left the driver to his business. His feet turned of their own accord and carried him down the yellow-brown cobblestone street toward the Journeyside Inn where Rien awaited his return from the two-day job.

He'd heard rumors of other people behaving as if they were under attack, but never paid them much heed. Everlive was a large city—people were bound to do crazy things now and again. Until now. If his visions and those cases had anything to do with each other, he needed help. Needed to know if he might be ill, or whatever else might be going on.

Multi-story brick and mortar buildings and vendor stalls rolled by, sending their aromas of food, oils, and burnished leathers after him. His mood lifted, welcomed home from that strange, otherworldly place that plagued him every time he attempted multi-step sorcery.

Sorcery. That had to be part of it. Those fiery columns hadn't just been fire—everyone on Veriscentia knew those colors. They represented the Five Pillars, the collective magic that flowed from the planet itself. If he hoped to figure out what these waking dreams meant, if anything, he needed someone more knowledgeable in sorcery than himself.

The world's most prestigious alchemy school, the Alchademy, resided just over a week's travel to the east, deliberately built near Planet's Core, a giant hole burrowing too far down to measure, which

breathed magical energy into the air nonstop. If anyone could divine the cause behind his incidents, surely it would be someone at the Alchademy.

First, though, he wanted to spend some time with Rien.

His pace quickened, the thought of being with her again spurring him on. His sword arm twitched as muscle memory recalled days of fending off wild munstra, helping the authorities track down rogues, and keeping wagon drivers company on worn dirt roads between destinations. His body contrasted his mind, it seemed. The noises of the city—a hundred mingling voices, footsteps, and whispering wind—personified his opposing desires with the expertise of a trained actor.

The sunlight dimmed as he crossed the Journeyside Inn’s open threshold, handing its job over to the glass lamps hung on the walls. Valus blinked to adjust his eyes as he padded across the traffic-worn red carpet.

Rien stood behind the counter, chuckling when he came within earshot. “You look thrilled. Miss me that much?” She reached up to fiddle with a strand of ebony hair that had escaped her favorite stained red bandana. The warm smile and glimmering blue eyes dulled after she got a closer look and realized “thrilled” was very much incorrect. “Valus, what happened?”

As perceptive as ever. They’d known each other for years, and grown as close as two people could be outside of romance. Rien kept a specific room reserved for Valus’s permanent residency, and since then he’d traveled less and less, aside from hired fighting. Yet he still couldn’t bring himself to settle down with her. The twitch in his arm hadn’t been random—any time he gave thought to leaving, eagerness overtook him. A large part of him loved travel too much—he didn’t want to stay in one place.

He glanced behind him. Between meal times, the lobby only entertained a few guests at the tables, there more for socializing than eating. None of them seemed to overhear the conversation.

“It happened again.” He hadn’t mentioned the hallucinations until the second time and had received a scolding for not telling her about the first.

Her hand gripped the apron of her blue-and-orange one-piece.

“Same as before,” he continued before she could say anything. “I’m going to the Alchademy soon to ask for help.”

Each vision came during attempts to cast compound spells, magic-work utilizing more than one pillar of sorcery. For most, magic was outlawed in the crowded streets for public safety, with a few exceptions. Healers, a few apothecaries, the peacekeepers, and those few warriors-for-hire they trusted to aid them, were allowed. His first two attempts had been inside the walls while on a job.

But if he couldn’t manage even a two-part spell without repercussion, he’d be forced to rely on the barest sorcery whenever he needed to fight, be it a person of interest or munstra. As much as he loved traveling and all the thrills it brought, his livelihood, maybe his life itself, was at risk. People could be reasoned with or paid off, but the sorcery-maddened fauna would sense weakness and attack on sight.

Rien clasped his hand to steady it. “I think that’s a good idea. But get some rest first. And don’t you dare rush yourself.” Her other hand reached under the counter and produced his room key. “I’ll come up to see you later and make sure you’re all right.”

He smiled in appreciation. “Thanks. I do want some time here before I leave.” He meant to say “time with you,” but his mouth rushed passed that part. Hopefully she read the intent.

With the warmth of her hand still clinging to his own, he made for the stairs to the second floor nestled in the back right corner. Travels aside, he enjoyed being close to Rien, and she to him. Helping to maintain the Journeyside had become like a second job. Not that she’d kick him out if he failed to help. Rien often put up moneyless travelers out of simple kindness, one of the reasons her inn was so popular, and he so fond of her.

He opened the door to his room with a creak, taking a moment to pause and breathe among the bed, two chairs, and decoratively-carved wooden desk pushed against the far wall. With the brief respite, his mind calmed enough to prioritize tasks. He shed his boots and half-cloak, set about packing everything he’d need, then took two sheets of paper and sat at the desk. He didn’t want to show up to the school unannounced, especially if he wanted to find help. They’d need to know of his coming in advance.

Of course, no one could be expected to know what was going on just from reading a letter, but it would at least give the experts at the school a chance to research before he arrived. If they answered, the carrier bird would find him on the road and deliver it to him.

After folding the letter and dropping it in the mail chute, he flopped onto the bed and lay back against the pillow, staring up at the plain wood ceiling. He was sure the fires had something to do with the five disciplines of spellcraft, but he was clueless beyond that. Was this something serious or just a passing oddity? Could he do anything about it? If he couldn't make money guarding travelers and hunting bounties—no, worse than that, his and others' ability to use magic itself could be at stake. If humanity lost that, it'd be a disaster.

Life magic and medicine went twos, and so many simple devices like pulleys, or tasks like repairing equipment, relied on the Pillar of Dynamics. He himself had called on the Pillar of the Mind more times than he could count, both for fighting and checking his direction whenever he went off road. As for Void and Divinity... he didn't know enough about them to say.

He fidgeted, anxiety poking and prodding at him. Rolling over several times, he entertained the same thoughts again and again, constantly reminding himself he already *was* doing something.

A knock on his door snapped him out of it.

“Valus, it's me. Hope you're hungry.”

Dinner already? A glance at the closed shutters revealed a thin line of orange light trickling in. He'd lost count of time. Pushing off from the bed, Valus padded over to the door and opened it to allow Rien inside.

She greeted him with a smile and set two dinner platters of veggies, fruits, and meat down on the desk along with warm mugs. Valus pulled up a pair of chairs and sat to eat with her, his tension vanishing. Rien's hair, loosened from the bandana, hung below her shoulders, catching the light from the wall lamps. The warmth drifting from her quickened his heart rate.

She tossed a berry into her mouth. “Phila wanted me to remind you to take a traveling partner. She knows a few people headed east.”

Phila worked the bar at the main counter. She’d been there almost as long as Rien owned the inn, a tall woman in possession of wits fast enough to to run a marathon. Having a tavern in the same building as the inn—a rarity in most cities—made the Journeyside a favorite destination in Everlive.

He knew Phila almost as well as he did Rien. His mind chewed on the prospect while his mouth chewed on the food, watching the lamp flicker. “No, this is a business trip, and I’d likely end up parting ways with anyone else halfway through. I’ll be sure and thank her before I leave, though.”

The conversation took a less serious turn, or tried to—with his impending departure, the subject always came back around. Finally, Rien stood to gather the dishes. Valus got to them first and stacked them on the tray she’d brought, then opened the door for her.

“By the way.” She stopped in the doorway and looked back at him. “The carrier bird went out just before I came up to see you. I made sure your letter was included.”

The last weight on his shoulders lifted. Rien must have noticed the change, because she balanced the tray on one arm and reached over to squeeze his shoulder before making her way downstairs. He leaned into the touch, but resisted the urge to clasp her hand. She needed to get back to work.

Once she descended out of sight, he opened the shutters to look down at the street. The daytime activity dwindled as people made their way home for the night. Valus sat and leaned on the sill, letting the warm breeze of late spring drift in and his thoughts drift out wherever they would. When his yawning grew constant, he closed the window again and went to bed.