

## Chapter Twenty Nine

### Within the Fold

“Starting with *you!* As I told you earlier...*your services* are no longer needed here,” Khaos roared. He was in the process of releasing the fallen star to feed on his worthless apprentice—it had been straining to do so since the fool’s arrival on the rooftop, when Behniel vanished.

Khaos shook his head, thinking his eyes must be playing tricks on him, when the truth hit him. As inept as he was, Behniel had managed to harness a few rudimentary spells. Apparently, he’d discovered how to bend light enough to create a cloaking spell. That would explain the youngster’s wild gyrations right before he vanished; he hadn’t just been flailing his arms in fear, he’d been weaving a spell. That was all well and good, but cloaked or not, Behniel was still tethered to the floor and the star still needed fed. Khaos waved a hand while sending the mental command to the star to go forth and conquer—which it greedily acquiesced to, flowing forth to cover the vast majority of the rooftop in pulsating tendrils of questing blackness. Khaos was so confident that he’d dealt with the *‘interruption’* that he went back to what he’d been doing before Behniel had barged in on him—studying the thing he’d called forth, without giving the matter another thought.

The first thing he noticed as he stood there gazing down into the seemingly endless abyss the star resided in was how much the power within the star seemed to grow after feeding on his apprentice. There had been a small flair when it had consumed the rabbit, but the surge within it in the past few minutes was akin to what he would have expected to see if the thing had been eating away at the world around it for months, or even years. Before he knew it, Khaos found himself standing on an isle of decking barely big enough to turn around in while the mass of darkness emanating from the star filled the rest of the rooftop’s large area to capacity, even blocking out the moon and stars. As agreeable as that was, the wizard was pleased to see the star thriving so early after being freed, he was perplexed that it wasn’t simply expanding outward, spreading into the forest outside the estate instead of acting as if it was bottled up inside a giant jug. Muttering to himself about how things *never* seemed to go the way he thought they should, Khaos began wading through the inky mass—which did grudgingly parted to allow him passage, to see if for some reason the star was confining itself to the rooftop. His intent was to descend the staircase and exit the house to find out how far the star had managed to spread itself, but he never got there. Before he even reached the point where he’d frozen Behniel in place, he hit—*something*, hard enough to send him stumbling backwards with a grunt of pain.

Because it was night, and the star’s exuded essence was black, he hadn’t given a second thought to how dark the entire roof top had become. With one hand massaging his bruised nose and the other reaching out to tentatively explore the area in front of him, Khaos crept forward once again until his fingers came into contact with something perfectly smooth and unyielding, but oddly without any sense of temperature, either hot or cold to it. Frustratingly, no matter what he did, even calling up a ball of fire to shin light upon whatever it was that he had found, he couldn’t detect a single feature of the object, besides the fact that it was perfectly black. He *was* able to determine, after a fashion, by reaching high and low and working from side to side, that what he’d encountered was some sort of barrier—a *magical* barrier, of course. The problem with that was even the weaves making up the spell that created it were undetectable because the barrier blocked *everything*, including light.

“How on earth did you manage something of this magnitude?” Khaos wondered aloud. The fact that his moronic apprentice could create *anything* of note was shocking enough, but to be able to weave and cast a spell that left the greatest wizard of all time—there was no debating that fact as far as Khaos was concerned, scratching his head? And then another thought came to him. “*Or did you?*”

As the wizard replayed the events from his memory, he was sure Behniel *had* been in the process of casting a spell when Khaos lost sight of him. *But*, the more he thought about it, the more likely it seemed that the fallen star had also sensed that, and that *it* had responded by quickly erecting a defensive barrier against whatever form of attack—pathetic though it likely had been, that Behniel had intended. Yes, that was a much more plausible scenario. Khaos already knew the star was alive, and that that even though to this point his communication with it was rudimentary at best, in its own way it was a highly advanced creature. Who knew what it was capable of; the possibilities were endless. Realizing all of that simplified things immeasurably. All Khaos needed to do was find a way to tell the star that there was no real threat to worry about and it should as a matter of course drop the barrier; simple as that. Mentally rolling up his sleeves, the wizard turned around and made his way back over to the side of the undulating abyss.

As always, since the moment he’d opened the gateway to the faraway location where the cast-down star had landed, Khaos felt the thing’s—*the being’s* presence the moment he opened himself back up to it. And that was really the key. The star was constantly *seeking*, reaching out to make contact—*or devour*. Though no words passed between the two of them, the wizard had always been able to feel the star’s hunger, even decades before, when it had first reached out to him in his dream—or vision, whichever it really happened to be. Again, without words, as he’d ‘*told*’ it to take the rabbit, and then Behniel, he tried to send it an image of what he wanted—*needed* to happen, but after he went to check, he found the barrier to be as resolute as ever. Could it be that the star *hadn’t* been responsible for the barrier after all? As much as he would have rather been spending his time on other—*important, things*, Khaos heaved an angry sigh and settled in to begin studying the confounding thing Behniel had conjured.

An hour or so later, he’d discovered exactly two pieces of information about it. First, it was spherical in nature, wrapping around most of the rooftop, while also extending an equal amount up into the sky and down into the ground floor of the estate. Khaos was able to determine those dimensions by sending out a series of fireballs in all directions, allowing them to wreak havoc where they willed, but in every case once they contacted the barrier they seemed to simply cease to exist. The second thing he learned was that he couldn’t open a portal through the barrier. There were a number of mediums he’d used over the years to create various types of portals; mirrors, doors, mist, whirlwinds, and many others, the list of items you could hang the necessary weaves on was nearly endless, but nothing he tried could penetrate beyond the barrier. Within it, there was no problem, he could easily shift about from room to room or level to level at will. The odd thing was that the fallen star was also contained within the barrier, yet the star itself *had* been brought to the rooftop with the aid of a portal; a portal that was still open, locking together the two positions that were in reality thousands of leagues apart. Khaos’ best guess was that the barrier was also present at the fallen star’s actual position. The only way he could think of to test that theory was to drop into the abyss himself to see if that was the case, but he wasn’t ready to commit to that unless he was left with no other options.

Pacing was his normal way of working through complex problems, which wasn’t as easy as he would have liked with the dark essence of the star filling the entire house. Still, it did part o

make way for him as he wandered about. It was on one of his many circuits of the lower level of the estate that he noticed something as he was crossing through the kitchen. Blackness within the blackness. There were *something* resting on the stovetop. Something *so black* that his eyes couldn't even register its shape. And when he reached out to touch it, he encountered the same non-temperature as he'd experienced with the barrier. So similar that he was instantly sure that he'd discovered another barrier, except this one was movable. He picked the object up, wondering, *how can it be so light*, since his fingers quickly told him he was holding the cast iron cook pot Behniel often used to cook his dinner. But *why* bother casting a barrier around a piece of cookware?

While he was still pondering this, and turning the metal pot in his hands, searching over it carefully to see if he might *feel* the weaves encasing it, something began to happen to him. It was almost as if he had suddenly been sucked into a dream, because what he was seeing and feeling *couldn't be* really happening. The pot in his hands—which was nothing more than an indistinct black blob, began to shrink—as did the stove he'd taken it from. And it wasn't just the size of these things either. Their very *significance* was somehow lessened; how could the pot he was holding not be crying out its boundless joy that *he* had to pick it up. Khaos had always known he was superior to those around him, but just how vast the gap separating him for the pathetic wretches he had to deal with day by day, *that* he hadn't realized until that very moment. Even as the *dream* played out, he continued to grow—until his head was pressed up against the ceiling—*how dare it block his way!* Which a roar of outrage he raised an arm and shattered the heavy wooden beams overhead as if they were nothing more than oversized straw stalks.

If he had been in a trance of some kind, the destruction of a good sized portion of his house brought him out of it. He brought the hand that had demolished the ceiling up to his face and starred at it with wonder. The destruction he'd caused had brought him no injury—*but how could it have?* Mere wood had no chance of damaging the armored metallic green scales that covered his clawed digits and the rest of his hand and arm. Darkness shrouded the rest of his body making it hard to ascertain what other changes had taken place, but that was overcome with a simple thought that instantly wove together a glowing orb that lit the area around him bright as day. Another thought put a full-length mirror in front of him, showing Khaos an image that would have horrified most men, but left him smiling with glee that as he gazed upon his new form; a form that he instantly knew beyond a shadow of any doubt had been his destiny since before the world was formed.

"I am the renderer," the lizard wizard laughed in a rumbling voice that vibrated the house around him.

Golden slanted eyes with red slices for pupils looked down at the thing still held in his hand. He still couldn't *see* the cook pot, or the weaves that he knew must be wrapped around it, but since he was no longer just a practitioner of magic, having become a magical being himself, his sense of the invisible spell bindings *was* able to not only detect them, but to identify their origin; not unlike the way a bloodhound might know a squirrel had crossed the lawn a day before.

*Light...?* He drew deeply of the weaves '*scent*' once again and confirmed his first impression. That made no sense. Air, earth, ice; any, or a combination of all three, were perfectly suitable for binding, and therefore for constructing barriers. But air? Was the barrier nothing more than some illusion that played mind tricks to make you *think* that you were trapped. With a snort of rage, Khaos reached out a clawed hand to shred the weaves that he still couldn't fully perceive. The physical motion wasn't truly necessary, his thought did the actual damage—*but it felt good to take a swipe at the offensive thing.* The spell disintegrated like it had never existed.

The pot was still boiling hot—something he didn't give much thought to until much later because it barely registered in his armored hide. The contents were one of his favorites; venison roast, but he cast it aside with disdain; he *was* hungry, but his tastes no longer ran to anything cooked, or long dead for that matter. Tossing the pot aside, he willed himself back to the rooftop, the portal spell knitting itself together the instant he called for it. Of course the inky black barrier was still up; had that fool Behniel really thought a *light weave* could hold him? Well, his pathetic apprentice would rue the day he dared defy his master. Yes, yes indeed he would.

With a maniacal laugh, Khaos lashed out with his mind, shattering the barrier with a thought, but instead of the night sky that he expected to see as it disintegrated, the world lit up in an explosion of orange light. The flames were everywhere. The entire forest seemed to be ablaze. And the moment the barrier protecting the house from the intense heat came down, its timbers burst into flame, quickly enveloping the entire estate. Khaos cast a worried glance over at the abyss, but if anything the fallen star seemed to welcome the new carnage that had come its way. The burning manor's serpent lord felt a similar reaction growing within himself. Even as a wall of fire rose up in front of him, Khaos marched forward directly into its path, pausing within to draw in a deep, soothing lungful of the superheated air, which he expelled with a joyous cry, adding the torch blast of his own breath to the pandemonium around him. Then, as the fires lapped at everything he'd once held dear, he spread his mighty wings and launched himself into the air. It was time to remake the world in his own image. But first, he'd take the time to do a quick survey of his new kingdom.

Days later, after the fire had finally burned itself out, leaving almost nothing living for miles around, Khaos returned to the husk that used to be his home. Charred timbers and the soot stained rocks of the foundation testified that a good sized house once stood there, but his personal items; clothing and books, and more importantly, his lenses and the other tools of his trade looked to be a total loss. There was a chance the things he'd kept in the houses built-in root cellar had survived, but strangely, Khaos found he didn't care much one way or the other about any of that. The abyss was just as he'd left it, only larger. He was sure of that, though there was no way to be absolutely certain since the rooftop no longer existed to measure it against. The fact that the massive black circle was suspended in the air some fifteen feet high might have seemed odd to some, but Khaos with his understanding of how portals worked would have been surprised if to find any way else. What he hadn't expected was to find the other circle; this one on the ground directly below the abyss, comprised of dozens of pale bodied creatures—every one of their misshapen faces staring up at the undulating black mass above them with rapt, worshipful gazes. As Khaos flared his wings and settled to the ground beside them, the entire congregation turned to him and as one gave him a deep bow—*just as it should be*. Some—those that were capable, even spoke, lavishing him with praise and adoration. Those without the mouths or tongues to do so, whimpered at their inability to properly greet their master. Khaos acquiesced to their wishes to bask in his glory, but only for a few hours, then he sent them away. There was much to be done—*the world had waited long enough, the time to render had finally come*.