

THE ARCANES TRILOGY · BOOK TWO

THE THREE SURVIVORS

EARLY ACCESS PREVIEW

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NO STONE MEDIA

THE STRANGER

THE STRANGER TRUDGED THROUGH THE THICK SNOW SLOWLY. THE weather was still fierce, though the severity of the winter storm had died down. The frigid air stung the stranger's face, which had become numb as time passed outside.

It had been a few weeks of travel, and the stranger was looking forward to reaching the cabin, which was the stranger's destination. The warm intermediate stops at inns throughout the stranger's travels were not nearly as enticing as what awaited the stranger in the cabin. With the cabin in full view, the stranger's pace quickened to almost a sprint.

When the stranger got to the door of the log cabin, the stranger yanked on the door handle. Unfortunately, the snow storm had packed in the door and the stranger had to struggle to get the door open. *Great... right when I think I made it.*

The stranger pulled ferociously at the door, and could not pry it open. The stranger got on all fours and began scooping snow away from the entrance like a dog. *Just get me in here already!* The stranger thought annoyedly, scooping the packed snow as quickly as possible.

When the task was done, the stranger tugged on the door once more as hard as possible, breaking the hinges of the door. The stranger fell back in

the snow as the door came off its hinges. *Well I definitely overdid it..*

The stranger got up, and smiled when he saw the two people, he had been expecting gaping at the entrance where the door was moments ago.

“What are you doing? Could you have at least knocked?” the storyteller ridiculed, looking at what remained of the door.

“Sorry, I guess I just got ahead of myself.” The stranger admitted embarrassed.

When Inessa realized who was at the door, she ran towards the stranger and jumped into the stranger unexpectedly. The stranger caught Inessa, but fell with her from the momentum, falling back into the cold snow.

“I’m so glad you are back! I missed you!” Inessa screamed, as she nearly suffocated the stranger in the snow.

The stranger picked up Inessa, and lifted her reveling in her presence. The stranger had eagerly been awaiting their reunion. “I missed you too.” And then embraced the little girl from the ground. With Inessa in arm, the stranger stood up slowly and carried her into the warm cabin.

“And what are we going to do about the door?” the storyteller remarked.

The stranger had nearly forgotten that the door had come off its hinges and there was a gaping hole in the cabin, with all the excitement of seeing Inessa.

“Oh right, I guess I’ll fix that.” The stranger said setting Inessa down. “Honey go fetch me some of the tools we have in the storage room,” the stranger beckoned Inessa as she was set down. Inessa gave the stranger an eager smile and ran into the storage room, which was in the back of the cabin.

“How goes the council? I was not expecting to see you so soon. Especially not alone.” the storyteller asked the stranger.

“It goes. Not much more to say about that than what you probably already can guess. I can only take so much politics. I decided to slip out amongst all of the chatter.” The stranger admitted straightly.

The storyteller set out an honest sigh. “These things will be slow at first, but they will get better.”

“They already are better.”

“Agreed.”

Inessa returned with the toolbox that the stranger requested. “Excellent, exactly what I needed. You want me to teach you how to fix this?” the stranger asked Inessa pointing at the door.

The girl’s eyes dazzled at the request. “Yes!”

The stranger and the little devil of a girl worked together to get the door set back in its hinges, while the storyteller went into the kitchen to prepare a kettle of hot cocoa for the lot of them.

As the pair worked, the stranger and Inessa talked about the last few weeks.

“It’s been so boring. She won’t let me play outside at all while it’s snowing.” Inessa finished explaining to the stranger.

“Well now that I am back you won’t be so bored. We can go outside as much as you like. In fact, I’ll take you hunting.” The stranger promised.

“Really?” Inessa asked excitedly.

“Of course, but right now the weather is too bad. We are going to have to wait until this storm dies down a bit.” The stranger explained.

“In the meantime, that means we can finish the story about Mika!” Inessa exclaimed happily.

“The story about Mika?” the stranger asked surprised. *What has Sveta been telling Inessa.*

“What about the story about Mika?” the stranger egged Inessa on.

“Well how cool she is. Like she is an Arcane and uses all magics and how she is going to defeat her brother because he is evil. And now she is going West to find the rebellion! That’s where we left off.” Inessa blurted.

An interesting stopping point. Did Sveta know I was going to be back? The stranger wondered as the pair finished repairing setting the door back in its hinges and screwing it in with help of Inessa.

As if on cue, the storyteller returned to the living room where the fire crackled.

“Perfect timing, now get that door closed and come get some of this cocoa to get warmed up you two.” The storyteller offered, carrying a large kettle on a silver tray with three cups.

“Great job on the door Ina, I could not have done it without you. Now let’s celebrate with some cocoa,” the stranger complimented to Inessa.

Inessa returned the stranger’s remark with her own, “All thanks to a great teacher.”

The two beckoned the storyteller’s call and poured themselves the warm drink. And then sat themselves by the fire to enjoy the heat of both. The stranger watched Inessa with a smile, as she drank the hot cocoa. The stranger was always happy to be with her, especially since she had a positive aura about her.

“So Sveta, Inessa tells me you have been telling her a story?” the stranger asked inquisitively.

The storyteller, unbundled the garb that covered her face to sip on the hot cocoa. Beneath the garb, was an older woman that was nearly sixty. She had piercing green eyes, short blonde hair, and a gentle look under her tired expression.

“I’ve been meaning to tell her the story for a while now. Have you heard it? The woman teased.

“Many times. But never enough. It truly is a good one,” the stranger replied coyishly.

“Wait you know the story too? Why hasn’t anyone ever told me before?” Inessa protested, looking at the stranger and storyteller.

“Like I told you before, you were not ready to hear the story. But now you are. Wouldn’t you agree?” Sveta directed at Inessa and then the stranger.

The stranger look at Inessa pondering the question. The more the stranger looked, the more the stranger was certain. *Yes, she is ready.*

The stranger gave the nod of approval.

“Well then, I guess I will continue where I left off. Shall we?” the storyteller asked rhetorically.

The storyteller began where she had left off. “The rebellion? Mika asked. Wh-“

“Actually, I am going to cut you off right there,” the stranger interrupted.

The storyteller looked up from Inessa with a puzzled look. Even Inessa looked surprised, looking at the stranger.

“Wait why?” Inessa protested.

“Do you mind if I tell the story from here?” the stranger asked eagerly.

Inessa shot a look back at the storyteller, to gauge her reaction. The storyteller smiled. “Only if you think you can tell it better than me.”

The stranger returned her smile. “Oh I know I can. But first I am going to have to tell Inessa about a part of the story that you definitely missed.”

“Oh?” the storyteller muttered quietly, surprised.

“Are you going to tell me about the period that she skipped over Mika’s training? I was so mad when she skipped those two years!” Inessa hollered anticipating the next words out of the stranger’s mouth.

The stranger chuckled. “Way more important, and way more interesting.”

“Really? What is it then?” Inessa asked.

“I’m going to tell you about Koyla.” The stranger smirked. By the look of the storyteller’s expression, the stranger could tell that she did not even know about Koyla.

“Who is Koyla?” Inessa asked leaning in to hear the stranger.

The storyteller also leaned in to hear the stranger’s response as well. She was as eager as Inessa to know.

The stranger smiled.

“The most important character of the story.”

CHAPTER 1: THE UNBURNED

SOMEONE WAS CALLING OUT TO HIM.
“Koa!”

The word sounded muffled in the distance, the voice hinted familiarity.

“Koyla!”

He heard the word again, this time more clearly. It was not a word, but a name... his name. It was not the name he had thought.

“Koyla!” The voice called out once more, he recognized whose voice it belonged.

The boy shot up, gasping for fresh air. Beads of sweat rolled off his brow. He looked around frantically looking for the voice from his nightmare. Instead, he met the eyes of his father who was clutching his shoulders to wake him. He was the real source of the name shouting, but not the voice heard in his slumber.

Koyla’s father had a panicked look on his face. Beyond his weary brown eyes, greying black hair, and burned face Koyla could see even more distress from the way he quivered than normal. His frail body was shaking. Koyla could feel the rapid tremors tingle resonate through his own body.

“Where is mom?” Koyla asked, looking around the cluttered space.

“She is gone Koyla. I don’t have time to explain anymore. Take what you can carry and fetch your brother.” His father replied harshly. “Meet under the crooked bridge when you catch the first glimpse of the moon. Do you understand?”

Koyla nodded. He could see the fading light of the sun setting in the east from the cracks of the toolshed that he called home for the past few weeks. Normally, his father would have gave him more warning, but he knew not to question him. Koyla had grown accustomed to uncertainty. Uncertainty was the only thing that kept them alive.

“Go.” His father beckoned him, and without a hesitation, Koyla ran to get his brother.

Koyla burst through the creaky wooden door that sealed the toolshed and immediately felt the frigid air through the holes of his tattered clothing. *Why does it have to be so cold around here all the time?*

He recollected himself and started to sprint down the hillslope the toolshed resided. In the distance, a manor with gold trimmed pillars, smooth beige crystal surfaces, and an obsidian roof glimmered in the remaining sunlight. The toolshed paled in comparison, but hid in the foliage one kilometer away from the manor.

The toolshed was long abandoned though; the Filth who tended the vast property likely had used it ages ago. Koyla had found it himself. He knew it would be a perfect place to hideaway as his father commanded. Koyla had directed that all of them stay in different places. It was safer that way.

Koyla cut through magnificent plots of land, all of which boasting equally as magnificent and unique manors. As he passed through the perfect gardens, he appreciated the delicate varieties of flowers and monument like statues. Koyla hated the elite mages of the north, but reveled in their luxurious tastes.

None of his neighbors knew of his presence. Koyla was a ghost, even more so than his father was. The mages that looked for them did not know Koyla’s name, but they all knew his father’s. A rarity, a mage that knows a

Filth's name, but true. His father's name was the reason why there was so much uncertainty. It was the reason why Koyla was fetching his brother.

Koyla knew exactly where he was supposed to be. He was five properties away, stowed away in the rafters of one of the manors. Koyla promised his little brother he would not tell their father where he was actually staying. His little brother, Yoni, had originally told his father he was staying in a remote stable five kilometers away three weeks prior when they had last met at the crooked bridge. Their father believed Yoni, but Koyla could tell he was lying. His brother held up his chin when he lied.

When they went their different ways, Koyla followed an unsuspecting Yoni and stopped him as he climbed through a window in one of the manors. Yoni pleaded his case. Koyla decided to inspect the spot before he promised his brother anything. It was a risky hideaway, but surprisingly isolated and safe. Apart from possibly being caught from the outside, the rafters were practically undetectable from the inside: A private loft that would be warm at night. Koyla promised his brother he would not tell their father, so long as he promised to never enter the manor. The ten year old and eight year old shook on it.

Normally, Koyla would have carefully traversed the distance, but the time and the circumstances called for speed. The moments before dusk were the quietest. In the suburban areas of the north, the mages stayed indoors and enjoyed feasts with guests. The marvelous gardens were ironic, because they were typically un-enjoyed by their owners since the weather near Castle Vania was frigid.

Koyla spotted the manor that housed his brother. It was more traditionally crafted than many of the neighboring structures. Massive sally ports, granite walls, gargyle carved statues and shrubbery growing out of the infrastructure. The entry point to the rafters was an uneven granite wall that was easy enough to climb, but thirty feet tall. A small space between the roof of the building and the stone gargoyles was the entrance to Yoni's home.

Koyla climbed the wall slowly. He was not as agile or surefooted as his reckless brother so he took his time. Eventually he made it to the top, and slipped into the two feet of space that someone his size or smaller could fit through. *I still don't know how Yoni found this place*, Koyla thought as he squeezed through. Finally, he had made it through and lightly dropped down to a flat surface on the rafters.

The area was a vast space, and Koyla quickly spotted a few of Yoni's belongings a dozen meters away, a worn out blanket and an empty twine bag. He looked around and his brother was nowhere in sight. *He knows he is supposed to be here at this time everyday. Where is he?*

Koyla looked for any clue that would help him find his brother. Even though it was dark in the rafters, there was a faint light from the edges of the roof. Through the faint light Koyla could see an outline of footsteps, ones that I had come across mud at some point. Koyla did not notice a pattern to the footsteps, other than from the entrance of the hideout, but noticed the footsteps led towards a closed off wall on the opposite side. It was heavily traveled which made no sense to Koyla so he followed them.

He walked until he hit the wall. *A dead end*, Koyla realized to his dismay. He turned to walk away and the wood creaked heavily under his step. *This is the only place that creaks*. He stepped back onto the wood and off. A sharp creak. Koyla dropped to his knees and brushed his hand across the wood. It was loose!

Koyla pulled at the wood plank and it lifted easily. He looked down and saw a crawlspace with faint linings of dirt. *Yoni what have you been up to* Koyla thought curiously.

He dropped down into the crawlspace and had to drag himself in the direction that it led. As Koyla crawled, he heard murmurs from the interior below grow louder. Although Koyla could not see the source of the noise, he could tell there were multiple people in the room below. After crawling ten more meters, Koyla finally was able to see down below through the spaces in the ceiling.

As he surveyed the bottom he saw a clad of mages dressed in fine clothes. There was about ten of them in all, an equal ratio of men and women. The mages were clearly couples because the men and women hung to each other at the elbow. All were above the age of sixty, as all their hair was white and their faces wrinkled. The men wore fine suits of neutral color with coattails lined with various crystals. They wore top hats so large that they served no purpose other than to stand out. The women, on the other hand, wore colorful dresses with furs from animals Koyla had never seen before. Sparkling jewelry hung from their ears, necks, and wrists; jewelry that was worth more than anything Koyla's family had ever owned.

They were mingling amongst themselves, stuffing their old, but fat faces with small bites of food more lavish than Koyla knew or recognized. The aroma from below made Koyla salivate. As he watched the mages, he envied them. *They don't have a care in the world. It's unfair.*

Koyla continued to watch them laugh and joke about things that he knew nothing about. They were all clustered together and moving relatively little. Strangely, Koyla saw something in the corner of his eye. Near the pack of mages was a massive table where the food they were eating was coming from. He saw movement and focused his attention to where he had noticed it, away from the mages.

Behind the table, he saw someone prowling. The person was sneaking provisions from the massive spread of meats, cheeses, fruits, and vegetables on the table. Koyla's heart sank when he realized who it was, *Yoni*.

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