

# True Magic

## Chapter 1: Raindrops

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It came as no surprise to Vya that the rather zealous temple of Temperance was the first to call for a mass sermon in twenty years. Despite the protests of priests from the other temples, the high priest of Temperance had insisted. Eventually, the priests had conceded and complied. She longed to instead go to the temple of Authenticity to help prepare for the usual evening sermon with the other acolytes. However, all of the members of the other temples in the city were expected to attend.

Glad to at least be out of the rain that had persisted for the last two days, Vya worked her way through the crowd crammed into the cavernous great hall of the temple of Temperance. She found an emptier area near the engraved columns around the perimeter.

"Good day to you," said the high priest of Temperance, inviting the congregants to stand. Most were already standing, but a few, mostly children, hastily sprang up from the blue-speckled white stone floor. The other high priests and priestesses were already standing behind him. "Thank you for coming. I know these summons are unusual" – many non-Temperant priests nodded, while others glanced at each other – "but there's something I'd like to address with as many of the city's most faithful as possible. However, it would be improper to do so without first giving the Ten their due. I hope you will join me now in prayer and reflection upon their beneficence."

The sermon dragged on, cycling through prayers and speeches. Vya wondered what was so important that it couldn't wait for the winter solstice sermon just weeks away.

"Thank you for those . . . generous words, Father Argust," said the high priest of Temperance after almost an hour as the high priest of Prosperity finished a ten-minute monologue on Prosperity's appreciation for timely interest repayments.

"Of course, Father Atrus." The high priest of Prosperity bowed and resumed his seat.

The high priest of Temperance nodded in return. "And now for why I called this sermon." The low whispers that had permeated the high priest of Prosperity's monologue stopped. "Since the gods fashioned humanity, we have prayed for guidance, security. Our faith has been rewarded. By their grace, Atla is the greatest kingdom on the continent. The most faithful among us" – the high priest nodded at the priests around the hall – "have been granted holy magics to employ in their service. We strive to remain worthy.

"Alongside these divine blessings, there is pathomancy, bound in humanity's nature and shortcomings. We have long toiled to understand its origins. The most substantiated theory suggests someone retained divine blessings against the will of the gods, and that they were twisted over the centuries by human nature, becoming modern magic."

Vya frowned. Many traditionalists believed this, particularly Temperance's worshipers. But Truth's priests had never espoused it, and Authenticity's held pathomancy to be expressive of people's true nature.

"Mustn't it then be viewed as sinful, heretical, by the Ten? To Temperance, indulgent? To Justice, immoral? To Truth, its apparent innateness to human nature a vicious lie?

"But people only relinquish their vices with great reluctance. Therefore, I believe it best to acclimatise the populace to only using what is permitted by the gods. As the first step towards appropriate restraint and deference, pathomancy will now be prohibited within Temple Park. Any who transgress within this bastion of the gods will be punished."

Many congregants nodded fervently. Some murmured, "About time," or, "Serves them right!" One man shouted, "Strip the heretics of their stolen magic! Glory to the gods!" Vya kept her face impassive. Surely, he wasn't serious?

"Now, now, settle down," said the high priest, silencing the hall. "Though misguided, sorcerers are still our family. We must be gentle, patient. Guide them back into the arms of the gods. They will welcome all who repent. Let us have a moment of silence, and pray for the lost among us."

Vya bowed her head and closed her eyes, but in contemplation, not prayer. It was a good thing Riven didn't attend sermons—

"May the blessings of the Ten be upon you all," said the high priest, ending the sermon.

"The blessings of the Ten be upon you," the congregation chanted back. People began rising from the floor, someone stretching here, someone rubbing their numb backside there. Children chatted amongst themselves while their parents bowed to the statue of Temperance looming over the high priests, who had each been swarmed by fellow priests. The high priest of Temperance strode towards a door on the side of the hall, several Temperant priests in tow. Vya stood, stretched, and shuffled with the crowd through the great hall and out between the columns of the temple's front wings. Rainwater trickled down the writing engraved on the columns.

*At least Riven doesn't have to worry about this at home, either.* Vya pulled her cloak hood on. *It'd only make her feel worse.*

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As Riven looked up, a raindrop rushed at her forehead, but darted away at the last instant. The next also swerved to dodge her, and the next, each taunting Riven. She sighed. It seemed she was always miserable in time for rain. Her aggressive footfalls left a trail of baby puddles as she trudged along the river At. Its murmurs harmonised with the rain's pitter-pattering, gradually washing away Riven's frustration, leaving behind only sad numbness. She looked at her reflection in a puddle: short brown hair – with uncontained hydromancy, bathing was torturous – round face, sad, dejected eyes. Not her natural green, but hydromancy's deep, ugly blue, betraying her misery. Why couldn't they flash happy yellow for once in her life? Or angry, flaming red! She was angry right now, wasn't she? But apparently not enough. Probably too upset like always. Kicking the puddle, she continued walking.

A noise carried over the rain. Boys talking boisterously, laughing. Riven focused on the sounds of the water around her, but step by step, the boys drowned them out. *Fuck, it's those three. They think they're so great, flaunting – bullying with their aeromancy. Shitty little punks.*

Riven turned as their leader approached her, running a hand through messy silver hair. "Moping about by the river again?" he said with a punch-able smirk. Not that she'd ever summoned the courage to punch him, though. They'd always pushed her buttons, stabbed at her insecurities, tormented her while the adults ignored it. She hadn't been happy before meeting them, but they had only deepened the well of her pain. Why couldn't they just leave her alone?

Riven looked him in his ice-blue eyes. "What do you want, Forst?"

"Don't be rude," said the burly one on his right, a repulsive grin on his face. "We just want to talk."

*Bullshit you do, you witless goon.*

"Just like in class, Teh? Need to pick on my hair again?"

"Hardly," said the boy on Forst's left, pushing glasses back up his nose to his cold, grey eyes. Balange was a runt compared to Teh, but proportionately cleverer. "It speaks for itself. So short, unladylike. Ugly. I was just asking Forst if a boy had stolen your moping grounds."

"Not that we'd care," said Forst. "We'd shove him in the At and keep looking for you."

Riven clenched her hands into fists – probably uselessly, though. "Why don't you jump in the river instead, see how you assholes like it?!"

Forst chuckled. That was never a good sign. "Gods, no. We'd catch a cold." He stepped up to Riven, his nose level with her forehead. When she refused to back away, he punched her stomach.

Riven doubled over – *Fuck, that hurts!* – then glared at Forst. Thankfully the rain was soothing . . . the rain . . .

*Oh no . . .*

"I think we'll make you instead. You can't exactly fight back now, can you?"

*Shit!*

"I see your rage."

*Stop.*

"The angrier you get, the faster your sadness evaporates—"

"Stop."

"—robbing you of the one thing you can actually do—"

"Don't . . ."

"—splash us with puddles."

"Fuck you!" Riven swung her arm back, but Forst's eyes flashed red and light-green, and his fist smashed into her face. She stumbled back and landed in the mud. Her cheek stung as she gazed up at the clouds. *Great, now my cloak's filthy and mud's running down my face. . . but I'm facing up? And it's warm?*

"Like my new magic?" Forst asked. "I think ash suits a superior magician who actually deserves their powers." He knelt on her chest and punched Riven's face, one side squelching into the mud, the other soiled by wet ash. "But you? You're useless" – Punch – "unloved" – Punch – "unwanted" – Punch – "unnecessary."

*At least I'm not a cruel brat, undeserving of happiness, unworthy of power!* Riven thought. *Everything gets handed to you! It's not fair. "IT'S NOT FAIR!"*

As Forst punched her again, Riven lashed out blindly. She missed, but Forst fell back, wailing in pain. Rolling onto one side, she looked over at him. Forst was clutching a bright red burn on his face. She stared in shock, but looked down as her hand prickled with heat. It was on fire. Her eyes widened and the flames vanished, a crackling sting replacing them. "Ouch!" she cried, shaking her hand. She examined her reflection in a puddle forming beside her. Her eyes were glowing cyan. Fire? Lightning? She could use magic besides hydromancy? *FUCK YEAH!*

Riven smiled, water trickling down her face. Tears? Of happiness? Impossible. She was never happy, certainly not this happy. *But why does the wind feel the need to pelt rain at me right now? Wait . . . wind?* She focused on the puddle again. Her eyes were now glowing bright yellow. Aeromancy too? Could today get any better?

"Three elements in a row?" said Balange. "Impossible!"

Riven stood, refraining from drying her face – she wanted to feel the physical proof that she'd actually unlocked new magic. Balange and Teh stepped back, while Forst lay in the mud, gaping stupidly at her. She shrugged and walked past them. *Wait 'til Vya hears about this!*

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Walking home, Vya envied Riven's ability to ward off rain entirely, but immediately reprimanded herself for thinking something like that. However, seeing several groups of Temperant guards patrolling the streets made her glad that Riven was safe at home. When she arrived, she darted through the door, then removed her cloak, shaking the rain off. "Hey, I'm back."

Her mother Alda popped her head of greying hair out of the kitchen. "Hello, dear. I was wondering how long you two would be. Dinner will—"

"Mum, it's just me." Vya walked over to her mother, kissing her cheek. "Riven never attends sermons."

"I know, but she said she was going for a walk and might find you after 'that awful, boring sermon,' as she put it." Vya's face fell as she followed Alda into the kitchen. Her mother returned to stirring a pot of stew suspended over the fire. "She didn't find you?"

"No, she's gone off on her own. Again. Couldn't have picked a worse time, either."

Alda looked back at her. "Why? What's wrong, dear?"

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Riven followed the southern road, feeling light despite her muddy cloak weighing her down – although, with her hydromancy dormant for the moment, she was glad of its protection. Ahead, she could make out Atla's southern gate, inching closer, with a small queue before it. That morning, she'd passed short, portly Herbert and tall, balding Lawrence on her way out of the city. She hoped they were still there. Herbert always acted goofy whenever she needed cheering up.

Soon, Riven joined the queue behind a man levitating a metal rain-shield above himself and a woman, probably his wife. She stood back from the water trickling off the rain-shield's edge and peered past him. Herbert and Lawrence were sheltering under the arch of the gate. She smiled and waved, drawing Herbert's attention. He went stiff, his eyes widening for a second. He tapped Lawrence, whispering to him. Lawrence looked over at Riven with concern. He glanced at Herbert, then at a third man – no, two men – that Riven now realised were talking to a merchant at the front of the queue. They weren't wearing Atla's scarlet and orichalcite green livery, but the blue-speckled white of guards of Temperance.

Riven froze, then ducked back behind the couple, who advanced as the guards let the merchant pass. She pulled her hood lower and lifted a hand to her eyes. Only rainy sunlight illuminated it, which offered some reassurance.

"Next."

A hunter followed the merchant, and the couple stepped forward. Riven dropped her hand and glanced at them, then at Herbert and Lawrence, who remained stiff and silent, and then at the temple guards. Both wore swords in scabbards at their hips, chain mail under their tunics, and helmets with slits for their eyes, shrouding them in darkness. The one on the right held an open scroll in both hands, two more under one armpit. His partner crossed his arms.

"Afternoon, gentlemen," said the man in front of her. "Lovely weath—"

"Names, villages and business in Atla," said the guard on the left. "And do get rid of that offensive scrap."

"Patry and Mads, from Aent on the coast. And . . . what, this?" Patry glanced up at the rain-shield. "It's raining."

"Not our problem, but that offence against Temperance is. Get rid of it."

Patry looked past the guard at Herbert, who was staring at his feet, and then at Lawrence, who was studying a roadside tree. "Come on, it's not illegal to stay dry, is it?"

"Not yet," Herbert said, his words almost drowned out by the rain.

"Can't you just let us in?" asked Mads, who held onto Patry's arm. "It's not hurting anyone. We don't want to catch a cold."

"Not. Our. Problem." The guard uncrossed his arms and rested a hand on the pommel of his sword. "Get rid of it, or you can't enter."

Lawrence hurried forward in alarm, inserting himself between the two men. "Sir, there's no need for violence. He *is* allowed to use magic in the city."

"Woah woah woah, okay, it's going." As Patry reshaped the cover into a ball, the guard gripped his scabbard and sword, ready to draw it. Patry let the ball drop and raised his hands. Mads clung to his elbow.

The guard glared at Patry, then inspected the metal. Releasing his sword, he kicked the ball into a bush and crossed his arms again. "So, Patry, Mads, Aent village?"

"Y-yes. Visiting the blacksmith."

The other guard examined his scroll, then shook his head. "They're okay."

"Fine," said the first guard. "Go."

Patry nodded, and he and Mads hurried through the gate.

"Next," said the guard, glaring at Riven. "Name, village, business in Atla."

Riven stepped hesitantly forward. "R-Riven Leve. I live in Atla . . ."

"Your cloak?"

"Come on, cut her some slack," said Lawrence. "She left the city this morning to go for a walk. We were there. She's harmless."

"Your cloak?" the guard repeated.

"I tripped on a tree root near the river," Riven replied.

The guard stared into her eyes for a moment – Riven prayed they were green – before asking, "The list?"

His partner shook his head.

Riven, Herbert and Lawrence sighed in relief. Riven hadn't even realised she'd been holding her breath.

"Fine. Go," said the guard as a farmer approached.

"Y-yes sir." Riven passed the temple guards, giving Lawrence and Herbert a grateful smile. They smiled back and retreated back under cover as the temple guard questioned the farmer.

Riven proceeded through the gate and down the southern road for a short way, the weight of the rain reassuring her. Then she ducked into an alley between a tavern and a boarded-up stable. Making sure no one else was around, she gripped a window ledge and hauled herself onto the stable's roof, using cracks and crevices as footholds. Shifting back from the edge, she considered the neighbouring roofs. That warehouse was close enough, but . . .

Riven closed her eyes and thought back to the fight. She smiled, remembering the flames crackling, the sharp zap, her glowing eyes . . .

Gusts of wind challenged the rain, driving it back. Riven considered for a moment how to gather the wind to propel herself over to the warehouse. Several months ago, she'd propelled herself from the bottom of the ocean canal after Teh had shoved her off the canal bridge. It had felt like a wave engulfing her, pushing her up. Riven focused on that sensation, imagined the wind pushing on her back. Its force increased, and her cloak flapped forward. She opened her eyes, braced herself, then sprinted and leapt from the roof.

Riven laughed as she flew, but her smile evaporated as she overshot, landing on the roof's downward-sloping far edge. "Nope, nope, too fast!" Riven released her magic, but her feet had already slid off the last fraction of roof. Panicking, she tried to change the wind's direction. It pushed her down into a tree. The branch she collided with snapped, and she fell to the ground.

"Ouch," Riven groaned, picking herself up. *Maybe I should leave the aeromancy for home.* She scanned the alley and, satisfied she was still alone, climbed back onto the roof. She leapt from the edge to the next roof, this time catching the peak without slipping. Much better. She crouch-walked over the peak, and then started running again.

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Vya leant against the doorframe. Riven couldn't stop her magic. What if she had left the city again and a temple guard at the gate decided she was being disrespectful? Vya crossed over to the pot and explained to her mother what the high priest had decreed.

"I'm sure you're worrying about nothing," Alda said. "You're always berating her about sneaking about on the rooftops. Up there, no one will notice her. And it's not like the temples have seized gate-watching duty."

Vya watched Alda stir the stew for a moment, then glanced up at her nervously. "You sure?"

"Quite." Her mother smiled reassuringly. "Now, fetch the bowls please, dear. We can hardly eat this straight off the table, can we."

Vya smiled and nodded, took a deep breath, and walked around the dining room table to the cabinet. She'd just picked up the bowls when she felt the sharp kiss of cold air and heard a squelch from the front door. She turned to find Riven extracting herself from her sodden, muddy cloak. "Where on Earth have you been?" she shouted, whacking Riven over the head several times with one of the bowls. "I thought you were staying home."

“Ow! Ow! Ow! Cut it out.” Riven threw her arms up to block the wooden dish. “I just went for a walk.”

“And came back covered in mud, leaves and bruises.”

“That wasn’t my fault.” Riven picked up her cloak. “Okay, the leaves were, I may have fell in a tree—”

“Because you keep climbing on roofs!” said Vya, putting the bowl back with the rest and planting her hand on her hip.

“Well, yeah, but it’s more I don’t have a solid grip on aeromancy yet,” replied Riven, smiling sheepishly. “The mud and bruises are Forst’s fault, not mine.”

Vya raised an eyebrow. “Forst . . . air magic? Riven, you only have water magic.”

Riven grinned. “Had. You’ll never believe what happened.”

Vya stared at her for a moment. “I think we’ve both got some news to share, and you’re not going to like mine.”