



# The Magic Flute

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## *Foreword*

# **Legacy of the DiKena**

*It began in fire to scar memory and curse the soul with flame born of the firewind and of the storm. Thriving on chaos and pain, it swept the land, filling every corner and every valley and every lost mountain spire with light to remake the world. It began in a dream and half-remembered nightmare, spilling forth like liquid light as thick as molten stone, and it seeped through the cracks between fantasy and magic.*

They called themselves the DiKena, and they were the source through which chaos flowed. The DiKena were first among all things, and they could shape the world and all things in it to their thoughts and imagination. They created spires of crystal and castles in the sky, and they created monuments of stone to rival mountains and oceans of green wood and bright sky.

They could give form to their very thoughts, their passions and desires, creating sculptures and life of intricate beauty and power. Creatures were created, companions, servants, and wild things drawn from the hidden corners of the soul. Shards and fragments of chaos slipped from the DiKena in the form of their anger and hidden rage.

The DiKena made war against their creations of chaos and destruction. Every confrontation would end only in pain and blood, and from these fresh wounds in the hearts and minds of the DiKena, more monstrosities would grow. To preserve their world and end the corruption of the land would have required them to bind their thoughts and passions in ways that they could not understand.

The storm grew and chaos reigned. That was when the dragons appeared. Guardians of the earth and sky, they sought only to protect the DiKena and sate the wild things of their blood lust. Whether they had been born out of the need for help or been created long before and remained elsewhere until needed was something the DiKena never learned.

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The things were stopped. Creatures and strange monstrosities slipped back into the shadows from which they had been born. The world had been cleansed with fire and blood, but the DiKena could no longer touch the soul of the land.

Dripping with the afterimages and echoes of fire and chaos, the surviving DiKena splintered as they tried to regain their lost magic. They went into the forests and attempted to regain what they had once given to the trees. They explored the depths of the mountains while others swam in the oceans and still others attempted to claim the sky. The dragons could only watch as the various DiKena grew more and more distant, and they could do nothing to prevent the DiKena from changing.

DiKena, returning from the labyrinths beneath the mountains, spoke of wars fought with the surviving creatures of chaos. These DiKena called themselves the Montmorin. Learning from the wood and the forest, some DiKena spoke of becoming the Dryn. Others had learned to call themselves the Kianan.

It was the Kianan who first grew angry with the dragons for they could not help the Kianan regain their lost power. The dragons refused to sacrifice themselves in the hope that the DiKena would be reborn. They departed from the cities of the Kianan and made their new homes in the heights of the mountains where not even the Montmorin could reach.

From their perch in the mountains and from the sky far overhead, the dragons continued to watch over and protect the Kianan, Montmorin, and the Dryn from the folly of their forefathers. They watched over the bitter and disenchanting children of the DiKena. They watched and they waited.

## Chapter One

# A Scream in the Storm

*The mountains stood over a foot tall on a table that took up most of the space in the small room. Surrounding the carefully sculptured and designed mountains was a representation of the forest Morningsglory and within the forest to the east was the Dryn city of Greenhaven. Beyond the forest and the city where the Saffron river left the trees behind, the town of Edgewood acted as the mediator between the world of the Kianan and that of the Dryn. To the north of the forest and the mountains was the village of Windvale, and to the west of the mountains was the castle of Highwall. Far to the south and beyond the scope of the map was the Ivory Tower where the Kianan king held court.*

Tahrl looked back over the model to the Redstained mountains and the little wooden signs that recorded the paths of the troglodytes. More signs stuck into the model indicated where his soldiers had blocked the troglodytes' expansion. The small posts told of where there had been battles with the troglodytes, where there had been victories, and where there had been defeats. The forces that were represented on the signs were a mixture of Kianan soldiers, Dryn, dragons, and even some of the magician Balthazar's graths.

The wind roared but in defiance of what Tahrl did not know. He looked up from the table at the flickering of the lamps and about the small stone room. A storm raged outside of the walls of the castle, and Tahrl could feel the wind and the rain even from the map room deep inside of Highwall. The crack and crash of thunder seemed to shake the room, and he put his hands against the edge of the table.

He let go of the table, lifting his hands as if he could not trust them in the storm, and smiled weakly to himself as if he did not expect his fingers to understand the joke. He looked back to the table and picked up a sign, which he intended to add to the model. The light from the lamps flickered, casting strange shadows over the mountains, and a cold damp wind seemed to batter around him.

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Turning away from the table, he saw how the light flickered and played about the large stone cavern, yielding soft shadows and dark designs that had not been formed in less than a thousand years. He leaned against the table as the crash of thunder echoed and reechoed about the chamber. He shook his head and then looked about the small room that was home to the map of the Redstained mountains.

The lamp flames flickered and shook as if they were being beaten about by a strong wind. The quickly changing patterns of shadow and light had made the room look like a cathedral. He turned back to the table and let his gaze wander over the mountains. The cathedrals were the ancient dwellings of the DiKena. To step into the ruins of a cathedral was to step into a hall of stone and crystal that had been shaped into spires and arches and vaulted ceilings beyond description. The one time that he had been inside a cathedral, Tahrl had felt his skin tingle. He had stepped delicately across the floor with the echoes of his footfalls thundering all around him, and he had spoken with his Montmorin guide in only hushed whispers.

He heard a shout and saw flashes of amber light flicker through the cathedral. The wind rushed over the walls of the castle. He blinked his eyes and glanced quickly about the map room. The light of a magic fire burned around several white robed figures as they struggled against the darkness that surrounded them. The model of the Redstained mountains rested on the table before him. Tahrl felt the clay of the model under his fingers as he touched the mountains with one hand. In the wind, there were traces of music echoing about the chamber. The Redstained mountains were not far to the east of Highwall castle, and the dragons had never mentioned a cathedral there. It would not matter if there had been one because the troglodytes would have destroyed it. The closest cathedral that he knew of was part of the Earlinstien mountains far to the north.

They were running through flickering red light, and all but one of them wore white robes. He held something long and slender that glared with silver light. Tahrl stood still to catch his breath and stretched his arms out toward the sides of the hallway. He did not remember leaving the map room. He was running with the others, following the music and the silver light. The tunnel veered crazily around him, and things of blood red and black light tried to grab him as he ran past.

Someone cried out in surprise and fear. He stopped and shook

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his head wildly from side to side. It was someone in the hallway and not someone in the cathedral. A woman in servant's colors stood before him with a bucket lying on its side at her feet and water slowly spreading over the floor. He was standing in the hallway with a serving woman and not in a cathedral with people wearing white robes. The woman held her hands over her mouth and was backed against the wall of the hallway. He brought his hands to the sides of his head and thought that he should know this woman's name.

The wind roared down the hallway, filling it with harsh music. Tahrl wrapped his arms across his chest against the cold while the woman seemed not to notice it. She was in a hallway of the castle and not with the people running through the cathedral. Tahrl looked behind them. They were being followed by bone thin figures that were too tall and had dark red skin. His heart began to beat faster even before he turned and ran with the white robes.

They ran through vaulted corridors of the cathedral and down a flight of stairs in the castle. He stopped, feeling the air press all around him and stick to his skin, and all around him were voices, shouts and laughter, and the crash and call of arms. The large practice room was crowded with Dryn, sparing, laughing, watching, betting on who would win. He spotted Armada with a staff in her hands facing down Chrystal. Their staffs cracked together. Chrystal laughed, and the others spoke too rapidly for him to follow.

The man with the rod of silver light had stopped running. He stood in a hall that was smaller than most in the cathedral but still much larger than the practice room. Armada shouted a wordless challenge. Tahrl could see the strange figures by the silver light. They were tall and slender with unnaturally broad shoulders and elongated faces with many sharp fangs. The man who did not wear a white robe stood against these things and raised the silver rod to his lips.

Wood cracked as if it wanted to break. Chrystal's arms shook as her staff blocked the attack. She was no longer laughing, but the smile had not left her face. Armada pressed forward against the much taller Dryn. Her stance was determined. She forced their staffs to the side and kicked. Chrystal would not back away, and her eyes glowed with a gleeful fire. The other Dryn moved out of the way as Armada and Chrystal stalked around the practice floor.

The creatures swarmed around him like smoke. Tahrl shook his body and gripped his hands into fists at his sides. It was the man

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in the cathedral who stood against the red darkness. Beyond the walls of the castle, Tahrl could hear the storm over the shouts of the Dryn. The wind howled as if it wanted to take the walls apart stone by stone. The thunder hammered as if it wanted to drive the castle into the ground.

Tahrl's vision blurred, and Armada moved so fast that he could not follow her attacks. The blows of the staffs happened so often they seemed to be almost one continuous sound. The shadows swirled around him and blinded his eyes. They swept around, and long jagged fingers the color of burnt wood pierced his chest. Tahrl brought his arms up to cover his heart, and the creatures ripped it out.

Armada screamed. It was a scream of despair; the cry of the condemned thrown into the fire or lowered feet first into the heart of a volcano. The scream of an animal or thing that can feel the claws of a predator sink into its flank, and the beast knows that it is going to die. Her scream was like something that knew the sun would never rise again and was venting all of its anger and all of its feelings of helpless futility with the one sound.

Tahrl wiped the tears from his eyes and rubbed at his face with his hands. He realized that he was lying against the floor of the practice room and had curled himself into half a ball around his arms. The room was too small; there had been a much larger chamber that had been carved from stone. The room felt hollow as if it were not all there, and somewhere there had been someone, people, something, in caverns carved, formed, out of the living stone.

The floor was cold, and he felt as if there was something wrong with that, as if the practice room should be heated from underneath. He had somehow managed to move from his side, and it seemed that people were shouting a long way off in the distance. There was no one else in the practice room, and there should have been people practicing, moving about, and laughing. Many a test of skill had been settled on the practice floor between the Dryn and the Kianan soldiers, and someone had once told him that the soldiers learned much more about fighting through informal grudge matches on the practice floor than they ever did at training sessions.

Somewhere, there were people making quite a racket from the sound of it, but they seemed to be far away. As he listened to the sound and tried to concentrate on it, the voices seemed to get louder and much closer. His knees shook as he brought them between

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himself and the floor, and he managed to rise slowly and unevenly to his feet.

The practice room was crowded with people. It wasn't empty; the practice room had never been empty. Most of the Dryn were shouting and moving about, and one of them was screaming what sounded hysterically with anger. Tahrl looked toward the middle of the practice floor where many of the Dryn were swarming about as if they were fighting against something or trying to hold something down. His gaze drifted away from the mass of people and settled upon two wooden staffs. The cuts were raw and uneven where the first staff had been broken violently in two, and the second staff was a scattered mass of splinters and sharp edges, as if it had exploded in someone's hands.

The mass of Dryn surged to the side, and several of them were thrown away from the pile. At the heart of the swarm, Tahrl could see Armada with a Dryn hanging onto each arm. She looked tiny compared to the Dryn that surrounded her. Her hands were clenched into fists, and there was a trace of red liquid between her fingers as if they had been badly cut. Armada let loose a cry that began as a gurgle and a growl and grew as she tried to swing her arms about and dislodge the other's grip.

Tahrl tried to call out her name. He could barely find any breath to use, and his throat felt utterly dry. His mouth opened and closed, but nothing more than a whisper escaped from between his lips.

Armada shouted words in the Dryn language that he could neither follow nor understand. Since he had taken charge of Highwall and the Dryn had arrived, he had put some effort into learning their language, but he could not keep up with the shouting going on around him. Armada wanted to be let go; that was clear enough. Tahrl did not need to translate the proper definitions of the words in-order to understand that. Armada wanted to be let go; she wanted to be let free.

Armada shouted something about death. No, it wasn't death. Tahrl realized she was saying that someone was dead, but he couldn't understand what she meant. Several of the Dryn stood back from the brawl, and they were spaced around the group, forming a circle. They would be the wizards among the Dryn who had agreed to teach the Kianan soldiers at Highwall. Tahrl thought that it would take all of them to stand against Armada. She might be an incredible fighter, but she was still a wizard at heart. Chrystal who

had little to none of a wizard's training was in the thick of the brawl and still clung to Armada's arm. Chrystal and Armada liked to joke that she could take Armada two falls out of three. They also liked to joke that it was because Chrystal was the fighter and Armada was the wizard that they got along so intimately.

Tahrl shook his head and tried to stop his mind from wandering. Next to her mother, Armada was the most powerful wizard in all of Greenhaven. She had learned from the best. Alexander had lived with the Dryn since long before he had become a traveling minstrel and long before he had taken the name of Alexander. The Dryn all knew him as Delan, and he hated the magicians who now taught magic and had made certain that his daughter had received a proper wizard's training.

Armada shouted that he was dead. It didn't make sense. She had not used a name that Tahrl had been able to understand. He was trying to comprehend what was happening; it was like he didn't want to understand who she claimed was dead. He felt like he should be doing something to help and not just standing beside the practice floor watching Armada scream. She had used an uncommon word of description; most Dryn never knew who their fathers were.

"No!" Tahrl shouted, holding his arms against his sides as if he were trying to squeeze every last trace of air from his lungs, dragging the word out, filling the room with the sound.

Everyone in the practice room grew quiet, and there were now more people on the practice floor than only the Dryn. There were some of his soldiers and household servants and people who had come because they had heard the commotion on the practice floor. Armada stood still with her fists upraised, and a Dryn held fast to each arm. A drop of blood fell from her left hand and splattered against the floor. Nobody in the room moved, and they were all looking at him. For a giddy moment, Tahrl wondered what language he had used.

"He," Tahrl tried to say, and the word echoed as if the room was hollow or as if the monsters really had ripped out his heart. "He can't be! He can't be deh-"

"Feel it!" Armada said and jerked her arm free of Chrystal's unresisting grasp. "Don't deny what you know to be true!"

"It doesn't make sense." He took a step toward her and realized that her face was streaked with tears. "How could Alex- How could we feel that?"

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“You know nothing.”

Armada jumped from the circle, crossing the floor, and ran for a door. Tahrl moved toward her; shoulder colliding with chest, and they fell. Armada clawed at him, trying to push him away. Chrystal reached them and pinned Armada’s shoulders to the ground.

“Let go! Let go! Torch you! Let go!”

“Where are you going to go?” When there was no answer to his question, he slapped her across the face with his free hand. Armada stopped struggling beneath them and focused her eyes on him. “You don’t know, do you? You want out of here and to run. Where?”

Armada kept her eyes on him, and her look was one of smoldering anger. She didn’t struggle against them while her breathing became steady and deep.

“None of that,” Chrystal said and banged Armada’s shoulders against the floor.

Armada made a sound of surprise and annoyance as her breath rushed from her lungs. She appeared almost calm with tears still falling from her eyes as she tried to glance about the practice room.

“We both felt it,” she said to him. “Everyone here felt Delan die.”

“Don’t start-”

“Imagine Teresa!” she shouted over his words. Tahrl slowly uncoiled his arm from around her and seated himself next to her as what she meant began to sink in. “She has known him longer and better than anyone can understand. What is her reaction?”

Chrystal helped Armada lean forward and held her hands lightly against Armada’s shoulders to support her.

“We must leave for Greenhaven,” Chrystal said, looking directly at him.

Tahrl didn’t have to turn his head to know that the Dryn around them were nodding in agreement. His shoulders hiccuped, and he made a sound that could have been a cough, a laugh, or a cry.

“Have you forgotten that there is a storm raging out there?” His arm swung around and pointed at one of the walls. “You would kill the horses! No one is going out there!”

“We could,” Chrystal said, and Armada nodded her head in agreement.

“Wait for the storm to pass.” His gaze moved quickly back and forth between Chrystal and Armada.

“Why?”

“Because.” The room was quiet, and somewhere off in the dis-

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tance he could hear the crash of thunder. His nose began to tingle, and he heard thunder echo in the hollow space where his heart had been. "Because I want to go with you." Chrystal rolled her eyes, but he tried to concentrate on Armada. "You felt- what did you feel? Did you know- did you feel- did you see where he was? Do you know what he was fighting?" He closed his eyes and felt a chill play along his back. "Like monsters out of a nightmare!"

He felt the touch of fingers against his face and opened his eyes to see that Armada had reached a hand out to him. She seemed to notice something on his face where her touch had been and pulled her arm back to look at the cuts and the blood.

"My hands," she whispered.

"They must have been hurt when your staff shattered." Chrystal moved her hand behind one of Armada's own and moved it to where she could see the cuts better. She looked to the others standing around them. "Someone get bandages and something to clean the wounds."

"I see splinters," Armada said, looking intently at the hand. "It exploded, you say?"

"Burst would be a better word for it. I hadn't realized you had been hurt."

"Wait!" Tahrl almost shouted, and they both looked at him. "Are you going to wait?"

"You know where he died?" Armada asked.

"I don't know if he died. It was a cathedral. The cathedral at Earlinstien."

"And monsters?"

Tahrl nodded his head unsteadily.

"Troglodytes, graths, trolls have all been called monsters."

"These were different. These were monsters. I didn't see enough to know how they hurt Alex."

"You always were very good at denying things," Armada said, looking away from him.

"What's that supposed to mean!"

"Nothing."

Iola walked over to them and sat across from Tahrl, holding a bowl and some bandages. Armada held out her hands as the other Dryn began to sponge the cuts with a damp cloth.

"Three days," Armada said. "I'll delay no longer."

"If only the wind has lost some of its fury, we'll take the horses."

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Armada nodded her head, and then they both turned their attention to Iola who held a small knife with one hand. Chrystal sat braced behind Armada so that she could bring her arms forward to hold Armada's wrist and prevent the hand from flinching.



*Tahrl filled his cup with the warm mead and returned the pitcher to its tray next to the fire. As he turned away from the fire that burned in its pit, he took a sip of the drink and walked across the room. He ignored the cushions that were placed around the fire-pit and the two tables with their scattered piles of papers, documents, and books. Most of one wall of the room was taken up by a bookshelf that was filled with books resting haphazardly against each other. He stopped a few paces before the single window of the room and took another sip of the drink. He listened to the wind howl as it ran past the window, causing the overlapping wooden plates to bang together, trying to break free. The door to the room groaned as it was opened, as if calling in sympathy to the storm beyond. He did not turn from the window as he listened to someone enter the room and close the door. It was Hector who politely coughed once and then waited for him to look in his direction.*

“Are you crazy?”

Tahrl resisted the urge to chuckle and continued to watch the man.

“The storm has gotten worse.” Hector swept an arm toward the window. “It won't be safe to ride in three days.”

“Chrystal and Armada are going on foot if they have to no matter what the storm thinks,” Tahrl said. “Something happened, Hector. Something scared me and convinced the others that we need to reach Greenhaven.”

“They're not all going, are they?”

“I hope not.” This time he did chuckle. “I think Armada and I are the only ones who really felt it.”

“Felt it; felt what? I couldn't follow the discussion. They always talk to me in Kianan.”

“What are you talking about?”

“When I got to the practice room, you were all speaking Dryn.”

If it were possible, Tahrl would have choked on the air in his lungs. He staggered back to the fire-pit and slumped into one of

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the cushions. The half-empty cup almost slipping from between his fingers.

“I was speaking Dryn? I hadn’t noticed. I have always had trouble with the language. It’s not like Kianan or Montmorin. It’s not a written language; it’s had lots of time to differ from DiKena.”

“Tahrl! What’s wrong? What did you feel?”

“I felt.” Tahrl put both hands around the cup and held it before his chin. “I felt.” He stared at the cup through half-closed eyes and remembered vaulted chambers cast in shadow and flickering light reflecting off of red bones. “Something terrible has happened. To Alex. I’ve never seen her react like that. It was like she snapped; lost control.”

“You mean Armada? Some of the Dryn have mentioned, and I remember Juliana telling me a couple stories in particular about how protective they are of their children.”

“What?”

“You know. There is nothing quite as dangerous as a Dryn whose daughter is in danger. You so much as raise the back of your hand toward a girl, and her mother, any Dryn for that matter, will break both your arms and then worry about what was going on.”

“I know all of that.”

“Maybe that’s how Armada was acting. As if her daughter was in danger.”

“I don’t think we ever have to worry about that.” He looked away from Hector, returning his gaze to the fire, and drank what was left in his cup.

“Well, you said she believes Alexander is in danger. And he is her father.”

Tahrl glanced sideways up at him.

“That is not common knowledge.”

“I’m not common. I think it was Juliana who told me.”

“You get along well with Juliana then?”

This time it was Hector’s turn to glance away and develop a fascination for the play of the fire.

“Well, they do have some beliefs that seem a bit odd. But, I bet I must spend more time interacting with the troops than you do. I mean,” he continued hurriedly, “you’re in charge here, run the defense, and juggle the big picture, but someone has to handle the day to day administration of this place.”

“Which reminds me. I’m surprised you haven’t put more effort

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into trying to stop me from going to Greenhaven. As I recall when you walked in here, you asked after my sanity.”

“Oh, that. If you feel you need to go, you should. Don’t look shocked; something is wrong. You and Armada weren’t the only ones to feel something.”

“What do you mean?” Tahrl gripped the cup hard enough he was surprised that he did not crush it.

“You know that because of the heavy storm we’ve kept someone near the Wraiths- sorry. Dragons. In case something happened to the shelter? Well, I ran into one of the men earlier. He was really shaken up. Apparently, the dragons had been acting weird all morning, and suddenly they threw back their heads and roared. All three of them.”

Tahrl swallowed once and could feel his heart start to beat faster.

“I tried to find out when exactly,” Hector said. “It was the same time Armada screamed.”



*A series of double doors and small chambers had been constructed as a link between the rooms for the dragons and the rest of High-wall. Tahrl pushed through the last door into a chamber that was open to the storm. The floor was slick with rain, and the wind tried to lift him off his feet. He managed to get the door closed and leaned against it as he looked about the large chamber. Part of the ceiling and most of one wall had been removed for the dragons, and Tahrl could see the tattered remains of a heavy cloth that had once covered the opening still gripping the edge of the stone against the wind.*

Moonlight was resting under the opening in the ceiling with her arms supporting her shoulders, and her head was lowered so that the tip of her nose almost touched the floor. It looked as if she was trying to catch the rain as it poured through the opening so that it would cascade down her body. Beyond where part of a wall had been kept to support the ceiling, Tahrl could see Graywing huddled behind the stone with his legs folded beneath his body and his head resting against the floor. Cloudbreaker was settling slowly to the ground where she would be able to watch Tahrl go anywhere in the large chamber with only a turn of her head.

Tahrl held a hand before his eyes as he started across the room toward Moonlight. The wind kicked up the rain and caused it to fly

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about the room. He stopped under the force of the wind and the rain and realized that he had not even reached the opening to the storm.

“Moonlight!” he shouted as loudly as he could manage, which sounded as nothing against the wind. He lowered his arm and tried to take another step toward her. “I need to talk to you. I have felt-”

A flash of lightning reflected off the brown color of her body and made it seem almost red.

“Something.” His voice was carried off by the wind.

The rain poured through the opening in the roof, flowing down his back, and dripping from his fingers. The only sounds were the wind and the thunder, and he wondered if Moonlight could have heard a word he had said.

“Leave me.” The voice was deep, and the words of DiKena rumbled about the chamber. Moonlight did not move, and the rain continued to run down her flanks and along the folds of her wings.

“Please!” Tahrl brushed the damp hair away from his eyes, blinking away water.

Moonlight’s head moved in a slow arc until she was looking out into the storm, the wind, and the rain.

“I want to fly.”

Tahrl felt the words in his body more than he heard them above the wind or in his mind. He clutched his arms over his chest with his fists held tightly as Moonlight turned her head slowly about and looked down at him.

“I want to fly.”

Her gaze drifted from him, and she turned her head against the wind and the rain to watch the lightning. Tahrl opened his mouth and made a strangled cry as it was filled with rain. He threw his arms across his face as he turned and began to stagger away from her. The wind pushed at him, trying to trip him and send him sprawling against the cold and wet stone floor.

“What drives your heart, Winterfriend?”

Tahrl looked from between his fingers, searching for the one who had spoken, finding Cloudbreaker watching him. He flung his arms from his face, caring not even if they might strike the ground, and he stumbled toward her through rain and wind and storm. She swirled her arm around him, protecting him from the rain as he reached her and slumped against her side. Her body was warm, and

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her skin was somehow dry. He laughed and wiped at the rain and tears still on his face.

“What moves you to go where it is unsafe for any child of the DiKena?” Cloudbreaker unfolded her wing enough to watch him, but he did not feel wind or rain. “What have you felt?”

“Fear,” he said, pressing his cheek against her side and looking up at her eyes. “Pain, confusion, and. And.”

“And what?”

Tahlr shuddered and looked away from her face to the dim confines of the stone chamber.

“And death.”

Her head dipped ever so slightly and swayed for a moment from side to side.

“And why consult us?” she finally asked. “What has driven you to brave the storm and speak with us?”

“Didn’t you feel it? I thought that. I thought you had felt the same thing I did. I thought you might understand what has happened.”

“I have felt the song broken.”

“The what?”

“The Avatar sought to learn from us.”

“Alex always hated that name,” Tahlr said before she could continue. “You must understand how much it hurt him for the Windmasters to start calling him that.”

“He sought answers from us. As if he believed the gentle magic was something we had given to him. But he was bringing the magic to us in all of its power and beauty.”

“The power that heals but cannot be taught.”

“That is all we know; all the Preservers can remember of the gentle magic. He was the first child of the DiKena who had ever touched the magic. He brought it back to us, and when he played the flute.” Cloudbreaker grew silent and raised her head toward the ceiling as if there were no wind or rain.

“The Kianan slaughtered the Windmasters,” he said quietly. “We, Alexander and I, represent the hope that it would never happen again.”

“Without the music.” She looked back to him. “Without the feeling that winter would one day give way to spring, we would never have trusted you.”

“The song of the earthsheart.”

Tahlr stood and looked out from under the protection of Cloud-

breaker's wing and about the stone chamber for who had spoken. He looked with Cloudbreaker to where Graywing had moved from behind the partial wall with its protection from the storm, and it struck Tahrl only in passing that he had understood the dragon perfectly despite the wind.

"The song has been broken," Graywing said.

Tahrl looked from Graywing back to Cloudbreaker. He shook his head from side to side, sinking slowly to the floor, and put his head in his hands. Cloudbreaker moved her arm so that the folds of her wing more carefully enveloped him and then nudged him with the tip of her nose.

"No," he whispered into his hands and felt Cloudbreaker's breath flowing around him. "How!" His fists struck the floor.

"The storm is driven."

Tahrl turned his head to see Moonlight approaching them. Rainwater still draining from her sides in small rivers with each step that she took.

"So she condescends to join us," Cloudbreaker said.

Moonlight stopped in mid-step and shook her head, causing large drops of water to fly in every direction. She then spoke several words in what Tahrl recognized as the dragon's own language.

"Speak so that Winterfriend can understand you."

The two dragons looked at each other for a moment. Moonlight still had one forearm suspended above the floor, and Cloudbreaker held her head on a level with Moonlight's own. Cloudbreaker finally turned her head with an upward swing and brought her gaze back to Tahrl.

"Moonlight was informing me that I am unkind." Her head shifted slightly as if she could look back to the other dragon but chose not to. "I am not the one who left you to the storm."

Despite the wind, Tahrl heard Moonlight drive the air from her lungs with a deep hissing sound.

"You are not the one who withstood the full force of the storm," Moonlight replied.

"You—"

"And what is it?" Graywing said quickly, interrupting Cloudbreaker. "That is the question. What drives the storm?"

"You don't know?" Tahrl said, looking to Graywing.

Graywing looked from the floor to Tahrl and then glanced side-

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ways at both Cloudbreaker and Moonlight before looking back to him.

“I know what the Preservers remember.”

“You do know then.” He stood, bumping his head against the folds of Cloudbreaker’s wing, and sat back down.

“We know of troglodytes, cavern and forest trolls,” Cloudbreaker said. “Of these, only the forest troll has any magic to speak of.”

“The power to cloud our minds.”

“This magic is nothing when compared to others. Do you believe there are other creatures in the world?”

“What? I don’t,” he said slowly. “There are graths, but they were created by a Kianan wizard.”

“An irony.”

“Yes. We never learn. But you meant any others like the troglodytes and trolls?” He fell silent and looked across the rain slick floor. “There must be other creatures like them somewhere.”

“Do you believe that nothing with any magic remains?”

“What?”

He felt the wind swirl around him and a trickle of water on his shoulders and down his back. The lightning flashed, casting odd shadows about the chamber, and the crash of thunder shook the room.

“There was no war.”

He swung about to look to Moonlight.

“Creatures appeared,” she said. “Slaughtered. And then disappeared. You could glance away for danger, turn back, and find everyone else dead. Ripped to shreds. No blood. Without a sound.”

“You never said.” He looked to Graywing who was huddled against the floor and to Cloudbreaker protecting him. “Skysailor never spoke of the DiKena.”

“In all of that confusion, do you believe that nothing could have escaped from us?”

“The troglodytes did,” Cloudbreaker said.

“I never thought,” Tahrl said, sagging against the cold and damp stone floor under her wing. “I know the DiKena legends; I never wanted to believe!”

“We know nothing of legends.”

“What did I feel?” He covered his head with his hands. “Something awaken? Something remember?”

“No.”

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He uncurled from the cold floor, the wind, and the rain to look up at Cloudbreaker. The brown shade of her scales seemed dark and almost red by the half-light and the lightning.

“We have felt it remembering for almost three hundred years. The Avatar went in search of it. You felt them clash.”

Tahlr stood. His legs resented the weight, and his clothes clung to his skin. He stepped to Cloudbreaker’s shoulder below the outspread arm and looked carefully up at her face.

“What is it?”

Her head rose in a slow arc toward the ceiling, and she nearly bumped her head against the roof. Her gaze drifted to the other dragons; first, to Graywing and then to Moonlight.

“You give names to everything. Even the nameless.” He drifted sideways and supported himself with an arm against her side. “You name me Winterfriend. Alex; Avatar. Teresa is the Forestsheart.” He looked down his arm to where his hand rested and stood straight, drawing the hand back to his side. “What is it?”

Cloudbreaker’s voice rumbled about the stone chamber as she spoke her own language. Moonlight replied in kind, and the three dragons filled the room with words that sounded as kin to the crash and roar of distant thunder so much like the voice of the storm.

“He has a right to know,” Moonlight finally said in DiKena.

“The Preservers have named it,” Cloudbreaker said in Kianan, and the words came out slowly and unevenly and without any trace of inflection.

Tahlr clenched his fists hard enough for his arms to hurt.

“The Greater Darkness.”



*Because of the dark clouds and the raging storm, it was hard to tell when the day ended and the night began. There was little difference in the light that filtered across Highwall most of which was produced by flashes of lightning. The day became the night, and the storm did not lessen in its power as it battered at the castle. The sun, if it rose the next day behind the clouds, went unnoticed, and that day passed without a way to mark the time. On the third morning, the storm did seem to beat less savagely at the castle, and the light did seem to imply that the sun had risen behind the black clouds. It was on this day that a company of riders set out from the main gates of Highwall. Tahlr road on his horse, Vixen, shrouded in*

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his rain cloaks against the storm while the nine Dryn who accompanied him wore only the cloaks necessary to protect their gear. When they figured the long day had passed, they raised their shelters against the storm for themselves and what they could manage for the horses. No fire was possible, and they slept fitfully in the cold and the dark under clouds that pushed down against their heads.

They rode for the next two days before reaching the Redstained mountains with the storm and the rain continuing to fall all around them. The castle of Highwall had been upon a cleared and open plain bereft of anything except a farmer's fields. It was during the second day's ride that they had reached the sparse forest to the west of the mountains, and after that, the journey went somehow more easily because the trees protected them from the full force of the storm. Iola, Daena, and Kora voiced the relief of all of the Dryn that they were once more among trees and away from the stone walls of Highwall. Only Armada did not greet the woods with a pleasant welcome and seemed to grow only more determined to press onward. It was on the following day that the rain abated and finally retired, but the clouds remained overhead in abundance to remind them that the storm could grow angry once more. As the horses continued to climb and the forest faded into patches of trees, they began to hold watch at night, and no one suggested the creation of a fire.

It was during one night that Tahrl was started from sleep by a clicking sound akin to stone striking stone. Iola knelt at his shoulder with her sword resting across her knees while the others were up and standing perfectly still about the camp, and their drawn swords appeared to glow pale white. Tahrl looked to the half-moon that was visible between the clouds while the sound of the troglodytes grew louder. Chrystal leapt in one fluid motion to the edge of the rocks they had chosen as their campsite and looked down onto the plateau. Armada stood in the middle of everything with both hands holding the hilt of her sword, and its tip resting just above the ground.

Tahrl reached for where the dagger, Quicksilver, rested near at hand, but Iola covered his hand, preventing him from drawing it. They both knew the magic dagger could fly through the air and attack an enemy without much direction from its owner. The sound of stone against stone grew no louder and finally began to fade. It was not until the sound had slipped altogether from hearing that

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the Dryn finally released their protective circle. Much attention was required before the horses would be calm, and it was even longer before those not on watch finally slept.

They rested the horses after ascending the summit, knowing they would soon have their first view of Morningsglory forest, and Tahr! admired the one peak among all the others, which he knew was the home of Skysailor and her children. The camp that was chosen was some distance down from the summit pass with the one peak still visible behind them, and that night they heard the sounds of troglodytes off in the distance.

They rode quickly over the gently sloping ground the following day and stayed clear of any ruins of the post-Crusade mining communities. Another day passed, and they camped on the ridge above a wide valley. That night Tahr! watched the pale shapes of a group of troglodytes run in single file through the valley, and the only sound was their substitute for sight.

Another day and they found themselves looking down over Morningsglory forest. Beyond the foot of the mountains still many days ahead of them was where the trees created their own world. The leaves blown about on their branches by the wind appeared as nothing so much as waves upon a green ocean. Tahr! remembered that Teresa had said it was the view of the sun rising beyond the forest and chasing away the shadows that had moved her to name the woods. He mused over where she must have sat as a child and watched the sunrise. Perhaps she had watched from a tree where the view was good, and she could hide from the Kianan who had held her mother prisoner.

They were approaching a clump of trees with the afternoon resting half gone before them when the clicking sound of stone striking stone began. Tahr! fought past his surprise as Vixen screamed and reared. From the trees, the forms raced at them. Ghost white shapes surrounding them. Tahr! shouted meaningless words as troglodytes collided with and clawed at his horse. Vixen, trained to fight, kicked out at them. He held fast in his perch and tried to reach for his staff.

Something leapt, smashing into him, carrying him from Vixen's back. Tahr!'s hands, protecting his face and neck, shot upward and held the troglodyte below the jaw. It thrashed about with its mouth gaping wide, saliva dripping from its teeth, and clawed hands raking at his arms. The thing made a loud strangled noise, and its breath plowed into his face. He closed his eyes and wished that his arms

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were longer. Its skin was rubbery, cold, and slimy. His fingers began to tingle. It brought its feet against his stomach with claws that matched those on its hands. He wondered what it would feel like to find his insides spread over the ground by the troglodyte's claws.

Quicksilver finally pulled itself free of its sheath. The dagger flew upward striking the troglodyte in the chest. The creature squealed. The dagger pushed upward. Tahrl felt feet trying to crush his stomach. He shouted in desperation at the pain. Quicksilver forced the troglodyte off of him and into the air. He gasped for breath and tried to curl into a ball. The dagger jerked sideways and sliced the troglodyte's chest open. The creature fell to the ground where it thrashed about as its blood flowed over the ground.

The surprised and excited voices of the Dryn suddenly reminded Tahrl that he was not alone, and he opened his eyes to look about the battlefield. Chrystal was pulling her sword free of the last troglodyte, and all of the bodies were those of the creatures. Armada, Chrystal, Kora, and Daena were on foot and held swords that dripped with blood while the others had remained on horseback. No one appeared hurt, and the horses looked like they had taken the most scratches on their legs and against their sides. Most of the troglodytes, it appeared, had been trampled under hoof.

He looked to the one that Quicksilver had killed. The troglodyte appeared almost lizard like with arms and legs that gave it the ability to stand upright or run on all fours. The head had been designed primarily to allow for a large mouth with massive jaws and was incapable of holding anything resembling eyes. It wasn't white; the skin had no color and was almost translucent. In the darkness of caverns beneath mountains, a troglodyte never developed color for its skin.

Tahrl almost fell over, and the contents of his stomach made a run for his mouth. He clamped his teeth shut around a gulp of air and spun around to look to the sun far overhead. The light hurt his eyes, and when he looked away, an image swam momentarily in his vision to remind him not to do that again. The others had sheathed their swords and were returning to their horses. He grabbed Quicksilver out of the air where it hovered protectively before him and dashed to his horse. Once in the saddle, he glanced to make certain that no one was left standing beside a horse and convinced Vixen to gallop away from the remains.

Vixen chose her own path as Tahrl held the reins tightly in his

hands and paid little attention to where she went beyond in the general direction of Morningsglory forest. He knew that troglodytes were relatively small creatures, being little more than half the height of a Kianan. They were thin and wiry as if they had been stretched upon a rack and were mostly teeth, claws, muscle, and bone. If a troglodyte were stretched so that it would be about nine feet tall and then dumped into a vat of blood, it would begin to look like one of those things that had chased Alexander through the Earlinstien cathedral.

He realized that Vixen was no longer galloping away from that clump of trees. Armada had her hand on the reins of his horse and was commanding both her own mount, Shadowfox, and Vixen to stop. When she released her grip, Tahrl yanked hard to one side and forced the startled horse to turn in a complete circle.

“It’s daylight!” he shouted as Vixen skittered uneasily. “Those troks attacked us in broad daylight!”

“I know!” Armada leaned precariously off Shadowfox’s back so that she could shout into Tahrl’s face.

He gathered the slack of his reins into his hands and settled back into his saddle.

“It’s never happened before,” she continued more quietly. “We always counted on them staying underground in the day as part of our defense. There’s something else they’ve never done before. We were ambushed!”

Tahrl let the reins drop to Vixen’s neck.

“That takes planning! They had to know we were coming! They had to wait for us! They had to keep quiet! That means they were blind until we made a sound! When was the last time a troglodyte displayed that much intelligence?”

“They were driven,” he said quietly, and he could feel the blood draining from his face.

“What?” Armada replied not with anger but with surprise.

He slid from the back of his horse and leaned against her side. The others remained on horseback and had formed half a circle around and to his side. Lifting his hands slowly from Vixen, he took several steps away from them and then sank to the ground. He brought his knees up below his chin and encircled them with his arms, locking everything in place. Armada scrambled from her horse and knelt in front of him, placing one hand on his shoulder and the other against

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his chin. He looked into eyes that were the color of pine needles on a spring morning with everything still sprinkled with dew.

“Moonlight said the storm was driven,” he said quietly as the rest of her face came into focus.

Armada did not say anything or ask any questions; instead, her grip tightened slightly on his arm, and she sat so that their eyes were on an even level.

“Moonlight and Cloudbreaker said that something survived the time of the DiKena.” His fingers unlocked, rose, and closed around the hand touching his face. “That Alex went in search of it. That we felt it. That it controlled the storm. Maybe it controlled the troglodytes.”

“Tahrl.” Her hand left his shoulder, and she tried to take one of his hands between her own. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You hardly seemed in a condition to listen.”

She laughed, and the sound was a sad and halfhearted giggle. She brought his hand to her lips and kissed his fingers.

“You think I’m calm now?”

His gaze fell to their hands, and for a long moment, he did not want to look back to her eyes. When he did, he noticed a single tear like a drop of dew trickle down her cheek.

“Something killed Delan.” She tightened her grip so that he would not deny it. “Now I know that it may be older than the Windmasters. Does the abomination have a name?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me.” She moved against him so that their legs were touching, their hands were locked together, their faces were less than an inch apart, and her breath caressed his face. “Even if it should strike us down as you speak the word.”

“The Greater Darkness,” he whispered to her mouth.

“Thank you.” Her arms went around his back, and she hugged him tightly.

His hands inched slowly around her shoulders and returned the embrace.

“In the memory of the DiKena, I thank you.” Armada leaned back so that she could once more look into his eyes. “If it can be named, it can be destroyed.”



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*Where the mountains gave way to the gentle rolling ground before the forest was a plain covered with tall grass. Closer to the foot of the mountains than to the trees that marked the edge of the forest, there was a sprawling three-story mansion. Both wood and stone had been used in the construction of the building, and glass had been carefully constructed to fit its many windows. Placed into the very center of the front of the mansion were several stone steps, leading to a massive double-door with a view of the mountains carved into the wooden surface.*

It had taken another day and part of the following morning for them to reach the mansion at the foot of the mountains. Tahrl climbed the steps leading to the door and made use of his staff to knock upon it. He waited and then turned to look back to the others who had not even bothered to dismount.

“I don’t think he’s here.”

“Maybe he doesn’t answer the door anymore,” Armada replied.

“No, really. Just by looking at the place, I don’t think Balthazar’s here.” He jumped quickly from step to step and returned to where Vixen waited. “I want to look around back.”

He climbed back into the saddle and nudged his horse to walk toward the end of the mansion. Around the back side of the house there was a second small stone building that looked like a storage shack and farther back a fence that reached nearly to the mountains and the forest. He looked first to the storage shed, which bore little resembling a door and smelled vaguely of sulfur and fresh blood. Vixen willingly stepped away from the shack but then showed even more reluctance to go anywhere near the fence. Off in the large fenced area, Tahrl could see brown shapes bounding about that looked to be nearly as large as horses. He slid from the back of his horse and continued toward the fence. Armada left Shadowfox with the others and moved to join him near the edge. A sound that could be described as neither a howl nor a roar was carried faintly to them over the breeze.

“I understand he has disposed of most of them,” Tahrl said without looking at her.

“Good.”

“Cloudbreaker reminded me,” he said after a moment of quiet, “that we never seem to grow tired of creating things like that.”

“Don’t you mean the Kianan? Your people never tire of trying to

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control things that can't be controlled. Magicians! Wizards! A wizard made those." She nodded her head toward the fence.

"Look who's talking."

She spun to face him and placed a fist against her chest.

"My training was so I wouldn't accidentally kill anyone! The magicians court disaster. They experiment. The wizards manipulated Delan! They forced him to be their Avatar."

"I know," he said quietly and looked out across the enclosure. In the distance, he watched several long furred creatures the size of young horses run in their direction. They had massive feet that concealed sharp claws and broad faces with short snouts that housed rows of fangs. They ran with a strangely savage grace as they flew over the grass, barely touching it in their passage.

"But he did free himself." Tahrl was surprised when one of the graths didn't stop and tried to leap over the fence.

Sword in hand, Armada pushed Tahrl backward. There was a flash. A circle of light spread around the spot where the grath had hit an invisible barrier above the wood fence. The grath rebounded and landed on all fours. It growled and snarled as it paced the other side of the fence and then turned on one of the other graths. The second one gave a demented cry of pain as the first one sank its jaws into the other's shoulder. The graths turned on the wounded creature, and amid a fury of warped growls, tore it to shreds. Within moments the only remnants were a couple bones which had been picked clean. As Tahrl and Armada watched, the pack then turned on the first grath and reduced it to a pile of flesh, bone, and blood.

Armada turned away from the frenzy, still holding her sword with a white-knuckle grip.

"Let's try the house again."

Tahrl nodded in agreement, and they walked quickly away from the fence.

"Take them back around front." Armada waved her hand to indicate the frightened horses.

Chrystal took the reins of Shadowfox and began to lead both away from the graths' cage. The others who had never bothered to dismount quickly followed along with Iola leading Vixen.

Tahrl and Armada reached the far less ornamental rear door of the mansion. Armada tried the handle and then knelt before the door to look more carefully at the lock.

"Stupid magician." She drew her dagger and jammed its point

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into the keyhole. “He’s done the magical equivalent of strong arming the door into staying closed. If he knew the faintest thing about wizardry this lock would take hours instead of.” A trickle of blue light arced down the dagger and into the lock. “Moments.”

Her hand returned to the handle, and the door opened inward. They stepped into a large kitchen, which looked as if it had not been used in a very long time. Tahrl closed the door, and its view of the fence.

“Balthazar!” he called out and walked across the room to a hallway.

“Pity an unused kitchen doesn’t mean anything when you’re dealing with a magician,” Armada said as she followed Tahrl into the hall.

The passage lead them to a spacious room with many cushions assembled around a stone fire-pit that was part of one wall. There was a wide wood staircase that lead to a second and third floor and another hallway that lead to the front doors. They heard a scraping sound coming from the front hall, and they walked in the direction of the doors. As they approached them, Tahrl could see a faint flicker of light and then heard a soft click. A moment later, Iola opened the door breathing out through her mouth and holding a dagger in one hand.

“What did he use to lock this,” she said. “Brute force?”

“You’re not far off,” Armada said and turned to Tahrl. “Okay, now I’m convinced he’s not here. Breaking the magic locks should have brought him running.”

“I wonder where he went.”

“If you’re coming in, tell the others there’s a stable around the side somewhere,” Armada said to Iola before turning to catch up with Tahrl.

He stepped across the room to the stone fire-pit and peered into its depths.

“Well, this was used less than a quarter of a moon ago.” He stood and looked to Armada. “We should look around more, but I bet he left in a hurry.”

“Summoned away or ran?”

“They are magicians. We may not have been the only ones to feel something.”

Armada had already crossed back to the center of the room and was watching Chrystal and Iola enter from the hallway.

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“We want to search this place,” she said to them. “Balthazar is the sedentary type. Never wanted to be too far from his pets. It took a lot to get him to leave in a hurry.” She looked back to Tahrl. “Maybe we can discover something about the darkness.”

*Chapter Two*  
**Shadows in the Light**

*The room was formed from cut and polished stone except for the final half of the walls and the ceiling which were of wood. The room was an extended rectangle and required the use of three steps from the door to reach the floor. Against one wall was a shelf and writing table, which held a number of loosely bound volumes. A final book was lying open against the floor with its back apparently broken and several pages scattered about it. Most of the space in the room was taken by a large table that supported a clay model of the Red-stained mountains. The peaks were scarred as if someone had once taken an interest in gouging craters in the mountains and later half-heartedly tried to repair the damage without the use of more material. Several long wooden sticks had been thrust almost at random into the mountains, and one or two had been dragged through the clay, creating unnatural riffs in the mountainside. The chamber was musty and cold with no windows, and the only light was provided by a torch, which Tahrl held over the model.*

“This has seen better days.”

“It’s not as detailed as the one at Highwall,” Iola said while leaning over the mountains and brushed a hand across several of the sticks.

“But it was the inspiration for my map.” He pointed to the wooden sticks with the end of the torch, causing the shadows to thicken and jump. “Those pegs used to mark the homes of the Windmasters.”

“With names like Bloodthief, Childslayer, and Shadowstar. I wonder why he hated them so?”

“I don’t know. He said Windmasters were evil monsters that must be destroyed. That’s exactly what the Kianan believed eight hundred years ago.”

“When your kind slaughtered them.” She looked back over the

scarred and disfigured mountains. “He didn’t take the truth very well, did he.”

“He really hasn’t changed much. I understand he’s taken to calling them drakes. Why? I don’t want to know.” He turned quickly, causing the flames, sputtering and flashing, to trail in the wake of the torch. “The map tells us nothing about why he left.” He stepped to the book on the floor and touched the broken spine with one hand. “This, however, tells us much more.”

Iola crossed the room to join him at the book’s side and caused a loose page to crinkle under her foot. His hand left the binding of the volume and pushed against her knee.

“Please.” His fingers gripped at her foot and tried to lift it backward.

“What?” she said and with understanding finally sinking in lifted her foot from the page. “It’s only dead leaves.”

“It’s not the paper,” he said, flattening the crumpled and smudged page with his hand. “It’s what’s written on it.”

“Afraid he couldn’t remember anything?”

Tahlr sat, resting his torch arm against one upraised knee and held the flame so that he could look at her face.

“If he died without keeping a record, everything he discovered would be lost.”

“So?”

He made a little sound like a laugh as the breath rushed from his lungs. The only movement he made came from the fire of the torch as its light flickered and danced about the room. He looked into a face that held an expression of indifference and a trace of amusement that he should take this so seriously.

“Well, what matters is that Balthazar would consider this important,” he finally managed to say, “and yet he carelessly dropped it; or the book fell when he grabbed something else. He must have been in a great hurry to abandon it here.”

“So what’s the book about?” Iola knelt next to him and rested a hand against his shoulder.

“Not important enough to go with him,” Tahlr said as he handed her the torch.

He then very carefully scooped what he could into his hands and tried to turn the book over. Several pages slide free and scuttled across the floor with one or two disappearing underneath the table.

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He lowered the volume to the floor and spread the pages open before them.

“Maps?”

“And not very well drawn ones either.” He tried to stop the paper from ripping as he turned the page. “Of what I wonder?”

Iola’s head jerked up to face the door and then she stood. The torch fluttering with her movement.

“What’s wrong?” he said, abandoning the book and looking up at her.

“I don’t know yet,” she said and stepped quickly toward the door.

Tahrl jumped to his feet as the shadows flooded the room behind the retreating torchlight, and he followed her up the steps to the hallway. They made their way to the main room with the flight of stairs and the cushions in their half-circle around the stone fire-pit. Armada entered the room at a run from the hall leading to the main doors and outside with Chrystal and Daena trailing along behind her. Spotting Tahrl as she turned at the entrance, Armada ran to him and clamped her arms against his shoulders.

“We have to go,” she managed to say. “Now!”

“Wait a moment-”

“She’s gone- I couldn’t feel- the forest is empty!”

“Armada!”

He pushed at her, clamping his own fingers on her arms, dislodging her grip, and she stumbled half a step, almost falling. Her eyes were desperate, searching this way and that as if she had lost all sight and sign of the sun.

“What are you talking about?”

“The forest,” she said, looking over his shoulder as if he was not there as if the others were not gathering all around him.

Tahrl felt her body start to sag under his grip so he began to maneuver her to one of the cushions. The Dryn made a path for them, and Chrystal moved to help him support Armada.

“I couldn’t be this close to the forest and not try to contact Teresa,” she said, seeming to notice them for the first time, looking from face to face to face as if she did not know who they were. “I walked across the field. Stepped back into the wood. And.” She shuddered, slipping, falling onto the cushion. “The trees are scared.”

Tahrl sank to the edge of the cushion, watching her face, and Chrystal, sitting upon her knees, held one of Armada’s hands. He

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could feel and hear the others growing anxious and circling around them.

“What could scare the forest’s heart?” Chrystal said.

Tahril felt the strings of his shoulders and chest tighten and felt a tingling sensation run through his nose and spread under his eyes. He wondered, as the room seemed to take an experimental dip to the side, if Chrystal had asked her question in Dryn.

“That’s what the Wrae- the Winterbred call Teresa,” Armada said, looking to Chrystal through wide eyes. “I couldn’t feel her!” Her hands shot upward but were stopped by Chrystal’s hold. “It’s like she left the forest.”

“She’s traveled before.”

“Not like this.” She sank farther into the cushion. “I told you before we needed to know how she would react to Delan’s death. I think she bolted.”

“Like you tried to do?” Tahril said.

“Like I tried to do. We can’t dally here. We need to reach Greenhaven. Find out what happened; how they are doing.”

“All right,” he said. “We won’t stay.”

“We would make better time without the horses,” Daena mumbled in Dryn to no one in particular.

“And leave me behind.” He turned to watch her take a startled step backward. “I tried to go at a Dryn’s pace through the forest once. It didn’t work.”

“We take the horses,” Armada said, rising to her feet. “I don’t trust the graths.”

She turned and walked unsteadily at first to the hallway that lead to the kitchen with Tahril and Iola quickly moving to follow her. As they disappeared down the passage, Tahril heard Chrystal directing the others out the front hall to see to the horses. Armada crossed the kitchen and sank to one knee before the single door that lead to the graths.

“We shouldn’t leave the place vulnerable,” she said to Iola who was looking over Armada’s shoulder at the lock of the door.

From where he stood in the middle of the kitchen, Tahril watched them studying the door. Armada held one hand flat against the lock while Iola stood behind her with a hand held to her chin and a smile creeping across her lips. He heard the faintest of clicks as Armada blew air into the keyhole.

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“That’s not much of a lock,” Iola said as Armada stood and turned her back to the door.

“No, but it’s better than what Balthazar had warded it with.”

She began to walk back through the kitchen with Tahrl falling into step beside her and Iola following along behind them. When they reached the main room, he saw that the others had moved outside and that a torch on a hook against the wall fought with the sun to fill the room with light.

“I must have left it there when we ran into the room,” he heard Iola say as he crossed the room and picked up the torch.

“We should return it to the map room,” he said. “After all, it’s not as if Balthazar invited us in.”

Armada walked with him as he followed the hall that lead to the map room. She studied the scarred and disfigured model of the Redstained mountains while Tahrl cradled the broken book on the floor and placed it upon the table. Against the wall next to the door was the peg to hold the torch and a damper to put out the flame. He took one last lingering look at the mountains before dousing the torch and returning it to its perch against the wall.

After they had climbed the steps and Tahrl had shut the door, Armada turned on him and threw her arms around his shoulders. He took an involuntary step backward as her arms encircled him, and she held him with a fierce hug. His hands hesitated for a moment in the air before he brought them together and returned the embrace. Her head felt heavy against his shoulder as if she lacked the strength to support herself, and her breath sounded loud against his ear. He felt as if a bunch of tiny weights at the back of his head were being scattered to the wind and carried away on a gentle breeze.

“Why won’t you accept the fact that Delan is dead?”

“What?” He felt the word echo within the suddenly tightening walls of his chest.

For a brief moment, he wanted to fling her away, but Armada’s hold only grew stronger around him. Her head left his shoulder, and she looked into his eyes.

“My mother has left Greenhaven.”

“She’s done that before.” He tried to look beyond Armada to the walls of the hallway they were standing in. “I seem to recall her traveling to the Ivory Tower to lend support to my views about the Crusade.”

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“We were half a moon preparing our disguises for that journey. You didn’t know she was Dryn until much later.”

Tahlr looked to the floor beneath their feet and felt his head slowly begin to shake. He turned, looking to the door he had closed on the map room and the carvings of a tall and vaulted castle shrouded in wind. After only a moment, the back of his neck began to quiver, and the feeling seeped slowly upward into his head. He voiced a strangled sigh and turned quickly only bumping against Armada’s forehead.

“She has gone in search of what has murdered her lover,” Armada said quietly with their heads still touching. “It’s impossible to understand what Teresa and Delan meant to each other. What they had been through together. Without him, she may not want to go on living.”

He turned his head with their faces still brushing together and was able to look into her eyes. It was like looking into a grove of ancient trees that towered far overhead and filtered the light of the sun. It was a view of redwood and green leaves, and several of the trees had splintered and toppled and blackened and burned. He felt his jaw go slack and his lips slowly part, and he tightened his hold around her as if he never wanted to let go.

“We’ll find her,” he said and then tried to clear the gravel clogging his throat. “Don’t you worry. We’ll find her.”



*It was hard to tell day from night or forgotten twilight for the clouds that filled the sky and filtered the light with shades of gray. Tahlr had noticed before reaching Balthazar’s home that the clouds had been slowly gathering again, but he had not thought much of it. Leaving the shelter of the house behind them and approaching the forest, he realized that the clouds were threatening to rain. He remembered how Teresa had once told him that rain was a sign of good luck and good fortune to the Dryn but looking to these clouds did not comfort him.*

The horses shied and skittered uneasily as they felt the confusion of their riders. Tahlr saw and felt the apprehension of the others as they crossed under the first row of trees and entered the forest. At moments such as this, it was impossible to tell what a Dryn was thinking. He knew that the forest felt different; he could feel that much, but he did not know what the others felt to be missing. The

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others pushed their horses forward as if they were following a clear and open path that left him feeling blind and dumb. He could not understand how the others moved so easily at such a pace while tree limbs and brush battered at him. He kept low to his horse's back, but still the others flowed easily about him. There was little light among the swirling leaves to see the others leave him at the back of the group. Vixen seemed to pick up on his fear at watching the others pull away from him in their haste and plunged onward between the trees.

It was Armada of all of them who reined back on Shadowfox and pulled alongside of him. She took one hand from the reins and reached across the gap between their horses to take hold of his hand. She gave his fingers a squeeze and a look that, he hoped, was meant to convey concern and understanding. After that, the ride became easier, and when Armada released her hold, the forest made fewer attempts to unseat him. Tahrl breathed easier with Armada staying at his side, and Vixen seemed ready to run for a long time despite the obstacles.

It was dark in the forest before the rain began, and then the others were ready to wait until morning. The shelters were easy to establish for the horses between the trees and the dripping rain. It took the combined efforts of Tahrl, Chrystal, Armada, and Iola, to protect a small fire to warm food and drink. They huddled together throughout the long night and shared and covered each other with their cloaks.

Everything was wet through and through by morning, and the rain did not seem at all tired or ready to lessen the downpour. No attempt at a fire was made before they started riding through what they could only consider morning by the passage of time and not by the light. The others seemed more willing to hold to Tahrl's pace, and Armada did not have to ride constantly at his side. The only change in the light that revealed glimpses of the forest for Tahrl was when the flashes of lightning began.

When they camped for the night, the shelter simply kept the horses damp instead of soaked, and what little fire they were able to enrage was decidedly uncooperative. No one had bothered to say anything through most of that day, and by the following morning, Tahrl felt the forest closing in all around him. The trees seemed all too willing to push at him or pour water down his back. Armada or Iola stayed constantly at his side throughout the morning. By what,

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he figured, must have been mid-sun, the rain did relent and drench them less thoroughly. It was not long after this that they reached Greenhaven.

As they brought their horses among trees that were large enough to engulf entire houses, Tahrl could feel that the others had become no less uneasy. The canopy of branches and leaves that the trees held far overhead, hiding the sun and clouds from view, made everything seem somehow gray. He saw no one moving about between the many layered and domed dwellings that the Dryn used resting against the trees.

Armada reined in Shadowfox, holding the horse as it stamped at the ground with the rain falling faintly about them. She shouted something that seemed to echo between the trees and made Tahrl feel giddy because he had not understood the word. He bunched Vixen's reins up into his fists and felt several large raindrops strike him on the forehead. He wiped a hand over his eyes as the water ran down his face.

Dryn appeared at doorways and the spaces between the houses, and many ran to stand among the horses. Their voices were many, and their words were fast as the crowd started to expand. The noise was lifted up to Tahrl as nothing more than a babble of sounds that he could not hope to follow or understand.

"Winonah! Ede! Rohana!" Armada shouted, and her voice rose above the sound around them.

The crowd seemed to shift around her, and it looked to Tahrl almost as if Winonah simply appeared at Shadowfox's side. Armada shouted out in relief and all but leapt from her horse's back, sliding into the much taller Dryn's embrace. Speaking, shouting, crying, they vanished; the Dryn swirling around them yielding a glimpse of one sister and then the other. Everyone moved again to let Ede join her sisters, and Tahrl lost their voices to the crowd. There was a touch against his fist, and he looked down into Iola's face.

"You can get down now." Her voice rose to his ears. "The horses will be looked after."

He lost his hold on the reins in order to take her hand and then slid from Vixen's back. The Dryn moved about him, and he staggered against Iola from the press of people around them. They flowed about him as if they were trying to trick him into believing that the world was spinning. With Iola's arm around his shoulders,

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the others swam to every side, and then Armada was before them, holding onto Ede, Rohana, and Winonah.

Winonah's eyes flickered up, noticing Tahrl, back to Armada, and then she settled upon him. Armada stopped speaking with a word half-finished on her lips and then turned, following her sister's gaze.

"We should go inside," Winonah said.

Armada opened her mouth, saying nothing. Chrystal stepped to Armada's side, placing a hand upon her shoulder, and Armada nodded her head. He watched Ede turn to the crowd, shouting instructions at them, and a path formed before them. He followed the others toward one of the houses with the rain drifting around them and the horses somewhere behind them.

The room was warm and smelled strongly of the wood that burned in the fire. There were other Dryn in the large oval room, and Armada and Winonah lead them through the chamber to another room and another. They found a room that was somewhat smaller than the others they had walked through and had its own fire-pit, which was surrounded with several cushions. The room was a stretched circle with only one opening besides the smoke vent and no windows. The walls were of a deep tan or brown color tinged with red, and Tahrl could not tell if they were made of earth or the wood of the tree.

Winonah and Ede tended to the fire and fed its desire with gathered branches. The others, Armada, Chrystal, and Rohana settled upon cushions around the fire and watched Ede throw green needles and seeds over the flames, which added their fragrance to the room. Iola appeared when most of the fire work was done, carrying a tray with bread and tea. Tahrl realized as Iola provided everyone with the food and drink that the others who had traveled with them were not here.

"Tell me," Armada said after everyone was settled about the fire but before she had touched her tea.

Winonah, Ede, and Rohana exchanged glances, and the only sound was of them shifting uncomfortably about on their cushions. Tahrl looked from face to face with Winonah and Rohana seeming to be on one side, Ede somewhat around the edge of the fire, and Armada and Chrystal on the other. Iola sat slightly apart from the others and appeared to be looking over the tray she had carried into the room. Winonah lowered her cup slowly to her lap where

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she held it with both hands and then with a shrug of her shoulders looked to Armada.

“Where would you have us begin?”

“Anywhere.”

Winonah’s gaze fell back to the tea that she held cupped between her hands, and her fingers stroked its surface.

“When father was here, there was.” She turned the cup around between her fingers. “Pain. He seemed preoccupied. With something. When he left, Teresa was no better.” Her eyes lifted back to Armada. “I think they may have had a fight.”

Armada voiced a sound of surprise that was lost somewhere between a laugh and tears and was colored with shock. Tahrl looked absently down the length of his arm to where his fingers were lopsidedly holding a cup. Its contents had sloshed to one side, and a splash of the tea had fallen onto his leg. He righted the cup as the damp warmth began to make its presence felt, and he lowered the cup to the floor near his feet. The liquid made a last desperate attempt to escape over the side as he settled it to the firm floor.

“Why?” Armada seemed to whisper the question with a mouth that did not sound as if it wanted to work. She sank back and sideways into her cushion, and her shoulder rested against Chrystal who was seated at her side.

Tahrl found the idea that Teresa and Alexander could argue or even disagree on anything difficult to contemplate. He wanted to reach out to Armada and maybe understand the slightest bit how she was suddenly feeling. Somehow, he couldn’t. With Chrystal sitting right there, he couldn’t reach them.

Winonah was speaking again. She was using the Dryn language, which up until a quarter of a moon ago he had never fully understood. It didn’t even seem strange as it occurred to him that he hadn’t spoken any other language for days.

“Teresa wouldn’t talk about it,” was what Winonah had said. “From what we have pieced together, it was that he wouldn’t let her go with him.”

“Where did he go?”

In that moment, Tahrl was glad that he had put his teacup down. The back of his neck was stiff, and he felt slight tremors try to shake his head. The room, the Dryn, and even the fire were overlaid with an image of a vaulted stone room cast in dark red and black shad-

ows. His lips parted as if he was about to speak, but nothing else wanted to work to let words out.

“I don’t know!” Winonah said, dragging Tahrl with a shock like lightning back into the room. “She wouldn’t tell us!”

“After Delan left, she was very withdrawn,” Rohana said. “Like she was trying to be with him or something. She wouldn’t talk, or when she did, it was very. Well; weird.”

“We really had to pry to get anything out of her,” Ede said from around the edge of the fire.

“It was all about the abstract reality intruding on the concrete.” Rohana moved her hands about in a confused shrug. “Magic running amuck. Forming pockets in unexpected places. All around, people getting more than they wished for.”

“You mean she thought it was caused by the Kianan,” Armada said, sitting up and almost away from Chrystal. “A reaction to the appearance of the dragons? That’s not how they tell it.”

“You mean the dragons?” Winonah said. “Delan had been with them before coming here. What did they tell you?”

“What did Teresa tell you? This is real wrath of the DiKena type stuff. Emotion given form went to sulk and hide from the dragons, and then the Kianan tried to kill all of them. Something’s getting ideas. Maybe trying before the dragons are strong enough to do something about it!”

“Fire and blood,” Winonah whispered, and for a moment, the loudest sound in the room was that of the fire. “What could we hope to do against something like that?”

“Cloudbreaker told me Alex went hunting it,” Tahrl said with a voice that sounded raw and ragged. “We felt him find it.”

“What did you feel?”

For whatever reason, he could not figure out who had asked the question. He sagged back into his cushion and closed his eyes, which did nothing to stop the flickering lights and shadows. The robes like wisps of light running through the chambers, and the forms the color of drying blood pursuing them. He shook his head in an attempt to not see the one figure among the white robes dressed in brown and holding a rod that glowed with a silver light.

“I saw a cathedral.” He opened his eyes, and the images fled to the shadows and hid behind the Dryn. “The Earlinstien cathedral. That is where he fought it.”

“That is where Teresa has gone,” Armada said.

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She was at the edge of her cushion with her shoulder leaning against and being supported by Chrystal's own. The fingers of those hands were intertwined. It seemed strange to him that of all the things to stand out in his attention at that moment it was Chrystal and Armada's interlocked fingers.

"But none of us felt that," Ede said.

"Do you have anything better to go on?" Armada's glance was sharp and jagged.

"All I could feel was Teresa's anxiety." Ede's hands moved to her shoulders, and she appeared to shiver. "When it was. All over; it took me a while to touch the woods. By then she had already disappeared."

"None of you could follow her?" Armada looked from face to face from Winonah to Rohana to Ede. "None of you could do anything?"

"You try to stop her sometime when it feels like your heart has been ripped out of the trees and stretched in the wind to dry!" Winonah shouted the words all in one breath.

"What have you done since! Fuck your hands?" Armada was at the edge of her cushion. Her legs were ready to spring her forward, but Chrystal had a grip around her arm holding her back.

Winonah was standing. Her cup rolling toward the fire, trailing tea, coming to a stop against the branches.

"That's all you've got!"

Armada swung sideways off her cushion because of Chrystal; her grip sliding down Armada's arm. The room before Tahrl's eyes seemed to stretch in an unnatural fashion. The air screaming past his ears.

"Shut up! Torch it! Enough!" Ede was standing between them with the fire at her back, holding her hands flat with a palm facing each of them. "Do I have to throw you both in the lake?"

The fire seemed to be the loudest thing in the room as Armada climbed slowly from the floor and returned to her cushion. Through it all, Chrystal had not lost her grip. The hand blocking Armada dropped to Ede's side, and she turned her head to look at Winonah.

"You may be eldest!" Ede pointed a finger at Winonah. "But with mother missing, I'm governess. You stand with me or leave my forest!"

Rohana rose slowly from her cushion next to Winonah and placed her hand lightly upon her sister's shoulder. Winonah shook off the touch and then settled awkwardly back onto her cushion.

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When Rohana returned to her seat, Ede's shoulders seemed to sag ever so slightly. Realizing that he had been gripping the loose edges of his cushion, Tahrl relaxed his fingers. He then noticed Iola, knelt almost double so as not to be in the way, pick up the discarded teacup and carry it back to her tray.

"Listen," Ede said. "The people are terrified. We can all feel it. Let's not let empathy control us."

"What do we do then?" Winonah said quietly but with her arms folded over her chest.

"I cannot leave Greenhaven. Not now. But someone must follow Teresa." She turned to face Armada. "Someone with experience of the lands beyond."

Armada met Ede's gaze and nodded her head once.

"This was only a stop on my way to the Earlinstien cathedral."

"Our way," Tahrl said, causing everyone to look to him.

"You are the governor of Highwall," Ede said, moving to stand before him. "You lead the Kianan's troglodyte defense. Are the link between Dryn, Kianan, and dragon." She stepped closer so that their knees were almost touching. "You cannot simply chase after Teresa!"

"Watch me. If Teresa can abandon her post, so can I."

"It's not as simple as that."

"Isn't it?" He turned to look at Winonah.

"We need you where you are." She could not hold his gaze.

"He's got this far," Armada said.

"What will your king think?" Ede said, but he noticed that she had taken a step back.

"I've bolted before."

"More than once in fact," Armada said.

"Shut-up!"

"All right! All right! Throw it on the funeral pyre!" Winonah threw her hands into the air and then brought them down hard against her legs. "I'll stay," she said to her fists.

Ede backed away from Tahrl. Winonah's eyes drifted from Tahrl to Armada and even to Ede.

"Someone has to help you patch things up."

"Oh, very well. I'd probably just get in your way," Rohana said to Armada. "I'm used to working with the others. You always were the solitary Drae."

Tahrl wondered if anyone else noticed Armada stiffen very

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slightly with a tightening of her shoulders and a straightening of her back. He watched both of Chrystal's hands come to rest upon Armada's arm a moment later.

"You take after our father." Rohana made a sharp bark of a laugh. "Do you ever!"

"Will you go with those you arrived with?" Ede said tentatively, approaching Armada while stepping over Rohana's words.

"A smaller group," Armada said. "The mountains are behind us."

"And Juliana?"

"Was on patrol. She hadn't returned when we left."

"Pity. You three work well together." Ede looked to Armada's feet.

"Four." Chrystal pointed at Tahrl. "Besides who out there is going to trust a bunch of Dryn charging across the countryside?"

They all looked to him except for Armada who appeared to sniff at the air and then turn her attention to the fire. He tried not to let his eyes rest on her and glanced to the others with a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Another reason to let me go."

"And what are you going to do?" Ede said.

Tahrl shifted awkwardly on his cushion and looked away from her to Armada. She returned his gaze with eyes that would not blink, and the changing light of the fire distorted the expression on her face.

"Find Alex." He shook his head slightly to clear it of Armada's look and turned back to Ede. "Find Teresa. Maybe find the monster."

"And what if you find the monster?" Ede stood with her back to Armada, facing him. "What will you do then?"

The crackling of the fire seemed hushed as if even the flames were waiting for his answer. He did not want to look at Ede because he would be able to see Armada behind her. He didn't want to notice the flat line that was Armada's mouth or the green leaves turning to autumn in her eyes. It was not that many nights ago that he had told her the darkness' name, and he did not want to remember the look on her face then or what she had said. He looked to the fire.

"Anything we can."



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*The bed was large and filled more than half of the small room. It was a combination of pillows and furs and down feathers with more furs and sheets that were very soft for covers. Tahrl pulled the coverings around himself and sank into the warm depths of the bed. The room, small as it was, seemed like any other room that he had ever seen in Greenhaven. The walls of brown wood or earth curved inward to become the ceiling and downward to become the floor. A soft light flooded the room revealing a table and chair and a chest where fresh clothes had been left out for him.*

He turned about among the covers to see who had pushed open the curtained doorway and had allowed light to flit and flow even for just one moment about the room. The Dryn who crossed the room and stood at the side of his bed was slender but strong and had an angular face. Her hair, the color of redwood trees growing in the deep forest, was pulled back from her face. Like all Dryn, her eyes were the color of green leaves when the snows were melting and the flowers were beginning to bloom. Her nightgown was like the drifting snow as it fell from the sky and gathered among the branches of the trees.

“Armada,” he said quietly, and his voice seemed somehow to fill the room.

Her mouth twisted into a crooked smile.

“Your thoughts fly always to her, don’t they?” Ede replied.

By what little light filtered past the curtain from the hall, Tahrl wondered if she could see the color rush to his face. His last sight of Armada had been as they were being shown to rooms, and he had seen them, arm in arm, turn to each other as the curtain fell into place. He had not intended to, but his gaze had lingered on the woolen cloth that had separated him from Chrystal and Armada.

“Oh, I. I never realized how alike you look.”

“Like sisters?” Her lips straightened into a smile while her eyes remained unfathomable in the dim light.

Tahrl curled his legs as she sat at the edge of the bed and ran her fingers over the surface.

“A request.” Her eyes moved from her fingers, drifting over the folds of the sheets to his face. “Stop hurting her.”

“What?” He gripped the covers between his fists and pulled them tight against his neck.

Her fingers stopped their wanderings, and she drew the hand back to her lap.

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“How to explain.” Closing her eyes, she drew her breath in slowly. “When Teresa became pregnant with Armada. She wasn’t young. She already had four daughters. Winonah, Rohana, Vashti, and me. No one had ever had four much less five live.”

“I know.” His voice sounded broken to his ears. “Alex said he hardly left her side until Armada was born.”

“Alex? Why do you insist on calling Delan that?”

“Because.” He relaxed his hold on the sheets and lifted his hands above the bed. “We raced through the Ivory Tower after the same book of poetry about the Crusade. We glared at each other over the book and demanded to know what the other intended with it. We laughed when we realized that we both had the same interests. To understand the dragons. That’s how I always think of him. With one hand protecting the book.”

“I remember the story.” She smiled down at him, and then her face suddenly clouded over. Her hands tightened into fists, and she bent her head almost to her knees.

“We’ll find him,” he said into the dark silence and reached for the long braid of her hair that draped over her shoulder.

“Why!” Her fists struck the bed as her head snapped around to look at him. “Why do you deny- Don’t you feel anything?”

“I feel his pain.”

She looked at him bent over as she was with eyes that seemed to shimmer with a trace of water. Her hand moved slowly over the sheets and traced the outline of his foot beneath the covers.

“I will learn what happened to him,” he said. “We’ll find Teresa. She’s not dead.”

“No, she’s not.” Ede shook her head. “I know. I have touched the forest’s heart. She taught me how.” Her hands returned to her lap, and she rested back against the edge of the bed. “Everyone was terrified she would die like Vashti had died. Like so many die. Giving birth to her daughter. I was so young.”

“I didn’t know.”

“A faded memory. Teresa never doubted. She finally agreed to groom me only to appease the others.”

“Why you? Rights of succession? Winonah?”

“Rights of succession? I could touch the whole forest. Every leaf, every tree, every plant, every animal, every drop of rain. So goes the succession. Armada can touch the forest when she wants to. But she has more. Magic to equal Teresa if not the experience.”

“Alex taught her.”

“Yes; control. For a time, they were inseparable. They would leave the forest. Travel the mountains. I don’t know where else. But Armada’s birth may have had a price.” Ede leaned toward him with her hands clenched again into fists. “She’s afraid she can’t- She’s terrified- Teresa always says not to worry, but even I have at times. Rohana, Winonah, and I have discussed it.”

“That Armada might be beh-”

Her hand tightened on his knee.

“For a Dryn.” Her fingers released his leg and floated in the air. “This is everything. How could you understand? To be accused of not bearing children is a deadly insult.”

“But she has tried.”

“Oh, yes! She has tried; the stories I could tell you! The-” She looked to the ceiling. “But she doesn’t listen to Teresa. Because of everything at her birth, I have always felt very close to Armada. Like she was my own daughter. I had Iola less than ten years later. Because of everything, I have felt Armada lay awake at night. I have felt her worry; her fear. So she acts recklessly.”

“Always first in the face of danger.”

Ede nodded her head and then looked at him with a lowered face.

“Until Delan brought you here.”

“What do you mean?” He felt as if his body was weighted down with stones and was sinking through the bedding.

“You wouldn’t have noticed the calming influence you’ve had on her. You think you’ve seen her violent, angry, foolhardy? Unable to control her power? It’s nothing to what she was once like. You two are the talk around many a hearth-fire.”

“I don’t understand.” He tried to curl into a tighter ball with his arms cupped around his legs.

“Here in Greenhaven. Anywhere she went. Any man she met. Would remind her of what she lacks. A daughter. What she has told me is that when she is around you, she doesn’t feel the need to be a mother. The release. The relief. To not feel the drive to mate.”

“But?” Tahrl closed his eyes against a curtain falling to block a glanced look at Armada with her arms around Chrystal’s back and her head against the other Dryn’s shoulder. A hand fell onto his shoulder and prevented him from turning among the covers away from Ede.

“She does care about you.”

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“She has a funny way of showing it.”

The hand pushed down against his shoulder, almost flipping him back to face her.

“Don’t you understand anything about us!” The hand jumped to his chin to hold his face looking at her. “Haven’t you listened to a word I’ve said?”

“Yes.” Opening his eyes, he looked up the slightly trembling arm to her face.

“Liar.” She looked away, but the hand kept his head from moving. “The thought of mating with you is a reminder of what she does not have. It hurts.”

“What are Chrystal and Juliana then?” Something felt strange as it moved inside of him like water or blood flooding a hollow in his chest.

“Those three have been together for so long it’s hard to remember them being separated. They’ve fought together. Shared friendship. Shared life. Shared men. Would you deprive her of that love? That commitment?”

“No.” He covered his face with a hand, and when he uncovered his eyes, Ede’s image shimmered through a drop of water.

“Maybe you do understand,” she whispered, and her hand stroked his cheek. “We’ve lost our father, Teresa is missing, and whatever had the power to do so is still out there. Armada was close to Delan in a way I will never understand. She isn’t taking the loss very well.”

Tahlr remembered how Chrystal had basically had to carry Armada from the practice room on that day. She had carried Armada to their private chambers, and he had seen neither one of them for a day and a night and a day. His hands folded across his shoulders and held there to prevent his body from shivering.

“She needs you,” Ede said, leaning over him, “but not the way you want her to need you.”

“It hurts,” he said with a mouth that seemed so weighted with tears that it surprised him the words escaped.

“Love,” she replied in DiKena.

She kissed him lightly on the lips, and then her hands were around his back. Tahlr’s arms encircled her and held on tightly. His face was pressed against her shoulder as she rocked him ever so slightly, and the touch of her nightgown was fragile and soft before it was gone.



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*A crash like thunder of stone against stone filled the empty spaces and shook the crumbling walls of wood and stone. The darkness was splintered and fragmented with shards of bloody light, revealing pale forms of tooth and claw that swirled about in the shifting light. The world cracked with a shock that broke the stone floor and cast everything down with a roar into darkness. Amid the rubble and settling rock, there was the thought and touch of creatures moving about, and the crack of stone striking stone in the dark. There was a heavy pressure and a sense of being crushed. A sharp pain flooding everywhere, piercing flesh, and yielding blood. An explosion of brilliant and painful light shattered the darkness, and a blast of scorching wind drowned out the screams of the bone thin monsters.*

Tahlr sat in the darkened room upon the feather bed with the damp sheets covering about his waist. His quivering arms enfolded his shoulders, and his ragged breathing burned with pain in his chest. A hand, not his own, touched the marks left where a troglodyte had once tried to bite his shoulder off. His back stiffened, and he started to pull away from the touch.

“What is it?” Ede whispered from the darkness next to him. The only sounds to follow were of his breathing and the rustling of the bed as she sat up. “You screamed.”

“A dream,” he managed to say as her hand continued to caress his back. “Only a dream.”

“Would only a dream drive you from sleep?”

Her other hand touched his arm where it held tightly to his chest and brushed upward to his face and his hair. Tahlr felt tremors all through his shoulder and back, and he wound his arms more tightly to try and hold himself still. One of her hands turned to his shoulder, and the other gently swept over his back. The fingers and nails seemed hooked and sharp against his skin, and the only sound was a hiss in the dark.

“No!” He flung his arms out, driving her back, and almost tumbled from the bed.

“What is it?” Her grip on his hands kept him from falling, held them together, and held him still.

“I.” The room was dark, but he could feel and almost see how her thumb brushed against the back of his hand. “The trog-” He tried to unclog his throat and remembered the feel of the earth at his back. He had held the weight of the creature off with his hands, and he

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could still feel the slime drip down his arms. “We were attacked. In the mountains.”

“Yes.”

“By the light of day!” His hands now gripped hers, and he drew them toward his chest. “Troglodytes attacked us.”

“Solace.” One of her hands untangled itself from his hold and brushed at the streak of tears on his cheek. “You have had no comfort? No release? You’ve held it all back?”

“Armada-”

“Hush.” Her fingers covered his lips.

His arms moved to encircle her, and then she moved to hold him with a fierce grip. In the almost perfect darkness of the room, he thought that he could see her and realized that Ede seemed to be glowing. Tahrl felt as if the light were seeping through his skin and driving the touch and the pain of the claws and fangs from him.

“Think it through,” he said.

Ede loosened her grip and pulled back enough to look at him.

“It’s about time you did.”

Tahrl looked away as the shimmering light of her body made it impossible for him to hold her gaze, and for the first time, he felt a fire in the hollow space of his chest.

“We were ambushed.” He looked back to her face.

“Yes.”

“Ridiculous. Moonlight said the storm was driven but do we even understand what she meant?”

“The power being expended to fight Delan was backwashing into the wind.”

“What?” He felt a tingling sensation like the touch of tiny swords on his face below his eyes and around his nose. He blinked his eyes and felt the tears falling freely over his cheeks.

“Skip it.”

“We thought maybe the troglodytes had been driven out into the sunlight to ambush us.” He looked at her from a crooked angle and wiped at his face with a hand. “Backwashing into the wind?”

“Just a theory of manifestations.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” The hand could do nothing to stop the flow of tears or dampen the warmth like tiny bubbles behind his eyes.

“How could you?” The touch of her lips was a gentle warmth that

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seemed to lessen the burning in his cheeks. “No one has tried to teach you magic.”

Tahrl nodded his head slowly and wiped his hand against the covers of the bed.

“The troglodytes,” Ede said.

“Yes, the troglodytes.” He tried once more to clear his throat of the weights that had seemed to take up residence there. “They may have been trapped out in the light. They could have felt the Greater Darkness and become bold. Finding us could have been an accident.”

“They could have been laying in wait for any patrol. We have been fighting them for many years.”

“Well.” He gripped her shoulders and could feel her arch backward with the suddenness of the touch. “If the troglodytes, why not the graths? Balthazar is not there to hold them in check.”

“Oh.” Ede’s shoulders twisted in a move that almost dislodged his grip, and then her hands came to rest above her lap. “Could they escape?”

“Would they have help?”

“I don’t- I’ll have a patrol sent to guard them.” She brought a hand up to brush at her hair and then moved away from Tahrl leaving her hands to linger with his. “Have you thought about what has happened? What you are going to do?”

“Beyond finding Alex? And Teresa?” He looked away from her and closed his eyes as if he expected to watch white robes and red bones flicker through the darkness once more. “No.”

“We cannot run blind.”

“Do we have a choice?” He gripped her fingers more fiercely and looked back into her eyes. “I cannot wait for someone to explain everything to me. I’m going to chase Teresa. Try to ask her questions.”

“Do you expect her to have the answer?”

“There may not be an answer. There-” His words faded to nothing, and his shoulders shook with what could become laughter. “The DiKena destroyed themselves. We are agreed on that?”

“They could not control their own power.”

“They understood no better than we do. But. What could survive without something to drive it?”

“We do,” Ede said and pulled her hands free of his fingers. “The dragons have survived, and they have power.”

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“But could we do any more than feed the trolls? And are troglodytes anything more than another form of troll?”

“I hope you’re not implying this Greater Darkness doesn’t exist.”

“I don’t know what I’m implying.” He brought his fingers up to claw at his face. “All I know are what legends I can remember. Cloudbreaker said they know nothing of legends. What can we believe? The moral is stray thoughts lead to destruction. How much of the legends are truth, and how much of the truths are legend?”

“Do you know why Delan rejected his power?” Ede pried Tahrl’s hands away from his face.

“What?”

“He had become Magincia’s Avatar because they had given him no choice.” Her fingers tightened around his hands. “But, do you know why he abandoned the power?”

Tahrl shook his head slowly from side to side. Her hands strayed to his face to hold his head still, and she looked into his eyes.

“He watched his thoughts become reality,” Ede said. “He bound his power so that he would never create monsters.”

“I didn’t-” He choked on the words and doubled over with coughing that shook his body. “He never told me,” Tahrl finally whispered and then wiped at the corner of his mouth.

“This all happened long before you were born.”

“He could have told me.” He closed his eyes and felt the dark shadows and creatures swirling around him and clawing at his heart. “Do you think Delan is responsible?”

“No. Oh, no.” Her voice seemed to shake as if she were about to cry. “The wizards and now the magicians never understood Delan’s warning. The magicians have no safeguards, and their power reigns unchecked.”

“Unleashing anything.”

“Yes,” Ede said, as the room seemed to grow darker. “Anything.”

### *Chapter Three*

## **Fragments of Story and Song**

*The morning was twisted light filtered by the trees and clouds that seemed not as dark as those from the days before. The Saffron river flowed between the trees of Greenhaven and lingered only long enough to form a small lake before continuing its journey through the forest. It was here, before the lake with its single tree whose branches appeared to have exploded out of the water, that the Dryn had gathered. More women than Tahrl could count waited and fidgeted where they stood as if they had lost something and were expecting him to retrieve it for them. Salton, one of the two official ambassadors from the Ivory Tower, stood between Winonah and Rohana with his arms locked over his chest and refused to listen as he had refused to listen all morning to why Tahrl was going with Chrystal and Armada. With no more words to be spoken, they lead the horses between the trees of Greenhaven followed by the assembled Dryn and lead by the four daughters of Teresa and Alexander. It was beyond the edge of Greenhaven where the normal trees of the forest held sway that the lingering crowd of Dryn finally stopped to watch the small group mount their horses and watch them ride away.*

Tahrl looked back to where the assembled Dryn had stood moments before and saw only the trees as if the forest was suddenly empty and alone. He did not look back a second time as the day passed, and they did not ride as quickly as they had to reach Greenhaven. It was as if they had all looked back and seen the trees standing alone. The clouds gathered more thickly and grew darker, causing the light to fade from between the trees. Vixen did not falter in the dimming light and was able to keep pace with the other horses. It was not until long after the day had passed and the sun had disappeared behind the mountains that they finally stopped and prepared a camp with the aid of a light that Iola struck.

The next day woke them early with the feeling of rain running

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over the leaves. The forest was damp and dark, but the rain was not thick enough to escape the trees and fall upon them. The rain was a whispered memory by the time they left the forest behind them entering the small town of Edgewood, and Tahrl made certain that he was the first to leave the wood behind them. The town had once been little more than a number of buildings lined up along a road that ran past the forest, but it had recently grown as the Kianan sought to trade with the Dryn of Greenhaven. None of the townsfolk around and about took much notice of the small band that followed the simple path from the forest's edge. They crossed to the dirt and gravel road that was the center of town and found in-between the buildings a small clearing that had once been blackened earth. Several young and slender trees had grown tall on the open ground, and a bronze statute rested at the edge of the road in the shade of their branches.

Tahrl climbed from Vixen's back and stood before the small statute of a dragon with its wings folded against the ground supporting its head raised into the air so that it appeared to be surveying the road. With the statute was a plaque with a short list of Kianan names carved into its surface. He knelt before the statute so that his eyes were on a level with those of the dragon and raised two fingers to his lips.

"Winterfriend," he whispered in DiKena as he touched his fingers to the dragon's head. The hand rested there for a moment and then caressed the back of the statute's neck.

When he turned from the bronze dragon, he saw that the others had not dismounted and that, except for Armada, they waited with heads bowed to study the ground at their horses' feet. Armada held his gaze, and the hand that gripped Shadowfox's reins was a fist. He returned to his horse, and taking Vixen's reins in his hand, he led them toward the house to one side of the clearing. He noticed two men on the porch. One stood at the very edge, looking at Tahrl with a hand gripping a post. The other had not moved from where he sat, but he too watched Tahrl lead Vixen toward them.

"Tahrl," said the first man with a start as if he would lose his grip and fall; then he jumped from the porch as if the house had burned him. "Long time."

Tahrl looked the tall and fair-haired man up and down before he finally put his arm around the other's shoulders.

"Too long."

Tahlr climbed the step to the porch and moved to take the seat that Aaron had left when they had appeared. Chetwin was slightly older than either Aaron or himself and watched Tahlr with his fingers linked together beneath his chin.

“It must be important to bring you this far from Highwall,” he said without turning to see that Aaron now stood with the Dryn as they climbed from their horses.

“Teresa has left Greenhaven,” Tahlr said carefully and watched how Chetwin’s hands moved with a finger sliding down the back of one hand.

“That does not surprise me. The governess of Greenhaven does what she pleases. Your choices are more carefully watched.”

“Don’t start. Don’t lecture me on what I can and cannot do.”

“I have said nothing.” The palm of Chetwin’s hand faced Tahlr, and for the first time, he looked to where the Dryn were stepping onto the porch. “You have come to me.”

Tahlr bit at the air in his mouth as Chetwin looked back to him and raised a questioning eyebrow. He did not want to think about it, but he did wonder if Chetwin’s gaze had lingered upon Armada or Iola.

“I want to tell you what Salton already knows,” he said slowly and could feel how his fingers were gripped tightly together. “Teresa has disappeared. And we are worried.”

“Is she in danger? Will Greenhaven crumble?”

“Never,” Armada and Iola said in the same moment.

“No disrespect intended to your people or your mother.” Chetwin bowed his head slightly in their direction and then brought his hands back to rest below his chin. “The matter is serious.”

“We have reason to believe that Teresa is looking.” Tahlr glanced for the slightest of moments to Armada and noticed her hand uncurl at her side. “For something dangerous.”

“Go on.” Chetwin’s eyes did not waver from him.

“I believe she is looking for something the DiKena left behind.”

“What are you talking about? What do you mean left behind?”

“Look.” A fist rapped against the arm of his chair, and Tahlr remembered how Salton had laughed. “How much do you—” He remembered how, with a wave of his hand and a nod of his head, Salton had ignored everything he had said. “The DiKena did much that we don’t know and couldn’t understand. Something left be-

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hind. Something hidden in one of the cathedrals and overlooked until now.”

“Don’t lie to me, Tahrl. I’ve always given you more credit than that. Why would anything of the kind drag you all the way from Highwall?”

He wondered if the chair could support the weight he felt growing through him. Chetwin had not moved from his own seat with his hands held even and still below his chin, and he did not bother to look to the Dryn standing at the edge of the porch.

“How well do you know the legends?”

“I am vaguely familiar with them,” Chetwin said. “I’ve been brushing up on the parts concerning the Dryn and the Kianan.”

“You know they created things they could not control.” He blinked back the image of a slender and elongated face flickering in the reddish light.

“I don’t question that part. Where did you hear about this? This relic. Not from Teresa.”

“From the Wind- winter. From the dragons.” Tahrl closed his eyes and tried to banish what felt like thick air from his lungs. “And they said it was Alexander who found it.”

“Ah, now we are getting somewhere. Teresa and the minstrel are very close. That much is obvious. You have reason to believe he may have been hurt.”

“Yes.” The chambers had been dark with flickering light, and the white robes had run through the halls. “And-” He choked on the word as if it was dry and hard. The white robes had danced like lights in the dark, and the person not clothed in white had held a rod that glared with silver light. “And there were magicians with him.”

“What!” A shout from Armada.

“That could be a problem.” The hand shifted. His face was held still, but Chetwin’s eyes were fixed upon Armada.

“You never mentioned magicians!” she said in Dryn while stepping between them.

“If there is a disagreement between the Dryn and the magicians-”

“You never said they were involved!”

Armada towered over him, and Tahrl could feel her legs brushing against either side of his knee. Her face was lowered over his own, and the hand that pressed his wrist against the chair hurt. The other

hand, unfocused and away from her face, was a fist that wavered at her side.

“The images are unclear.” He turned his head from side to side beneath her gaze. “My memory is worse. Things make sense when they want to and not when I want them to.”

Chrystal put her hand on Armada’s shoulder and whispered things in Dryn that sounded like nonsense. He felt a touch at his hair and realized that Iola and Aaron were both standing behind him.

“Magicians.” The breath of the name brushed over his face. “They had him.” She stood, and with Chrystal’s hand still on her shoulder, stepped back from him.

“Tahrl,” Chetwin said, and he realized that the man was standing. “What you have brought me is important, and you have told me more than you may realize. But.” Chetwin raised a hand with the fingers curled together. “You cannot go. You are too important.”

“I’m not. We are going to circle the mountains to the north and return to Highwall that way.”

Their eyes locked together as Tahrl rubbed the hand and arm that Armada had pressed against the wood, and he could feel the others standing around and beside him.

“Don’t lie to me, Tahrl.” Chetwin turned to look to the trees and the bronze dragon. “If I thought you were going after Teresa, I would have to stop you. There are soldiers here, and they would bind you hand and foot if I told them to. Go around the mountains to the north but don’t follow Teresa. And, don’t tell anyone what you are doing when you reach Windvale. In fact, avoid Windvale altogether. The soldiers there wouldn’t understand, and the last thing I need is an incident between Dryn and Kianan. Don’t follow Teresa. And, don’t go through Windvale. Is that clear?”

Chetwin turned and stepped back toward him.

“Perfectly,” he said and then stood to take Chetwin’s hand.

As they shook hands, he felt one of Chetwin’s fingers touch his palm in a way that would only be understood by another ambassador or someone who had once been an adviser to the king. The simple message conveyed by the touch was for good hunting and for good luck.



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*They remained for the one night in the small town of Edgewood, staying at the house that had been built for the Dryn ambassadors and rested next to the clearing with its bronze statute of a dragon. With the first light of the morning sun, they left the town and followed the dirt and gravel road that rested beside the forest. They traveled quickly over the open road and altered their path to go around a caravan with the late afternoon sun drifting all around them. Two and then three days passed as they watched the forest give way to the mountains to the west of the road. They stayed clear of other people and anything that looked like a small but growing settlement. The road curved to the north of the Redstained mountains, and they held to it even as they approached Windvale. Keeping to the outskirts of town, they did not stop until the sun had nearly set and Windvale was behind them far to the south. With their camp prepared and Daena tending to a budding fire, they heard the sound of approaching horses.*

Tahlr and Armada both jumped to their feet and looked to the south with its sounds of galloping horses. Everyone remained still even Daena who sat holding a twig suspended partway into the fire. What they saw were two horses with the cloaks of their riders reflecting off-white and faded red by the twilight. The others, watching, slowly rose to their feet and gathered around Tahlr. Iola moved to stand with the horses and placed a comforting hand against her own mount.

As they drew closer, it was possible to tell that both riders wore white robes, and the first had a beard and hair the color of gold that covered his shoulders and shook with the wind.

“Balthazar,” Armada said, and the word was a weight that fell heavily to the dust at her feet.

Tahlr took a step toward the two riders as they came to a halt before him and held their horses still.

“Tahlr,” Balthazar said, nodding slightly, and brushed the gold hair from his face. “I’m surprised you didn’t stop at Windvale. I did not wish to give chase.”

“I’m surprised you’re not straddling one of your pets,” Armada replied, casting the words out before Tahlr had a chance to speak.

The horse stepped to the side and shook his head in protest to Balthazar’s twisted hold on the reins. Balthazar snorted in much the same way the horse could as he looked at her.

“Armada,” he finally said. “As refined as ever.”

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“From you that’s funny.”

Tahlr watched her take another step toward Balthazar and realized that the others had begun to gather around her. The horse pawed at the ground, and the magician still held the reins with a tight grip.

“What do you want, Balthazar?” he said.

The magician looked to him as his horse took a step back and away from the Dryn.

“I was, in fact, looking for you.” Balthazar let the loosened folds of the reins drape across the horse’s neck. “But I was not expecting to find you this far from Highwall. I need-” His gaze shrank to the fist resting against his knee and then snapped back to Tahlr’s face. “I have been sent to speak with the drakes.”

“You!” The word was more like a shouted bark of laughter than a question.

“Yes.” Balthazar turned his gaze upon Armada. “The council has questions for them.”

“Why would the Windmasters humor a would-be Slaughterer!”

Tahlr felt the night settling all around them. The sun was gone, having disappeared beyond the horizon, and the land was growing dark. There were no stars to be seen through the patches in the clouds, and he could not find the moon. Then he heard the silence that surrounded Balthazar and realized the magician was sitting rigidly on the back of his horse, glaring down at Armada. The half-light from the immature fire made his face appear distorted and red.

“What questions?”

The light snapped, and he watched the magician repeatedly blink his eyes and slowly shake his head before looking down at him.

“What questions do you want to ask them?” Tahlr said. “I must approve all requests to speak with the Windmasters at Highwall.”

“I thought you gave the drakes free reign?” The smile that Balthazar presented him was anything but pleasant.

“I do. I always ask if they want to meet the person before I make my decision.”

“Very well.”

The magician slid abruptly from the back of his horse. The woman who had ridden the second horse and also wore the white robes of a master magician dismounted and took the reins to Balthazar’s mount from him. He strode between the Dryn as if they were not

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there and seated himself before the still budding fire. They watched him next to the fire with his arms crossed over his chest, and then under Balthazar's gaze the fire began to burn more fiercely.

Tahrl looked among the faces of the others and noticed Armada's hand resting upon the hilt of her sword. He turned to the second magician who still stood with the two horses as if she were trying to ignore Balthazar. She appeared to be even shorter than the other magician with black hair that looked as if she had once hurriedly cut it with a knife and a round face that was tanned like someone who was not familiar with the sun.

"Earlinstien or Tyrcraig?" he said to her in Montmorin.

She turned from the horses with the reins held in each hand, and a smile slipped over the corners of her lips. Tahrl ignored the looks from the others and the glare he knew he must have been getting from Balthazar as he took a step closer to her.

"Earlinstien," she replied also in the Montmorin language. "Of the Vedoman house."

"Wait a moment." Tahrl smiled back at her and felt the fire burn more easily behind them with the light reflecting cleanly off her robes. "You wouldn't be Hath Malor's granddaughter, would you?"

"Yes!" The light of the fire seemed almost to sparkle in her eyes. "And you are Tahrl Morgan ap Morin."

For the slightest of moments, Tahrl shut his eyes and closed his hands into fists at his sides.

"I wish you wouldn't call me that."

"Why?"

"Master Sorcha!" Balthazar said in Kianan from where he sat before the fire. "We are here for a reason!"

"Please." Sorcha rolled her eyes as she switched back to the Kianan language. "You may be senior, but this is family."

She raised her hands into the air as if to add weight to her words and seemed to notice that she still held the reins for both horses. Her gaze switched from the one hand to the other and then shifted back to Tahrl. Glancing at each hand, Sorcha threw the reins at the ground.

"Tahrl," she spoke once more in Montmorin, bringing her fists up before her chest and holding them unsteadily in place. "This. I should be the one to tell you."

He watched Sorcha shift uncomfortably from foot to foot and looked beyond her to the others. Armada had moved her hand away

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from the sword and had folded her arms over her chest. Her lopsided gaze was fixed upon Balthazar seated before the sputtering fire, and the light played off her look of grim satisfaction.

“He.” Sorcha looked to the ground, and the flickering fire seemed to stretch and elongate her face in reddish light. “Alexander spoke of you.”

“What did she say!” Armada’s arms jerked to her sides as she took a step toward them.

“When?” Tahrl shook his head as the red light played over her robes. Images of white robes running through flickering light leapt before his eyes. “When did you speak with Alex?”

“Before.” Her face turned from the earth to look to him, and the struggle faded from Sorcha’s fists. “We were hunting- he said we were hunting. In the cathedral.”

The sun was gone, having disappeared beyond the horizon, and all that was left was a smear of blood across the sky.

“The story is grave. Before the final hunt. He spoke well of you. It is my place to tell you.”

Tahrl looked to the air. The clouds were black and filled the sky, hiding the stars and blocking the moon.

“We couldn’t imagine. The power.” Sorcha shivered. Her arms were wrapped over her chest, hugging her shoulders. “It dwarfed us. It would have consumed us.”

The clouds, reflecting the last of the twilight sun, were like the vaulted ceiling to a room with no walls. It was like standing in a vast chamber of flickering red light enclosed by shadows with someone clothed all in white robes.

“If not for Alexander.”

Hands reached for him. Out of the darkness and little more than shadows, clawed hands grabbed at him from memory. Bone thin and the color of dried blood, they encircled him.

“He stood against them.”

The flash and flare of a silver light drove the talons back. He remembered a silver rod glaring with harsh light, and he remembered the music.

“He told us to run while he held them back.”

The rod made music, but it wasn’t a rod. It was a flute. A flute that burned with a silver fire and wielded by the man who had made it.

“Tahrl.”

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He blinked his eyes to clear them of dew and looked to the Dryn standing around him and to the horses behind them and to Balthazar seated before a roaring fire. One of the white robes stood before him. One of the white robes was reaching a hand out toward him.

“Alexander sacrificed himself so that we might live.”

“No!”

The light was gone. He could not see. The world spun around him. He could not see. His hand hurt, and he wondered why there was pain. The silver light had fragmented and shattered, leaving everything in darkness. The hollow space in his chest burned with a lightless flame. Taloned hands clawed at him and tried to pierce him and tear out the fire. Glowing fragments and glittering shards of light drifted through the darkness. Claws raked over his skin. His lips broke, and he screamed like a broken song. The talons and claws took a firmer hold and sunk into his flesh. A gasp for breath only allowed fingers to reach down his throat, and he coughed with a pain that brought up blood. He felt the earth pressed against his face as he tried to cry and could only cough more violently.

There was someone next to him who brushed the claws from him, and he could feel them blown away on the wind. Someone held something before his chest, and he took it, pressing his hands against his heart. The fire grew softer under his fingers, and the burning stopped spreading through his body. He felt a touch against his shoulder and looked up the arm to notice Armada on one knee next to him.

“You’ve been holding that in all this time?” she whispered the words to him and brushed her hand over his shoulder.

Tahrl gulped for breath and tasted dust in his mouth. He wanted to speak, but no words came out only a trickle of blood and a sigh.

“That’s what you sounded like,” Chrystal said, moving to stand at Armada’s side, “when you screamed in the practice room.”

He blinked past a streak of tears to watch Armada raise her head to look beyond him and lean against Chrystal. She nodded her head once after a long moment and then looked back down at him.

“Are you ready?” Her hand caressed his side, taking away the pain with the touch. “Are you finally ready to accept that he is gone?”

His shoulders shook as he tried to giggle with a voice that sounded more like a shudder of pain. The hand against his side felt solid and warm, and he never wanted the feeling of that touch to end. He

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slowly tried to lift his face from the earth, and the touch shifted to his shoulder, seeming to help him move as he shifted from his side.

“It hurt,” he whispered and was surprised that he could form words at all.

The hand touched the side of his chin, and he looked up into Armada’s face. The trees were there in her eyes, and the forest was drifting in a fine mist. He tried to smile back at her and noticed Chrystal beside her with a hand on Armada’s shoulder. Tahrl swallowed once and turned his gaze away from them. The white robed magician, Sorcha, sat some little distance back from them, and her gaze seemed to be unfocused upon him. When their eyes met, she blinked and raised the back of one hand to her cheek. He looked down at his own hand and wiggled the fingers, triggering a memory of pain that he had felt there moments before.

“I struck you,” he said, looking back to her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t even realize-”

“No,” she said in Kianan with the hand still held against her face. “No apologizes. The bond between you and Alexander was strong.”

“And you felt it violently severed,” Armada said and brought her other hand up to brush through his hair. “With no training, what else could we expect you to do but block out the pain? Deny everything. I didn’t think.” She looked to the ground at her feet as she tried to clear her throat and then looked back to him. “I’m sorry.”

“Does this mean you’ve calmed down?”

The hands fell from Tahrl and came to rest against Armada’s knee as her mouth formed an unvoiced word. Their gazes locked over the brittle and bitter sound of the campfire burning nearby.

“Please.” Sorcha’s voice snapped the silence, and they both looked to her. “What she said. Is that why you are here so far from Highwall?”

“Of course, that’s why they’re here!” Balthazar said from his eternal seat next to the fire. “They’re probably running like sun crazed cavern trolls toward the Earlinstien cathedral.”

“Master Balthazar!” Sorcha rounded on the other magician, half-rising to her feet. “I will not warn you again. Do not speak so of family!”

The light of the fire made Balthazar’s face look to be little more than a mask surrounded by a mane of gold and reflected red hair. He did not make a sound as he raised his hand into the air, and a tongue of flame leapt from the fire to swirl around his fist.

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“Wait a moment!” Tahrl said, trying to stand, managing only to slide forward onto his knees. “The Earlinstien cathedral. He saved you. You were there. You were there.”

With her hands still clenched at her sides, Sorcha turned her head barely enough to look to Tahrl from the corner of her eye.

“Yes,” she said, “I was there.”

“Tell me. Tell me everything.”

“That’s why we are here.” Balthazar uncurled his fingers and lowered his hand to his side.

“You were not there,” Sorcha said to him, and when Balthazar did not reply, she stood, brushing at her robes as she turned to face Tahrl. “I will tell you all.”

When Tahrl tried to stand, the strength seemed to seep from his body, and he would have crumpled back to the ground if Armada had not reached out to help him. With Chrystal and Armada at his side, he waited a moment for his legs to stop shaking and then raised his hands palms open with a shrug of his shoulders to dislodge their hold. Armada did not support him, but she would not leave his side as he walked to the campfire’s edge. He noticed Iola and Daena moving about; Iola was caring for the two magicians’ horses, and Daena was going through the packs so there would be food. They were very quiet as they worked, and he realized that neither one of them had made a sound since the magicians had arrived. He sank to the ground before the fire and across from where Balthazar sat. Sorcha stood for a moment between Tahrl and Balthazar before she sat and then looked to the fire.

“He came to us; Alexander did,” she finally said, looking to Tahrl. “Well, he came to me really. You see; I grew up with the Earlinstien cathedral. It was always there. You know what that’s like, Tahrl. Your family lives with the Ivory Tower.”

“It’s hardly the same thing.”

“No; I know. It’s not like you can be inside the tower. No one has done that. But I know the cathedral. I would go there whenever I wanted to be away from people. Whenever I wanted to go exploring. So he came to me and wanted to know about the cathedral. But he didn’t ask me the normal questions. The things people always ask me. He asked me what I remembered thinking while I was there; how the place felt.”

“Imagery,” Armada said.

“Yes, imagery. But at first, I thought his questions were funny.”

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I mean, of course, magic is pooled there, and things were easier to do. It is a DiKena cathedral, after all. One of their homes. You can practically feel the background magic tingling against your skin, and magicians go there all the time to tap that residue of power.”

Tahrl nodded his head as he remembered how quiet the Earlinstien cathedral had felt when he had been there. He shivered as he remembered how the wind had felt as it brushed over his clothes and against his skin.

“But the questions he asked.” She brought her arms over her chest and gripped her shoulders. “They made me think about it differently. The questions started to scare me, and I began to remember things about the cathedral I can’t believe I had forgotten. He went to the council. He wanted me there when he met with them, but they would not allow it.” The fingers loosened their hold on her arms. “That made him angry.”

“It would,” Armada said.

“The council represents the greatest of us,” Balthazar said. “You would have no voice at such a meeting.”

“Your council-”

“Alexander said the council is a bunch of atrophying fools so blinded by their own faith that they would put their own tree to the torch.”

Armada threw back her head and laughed with a sound that drowned out the fire and filled the sky.

“Master Sorcha!” Balthazar almost screamed as he jumped to his feet and held his fists clenched at his sides.

“It’s what he said.” Sorcha raised her hands into the air, but the other magician still stood unable to keep his hands from shaking. “And it took three days for the council to listen. On the first day.” She held up one finger. “They thought he was there only to perform or something. Maybe to ask them to clear up a point in a song. On the second day, he finally got a real audience.”

Facing down the two fingers Sorcha held before him, Balthazar slowly sat back before the fire.

“But he told me they wouldn’t listen. Not until the flames dwarfed the trees. His words.”

“They never listened to him,” Armada whispered in Dryn next to Tahrl’s ear. “Not ever.”

“And then something strange happened.” Sorcha’s hand fell to her lap before she turned back to face Tahrl. “He told me that no

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matter what happened he wanted me to think of him as Alexander the minstrel. It seemed like a strange request, but I promised to always call him Alex.”

The fire seemed to grow strangely cold to Tahrl, and he sat very still with his hands folded over his lap. The others, Chrystal, Daena, and Iola had gathered around the fire behind and to the side of Armada with whatever they had been doing either finished or forgotten.

“On the third day, they listened.” Sorcha tried to laugh. “Whatever he did. Whatever he said. It worked. The council caused an uproar that shook Magincia from the apprentices’ cells to the masters’ apartments. Before the day was out, half the council was ready to ride for Earlinstien. Master Rufus, Master Wincroft, Master Canace, Master Hamarthon, and Master Vala were all going. I was brought along at Alexander’s insistence as a guide. On the journey, all they would speak of were the DiKena legends, and somehow he found time to tell me things about magic. It was confusing. What he told me.” She shook her head as if to clear it. “Cycles and patterns and intricate foci and.”

“Wizardry.”

“Yes! It- it- it was. Wow!” She giggled and then the shocked smile dropped from her face as she sank back to the ground. “But what the masters called him.” The fingers of one hand traced over her lips as if she were trying to quench the flow of words. “Dalin.”

Four Dryn sat so still that their silence was as loud as a shout. Tahrl held his breath. He didn’t want to move; he didn’t want to make the slightest of sounds, and the beating of his heart sounded too loud in his ears.

“Dalin was-”

“The name they used to bind him!” Armada said over Sorcha with a voice that could shatter wood and crack stone.

“The Avatar of Magincia.”

“The wizards’ puppet!”

Sorcha covered her face with her hands.

“With no will of his own and only the illusion of identity!” Armada raised her arms into the air and then struck the ground with her fists. “They had him! They drove him back to that!”

“The Avatar betrayed the council!”

A shock of wind and the crash of thunder rocked the night. Balthazar was sprawled flat on his back with Armada towering over him.

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Her knee was pressed into his stomach, and her hands held his arms flayed wide.

“He barely escaped with his life,” she said into his face.

Tahrl blinked and tried to stand on legs that refused to support him. Chrystal, Daena, and Iola rushed to stand around Armada, and Chrystal touched her with one hand.

“What purpose would killing him serve?” she said.

They heard Balthazar gag with pain as Armada pushed her knee up into his ribs. Tahrl tried to speak with air that rushed through his quickly opening and closing mouth.

“Are you trying to put your own tree to the torch!”

Her head jerked up. Chrystal slammed into Armada, lifting her from Balthazar. Daena grabbed hold, and the three Dryn tumbled to the ground. Sorcha reached Balthazar as he curled onto his side and retched on air. Iola stood between the other Dryn and the magicians with her arm held out, palm flat, facing Sorcha.

“I should kill you for that,” Balthazar managed to say.

“You want to try!” Armada shouted, struggling against Chrystal and Daena.

“No!” Iola held the hand firmly in place, blocking the magicians, and risked a glance at Armada.

“The fucking Avatar!” Balthazar rose to his hands and knees with Sorcha standing at his side. “What power could they hold over him!”

“There’s more to power than your butt-fucking magic!”

“Enough!” Tahrl shouted as he leapt to his feet and noticed that even Armada had stopped struggling. “Iola stand down and find a waterskin to empty on your aunt. Master Balthazar, I will tolerate no attempts against any of the Dryn. Armada, I should send you back to Greenhaven.”

“By what right do you threaten me?” Balthazar asked as he climbed unsteadily to his feet and faced Tahrl.

“I am the drakes’ Winterfriend. They would empty Magincia’s libraries if I asked.”

“You couldn’t.” Balthazar took a step backward, unclenching his fists.

“Yes.” He turned on the Dryn. “As for you, Armada, I could have the soldiers removed. The men would leave Greenhaven. All of them.”

Chrystal and Daena released their hold on Armada’s arms, and her hands sank to the ground.

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“You wouldn’t dare,” Daena whispered in Dryn.

“Iola!”

He snap-turned to face where she stood with the waterskin held loosely in one hand. He took it from her unresisting grasp and walked to stand before Armada. Removing the stopper, he crushed the waterskin between his fingers, spraying Armada with its contents. Chrystal and Daena jumped back as Armada, sputtering and coughing, wiped the water from her face. Her hand whipped through her hair and then flicked droplets of water from her fingers to bead the ground.

“Enough,” he said. “Enough.”

The fire roared violently in her eyes as if at any moment the flames would flare between them and burn him to a blackened stump. A drop of water like a single tear slid from her hair and into one eye, causing her to blink and look away. When she turned back to him, her eyes were filled with the deep forest after the rain has parted and the leaves were soaking up the light.

“Fucking Drae,” Armada said and lowered a fist as if she had grabbed something in the air between them. “I can respect that. All right Winterfriend. Enough.”

Cradling the empty waterskin with one hand, he slowly placed it on the ground before her and looked back to her face, seeing her nod with a suppressed laugh. Chrystal settled easily on one knee next to Armada while her gaze remained on Tahrl, and Daena still stood a step back from them with her arms folded together. He looked to where Iola stood apart from the others with her fists slowly clenching and unclenching at her sides. When she turned her face away from them, he followed her gaze to where Sorcha and Balthazar stood beside the fire.

He stood, turning to face the two magicians, and took a step toward them. Balthazar’s hands hung empty, and the light made his disheveled robes appear to be smeared with earth. Without a movement of her arm or a turn of her hand, Sorcha drew Tahrl’s attention away from him. She stood between them as if she could turn aside anything that might fall upon them, and the light flickered across her face and robes to make her appear almost to be glowing.

“Don’t stay here,” Tahrl said while his hand moved to take in the fire and the camp.

“I wouldn’t.”

“Go on to Highwall.” He looked to her face, but with the sharp

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edges of light reflecting from the fire in her eyes, he could not hold her gaze. “Moonlight and Cloudbreaker will answer what questions they can.”

“Can we be certain of an audience?” She glanced over her shoulder at Balthazar. “You won’t be there to approve.”

“I’ll give you a letter.” He turned to make for where their packs were settled. “They don’t even know where we are going-”

“How did you know?” Armada said over the end of Tahrl’s words.

He stopped in mid-step, reaching for the packs as everyone turned to where Armada stood with her hands at her sides and her fingers curled together.

“How did you know where we were going?” She raised a hand into the air and pointed a finger at Balthazar. “Like sun crazed cavern trolls. How did you know we were bound for the Earlinstien cathedral?”

“Where-” Sorcha almost laughed, cutting off the word with a rush of air, and her eyes moved between Tahrl and Armada. “Where else would you be going?”

“To find Delan’s grave.” Armada lowered the hand, and as her fingers curled together, a single drop of water, flickering red in the firelight, fell through her grasp.

“Who?” She shook her head as if something were clinging to her face, and her eyes flinched away from Armada. “Tahrl, I thought you were bound for Earlinstien because-”

“We are bound for the Earlinstien cathedral because of what happened to Delan.”

Tahrl felt the tingling of tiny pinpricks below his eyes and around his nose, and he brought one half-closed hand up before his chest.

“Delan! Dalin!” Sorcha swept her arm through the air with the sleeve of her robes whipping about. “I didn’t realize you would know that Alex was killed in the explosion!”

“What?” His hand, falling, forced him to stumble a step closer to her. “What explosion?”

“Like an erupting volcano that tore the cathedral into so much rubble,” Balthazar said from behind Sorcha’s shoulder with a voice that sounded hoarse from disuse. “That’s how the people describe it.”

Tahrl shot a look at Armada who stood like a tree surrounded by stone to deprive her of the movement of the wind. He remembered the touch of Chetwin’s hand against his own, and the message hid-

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den in the touch for him to have good hunting. Armada shrugged her shoulders once with her gaze centered upon him.

“It was seen for hundreds of miles,” Sorcha said. “The knowledge spread faster than we could ride. Windvale was already rampant with the news when we arrived. We were waiting there a day just to find out what news would catch up with us.”

“Malor? Urtha and Gran?” Tahrl held an arm out with the fingers reaching crookedly for her.

“They’re fine.” She held a hand flat to face him. “Would I be here if they were not?”

His gaze fell to the ground at her feet.

“How did you survive?” Armada had her arms across her chest while Chrystal and Iola stood with her.

“Alexander.”

A branch cracked amid the flames and sent up a shower of sparks that flew with the smoke like fragments of a shattered light. Sorcha watched the blaze and stretched out a hand as if she were trying to grasp the shards that fluttered away from her fingers.

“He drank of the flames.” Her eyes were only for the hand suspended above the fire. “And the music-” She drew back the hand to wipe at her face and eyes. “We flew on the breath of a song to my grandfather’s door.”

“You left him.”

“No!” She spun to face Armada with her robes swirling red and burnt wood in the flickering light. “He told us to run while he broke the door. He- He may have known what would happen.”

“Broke the door?” Tahrl looked from Sorcha to Armada who raised her head as if she would answer his question.

“Trapped the nightmares elsewhere, so to speak,” Balthazar said, and the glance that Armada shot him cracked over the fire.

“As Masters Rufus and Hamarthon put it, the DiKena’s creations were using the cathedral as a way here.” Sorcha lowered her arms with the fingers spread wide, and one hand was held before the other magician. “Alexander took it upon himself to prevent this.”

“And the shattering wind ruptured the cathedral,” Iola whispered.

“You make it sound almost insignificant.”

Iola shook her head slowly and took a step away from Sorcha.

“Like an erupting volcano; have you ever seen a volcano?” Sorcha held out her hands, grasping at the wind, with her fingers curled

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as if she would draw Iola to her. “A mountain. The entire side of a mountain thrown into the air like so much loose dirt. Covered with trees. Trees that would dwarf us!” She spun an arm into the air to reach for the clouds. “Tossed about like-” Her hand dove into the fire, grasping the flames, lifting a branch, raining shards of fire over the crack of shattering wood. “Like so many twigs!”

Tahrl made a muffled sound like a cry that pushed against the roof of his mouth as he stumbled toward her. Chrystal and Daena had both moved with Armada holding a hand out to Sorcha, and Iola had hidden her mouth with one hand.

“And the sound!” Sorcha shook the branch, and her fingers sunk into the wood. “The sound lifted me from my feet and tossed me like a rag! As if I was nothing! As if I was nothing!”

“Please.”

She looked to Tahrl as he stood with his hands out, shaking ever so slightly, and her gaze traveled down her arm to where she held the branch above the fire. She spread her fingers, and the wood toppled onto the flames. The hand she drew back to hold beneath her gaze was blackened, but there was no mark of blistering or burning.

“Fire and blood, Tahrl.” The Montmorin words were shaken with tears. “How can you fight that?” The hand rose to smear her face with ash and streak her face with tears.

Tahrl fell back a pace and noticed the fire burning low and the cold and the dark seeping around them.

“Cloudbreaker didn’t know,” he whispered, and his head trembled with the words. “Moonlight and Graywing don’t know. Skysailor or Stormsdream? Maybe one of the others? I don’t know.”

“Help us.”

Surrounded by trees, the empty forest filled his mind, and the faces of the Dryn, standing between the trees with hair the color of redwood and gold looked to him.

“The cathedral; I must go.”

“Why?”

“Because-” He glanced to Teresa’s daughter and granddaughter, and Armada shook her head slightly from side to side. “I must.”

“You promised me a letter,” Sorcha said in Kianan, darkening her robes with the blackened hand.

“Yes.”

Tahrl walked to the packs and searched through them until he had found paper and something to write with. Sitting among the

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packs, he wrote the message to Hector, using his knee as a writing desk. He looked up as he folded the finished page and saw that Iola and Chrystal had seen to the magicians' horses. He stepped from among the packs to where Sorcha still stood beside the fire. His eyes drifted from her, and she followed his gaze to where Balthazar stood watching the Dryn with the horses.

“Tell Skysailor that Alex sought you out.”

Sorcha nodded her head as she accepted the letter and tucked it within the folds of her robes. Turning from him, she walked to where Balthazar waited, and the two magicians took their horses from Chrystal and Iola for the starless ride back to Windvale.



*The better part of half a moon of hard riding would pass before they were close enough to the mountains to distinguish the ruin of the Earlinstien cathedral. Tahrl had looked one morning to the peaks of the Earlinstien mountains and had seen the half-crater of mountain rock that still stood where there had once been a snow-encrusted pinnacle to rival the other peaks. With the morning light still brushing the mountains free of nightfall, he had stopped Vixen and had held her reins tightly between his fingers. The others stepped quietly around him and looked to the ruin of the cathedral before them or to the path that had brought them so far. The path they had chosen had taken them around the towns and the cities of the Kianan, and it was only as they reached the first low hills of the mountain range that they had slackened the pace of their horses. Tahrl shook his head to clear his mind of how the mountain of the cathedral had looked during his visits to Earlinstien so many years before.*

Several more days would pass as they traveled the low mountains to reach the cathedral, and the moon that they could sometimes see at night passed through the shade of a sliver to begin to fill a circle once more. During these days, Tahrl studied the cathedral in silence and noticed how the mountainside had been forced into the sky and how parts of the land had slid to the ground like a torn garment. They found where the land had been marked and scarred by the rock and earth that had been flung far from the cathedral, and they traveled between trees that had been ripped from their branches.

The Earlinstien cathedral like a long dead skeleton that could answer no questions lay broken and ruined before them. The ground

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gave underfoot like fresh turned earth waiting for the seeds to be sown when Tahrl climbed from Vixen's back to stand before the gate of shattered earth and loose rock that had once been the entrance to the cathedral.

"Welcome," he said, opening his arms wide to the ruin of the cathedral, and turned back to the Dryn with his face split by a grin.

There were no words spoken by any of the Dryn as Tahrl led his horse over where the gateway had been, and each footfall sank into the loose earth with a sound like a sigh. He remembered how his Montmorin guide had lead him past the massive stone of the door that no one had ever been able to close. The chamber beyond had towered above them and had made the door, which leered behind them, small in comparison. Unwilling to release his breath, he had stood within the entry-hall, knowing that the cavernous rooms beyond would make even this seem confined. He remembered how he could see to the sloping walls and arched ceiling even though the torches that they had carried could never burn with that much light. Above his head, there were only clouds and the light of the sun where the vaulted stone of the cathedral had once been.

They walked over shattered earth and between mounds of broken land that had formed when the walls had fallen. The others had dismounted, each in their turn, and lead their horses behind where Tahrl walked in memory. No matter where they had gone there had always been the wind and the drifting light. It had been like a warm and gentle breeze to caress him, and the light had been like the sun blowing lazily through a stained-glass window. He stopped where there had once been a sloping stair with steps that had to be climbed one at a time.

"Nothing," he said, turning once more to face Armada with the flat and broken ground all around them.

"No." She released her hold on Shadowfox and raised a fist. "She is here. I can feel it. She is here."

He could see the tears that filled her eyes and threatened to fall as she held a hand to hold him back and stepped away from the others.

"Hiding." She stood upon the open ground and looked about the sweeping folds of the land all around her. "Hiding from us."

From around her, the wind rose as she held her arms tightly before her chest with her fists held below her chin. Without making a sound, Tahrl heard her call Teresa's name so that it would be car-

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ried on the breeze. He felt waves rippling out from her as if she were a pebble that had been dropped into a pond. The ripples flowed around him and around the others and flowed over the ruins of the cathedral as if dawn's light was returning to the world once more.

The voiceless sound began to swirl and pull against her grasp as it reached among the folds of the broken earth. Tahrl felt his arm tugged about by his hold on Vixen's reins as he began to watch the waves crash and pull at Armada. The wind around her was torn asunder accompanied by the sound of frightened horses, and Tahrl felt his fingers grasping at air where the reins had been. He could not turn his gaze from where the waves were thrashing, swirling, pushing at Armada. Her name died on his lips without the words to speak as she staggered under the waves, and Tahrl realized how far from them she stood. The wind spiraled before her, falling into the world before her eyes, and darkened as if the air had begun to bleed.

Raising his foot from the soft earth, Tahrl tried to step toward the swirling pattern the color of burnt wood and dried blood. Armada opened her mouth as if she would scream as the bone thin form with shoulders that were far too wide and an elongated face towered over her. The creature of blackened and blood red light roared with a sound like a raging dragon, revealing rows of sharp and pointed fangs. Armada cried as she raised her arms to block the fall of one taloned hand. The crash was an explosion of brilliant light that blossomed like a budding flower and flowed onto the ground, pooling as if it were water.

Tahrl fell and realized that Chrystal and Daena were dragging him backward and away from Armada. The cathedral was filled, echoing and reechoing, with the roar of the monster and the screams of the Dryn. Armada, on her knees, struck against the monster. The sharp edge of her dagger turning aside the claws. Sword flashing pale white, Iola jumped. It turned on her, and she staggered beneath the smothering roar. Armada had her feet under her. Sword held free in her hands. A clawed arm shattered the scream on her lips.

Tahrl struggled against Daena as Chrystal ran for the monster. A shout of warning from Armada. Her sword, glowing like white fire, bit into the creature. Claws grabbed Armada's arm, and a roar lifted her into the air. Iola shouted words that sparked a fire. Chrystal's dagger struck the monster. Its fist shattered the fire. Shards of flame danced over Iola. Armada, tossed like a rag in the monster's hold, struck Chrystal. The monster raised Armada over its head with her

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sword lost beneath its feet, and talons for hands smeared her skin dark as forgotten midnight, touching her arm, touching her leg. The creature threw her like a rag, losing form, floundering through the sky. Tahlr screamed, pulling free of Daena, and fell to his knees as Armada struck the ground.

Chrystal had her feet under her but was still on her knees. The creature turned with a sudden swing of its torso away from Chrystal to where Armada lay crumpled in the dirt. Chrystal lifted herself on her arms as it approached Armada. Daena had her sword in her hand, and Iola crushed the last of the flames between her fingers. One of the monsters that had haunted Tahlr's nightmares and memory since that night long ago in Highwall stretched a hand high into the air with its claws spread wide, glistening in the light, above Armada.

An explosion the color of the needles of a redwood tree flung the monster back through the air so that it screamed with rage as it struck the ground. She stood above the unmoving form of Armada, holding a wood staff that was almost as tall as she was with both hands. Hair, the color of light reflected off of a lake, cascaded over her shoulders and down her back in what had once been a braid. She wore what had once been a dress but was now smeared with earth and most of the skirts had been ripped and torn off. The Dryn who stood protectively over Armada was almost as tall as the monster of burnt wood and dried blood.

“You will not harm my daughter!”

Her words cracked the world like thunder, drove the roar of the wind from the sky, and brought warm tears to Tahlr's eyes. The monster roared, revealing rows of sharp teeth and a forked tongue deep in its throat, and with its taloned fingers spread wide, it leapt at her. The staff, trailing white fire, struck the monster, driving it to the earth. An arm shot upward to be severed by the swing of the staff and bounced over the ground far from the body. Flames the color of the stars at night played over the length of the staff and trailed down her arms as she held the branch in both hands above her head. She brought the end of the staff down, driving it through the monster and piercing the earth. The creature screamed like a dying horse, flailing its one arm wildly about, while the flames burrowed through it like roots and the light branched around the staff. The form of the monster lay still and broken like the earth, and the

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staff had become a young redwood tree as tall as the Dryn who had planted it.

In the silence, Tahrl tried to move and managed only to fall to his hands and knees. Daena let her sword drop to the ground to help him, and they moved unsteadily toward mother and daughter. Iola was with Chrystal who had climbed to her feet, and together they were also approaching the governess of Greenhaven. She had settled to the ground next to Armada and was carefully lifting her daughter to her lap. Armada sleepily opened her eyes, and a smile, trailing blood, played at the corner of her mouth.

“Mother-”

“Hush, child, no words,” Teresa said as she tenderly kissed Armada on the forehead. Raising a hand marked with Armada’s blood to her collar, Teresa ripped the tattered material of her dress from her shoulder and chest. “Only drink.”

Kissing the top of her head, she cradled Armada in her arms. Tahrl and Daena sank to the ground near the others but away from the new tree while Teresa whispered into Armada’s hair. Settling to the ground next to Iola, Chrystal silently reached a hand out to Armada but fell short of touching her.

“Enough for now,” Teresa said, lifting Armada so that she lay against her lap. “Rest.” She caressed her daughter’s face with a hand and then ran the fingers through her hair. She took the time to cover her shoulder with the tatters of her dress before looking to everyone sitting around her. “The horses?”

Tahrl blinked his eyes but couldn’t stand because Daena had her hand on his shoulder as she rose to her feet. She beckoned for Iola and Chrystal to follow her as she began to look over the ruins of the cathedral.

“Iola,” Teresa said, so that her granddaughter stayed behind while Chrystal and Daena set off after the horses. “I left something among the ruins. You should have no trouble finding it. It’s wrapped in part of my dress.”

When Iola had walked away from them, Teresa lowered her head and breathed gently over Armada’s face. Tahrl gripped his arm across his shoulder as Teresa lightly kissed Armada.

“Teh-”

“Please, Tahrl,” she said, cutting off the name. “No questions.” She raised her head and looked unblinkingly into his eyes. “The only thing that grows here is grief.”

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Her gaze drifted from him to look in the direction that Iola had taken over the cathedral. He watched with her for a time and then stood to follow the progress of Chrystal and Daena.

“They’ve already found three of the horses,” he said but more to himself than to Teresa or Armada.

When he turned back to Teresa, he saw that Iola was walking back toward them holding something awkwardly in her arms. He settled uneasily to the ground as he watched Iola approach and finally reach them.

“Find your answers there if you need them,” Teresa said, looking at him once more.

He accepted the bundle wrapped in the material of Teresa’s dress and slowly began to unwrap it with shaking hands. When he pulled the last fold of cloth away, the light of the sun was caught and reflected silver from the shards of what was held within.

## Chapter Four

# Kingdom of Stone

*Feathers and soft-white down filled the bed beneath its many covers and blankets that were held in a frame of hard-polished wood. The four corner posts were carved with swirling branches reaching forever for the sky and held the canopy with its silk wraps that could be drawn together enfolding a sleeper in warmth. Amid the covers and soft blankets, Armada rested as if lost to a dream of distant lands and ancient woods, and Teresa brushed her hand across her daughter's forehead, turning loose strands of hair between her fingers. She turned, walking to where Tahrl waited at the foot of the bed, and then they turned for the doorway, stopping once to look to Iola sitting patiently next to the bed at Armada's side. Beyond the door rested a small anti-chamber to the spacious bedroom, and within this chamber, a Montmorin was leaning against an outcropping fashioned into part of the wall and reading over several parchments spread before him.*

Chrystal and Daena looked from the cushions they had been seated upon as Teresa passed through the door, and the man turned from his pages, crossing to greet Tahrl and Teresa in the center of the room. He was tall for a Montmorin, standing to just above Tahrl's shoulder, with a broad flat face that made him look as if he had been chiseled from stone. His hair had once been dark and brown but had grown filled with streaks of white like fresh snow, and his eyes were as deep and as rich as the depths of the world.

"How does she fare?" Hath Malor of the Montmorin said, taking Teresa's hands with his own.

"My daughter has been grievously injured, and I thank you for your concern." Teresa raised their hands together and gave his fingers a gentle squeeze. "The creature of shadow did more than scar her body. It attacked her spirit as well. I have done what I can, and she will recover. In a day, maybe two, she will be demanding to be released from bed and up and about."

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“That is good.”

“Good?” She released his hands, letting her fingers flutter to her sides. “It is my fault that she was hurt so. If I had not been hidden and lost to the world in my grief, she would not have called to me. The monster attacked, focusing on her, because she was trying to find me.”

“The fault should not lie heavily upon your shoulders. The daughter feared for her mother and would not know that such a call could draw forth a monster as you describe. Your own loss is still strong within you, and I grieve with you for I considered Alexander to be among my closest friends. Tonight, there shall be much feasting and dancing in his memory and in his honor.”

“Again, I thank you. For in your own time of difficulty, you have given me so much. I have asked for the sun, the moon, and the stars, and you have given them to me without question or hesitation.”

“It is as nothing. See to your own. You are as close as family, and I would willingly give you the life from my heart if I felt that it could help your daughter.”

“As I would give of my own. Now, being the ungrateful guest that I am, how do your own people fare?”

Hath coughed once, raising the back of his hand to his lips, and turned his eyes to the floor at their feet.

“The devastation is extensive, and we have been sorely wounded. The destruction of the cathedral swept across the fields, killing far too many of my farmers under mountains of earth and rock. The crops have all been ruined, and it shall be some time before our fields will once more produce a harvest.”

“I am sorry. If there is anything that I or any of my own can do.”

“I thank you for your concern and shall remember your words, knowing that your family has so little of itself to give.” He raised his face, looking to her eyes, and a hand, made into a fist, was held between them. “Standing together, the Montmorin are strong. I have already received pledges of support from the families of the Tycraig, Vedoman, Agrador, and Worthy. As for you,” he said, looking to each of them in turn, and his gaze returned to linger upon Tahrl. “I know that none of you have seen to your own needs as you watched over Armada. I would be remiss as a host if I did not see to you.”

“I wish only to stay to my daughter’s side.”

“I too wish only to watch over Armada,” Tahrl said.

“You should know better,” Hath said, enveloping Tahrl’s hand

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with one of his own. “Your family would never forgive me if I let you go without care and feeding. As for you.” He turned without releasing Tahrl to look to Chrystal and Daena. “Do you wish to experience the sights and sounds of the Montmorin in mourning?”

“As much as I would share in grieving for your loss, I wish to stay near to Teresa and see to her needs,” Chrystal said, and Daena nodded her own head in agreement.

“They do you proud,” he said, looking over his shoulder to Teresa, and then returned his attention to Chrystal. “If you should require anything, you have not far to go. I would not have you go hungry so I shall have food brought for you.”

“We thank you, again, for your trouble,” Teresa said. “The kindness of your heart is forever.”

“Such formality. We are family.” Reaching a hand out, he grasped her shoulder. “See to your daughter.” With a smile and a gentle push at Teresa’s shoulder, he turned, pulling Tahrl behind him, and made for the door away from the bedroom. He took up the papers that he had left scattered upon the outcropping with his free hand as they passed into a long hall of polished stone. To one side of the hall was an alcove where two young Montmorin women watched them close the door before returning to their own conversation as Tahrl was lead down the passage.

“It has been so long since last you walked these halls, Tahrl,” Hath said, sliding from Kianan into the Montmorin tongue. “I have not had the chance to properly congratulate you on your advancement. The Kianan’s troglodyte defense is a very important undertaking. We are all very proud of you.”

“Gran told me as much when he first visited me at Highwall. It is I who have not had the chance to properly thank you for the gifts that you presented me.”

“The smallest token. I hope they serve you well.”

They passed from the long hall and into another much wider passage where a roof arched high above them and shone with the light of torches reflecting gold upon it. Another turn and a flight of stone steps that could easily hold twenty people abreast, and there were others about, moving this way and that between the halls and high-arched ceilings. The voices and the smells of roasting game over great fires reached them even before they had crossed to the partial walls of engraved stone that set apart the banquet hall. With the rush and sway of dark light and bright smoke that drifted lazily

to be lost in the clouds of the ceiling far overhead, they dipped into the sound of a thousand voices all echoing to be heard above that of their neighbor. Many long tables were placed about and sometimes edge to edge in the great hall, and they cast shadows taken from the roar of the fire-pits where whole thunder boar and longhorn prancers were slowly charred and roasted over the flames. They moved quickly, stepping between the jumble of conversations, and Hath did not release Tahr!; even though, he no longer needed to be dragged from door to table. Stopping a man who carried a tray of upturned mugs which threatened to tumble, clattering, to the floor, Hath told him to see that wildeleaf, goldenheart, and roasted boar were sent to Teresa and her children.

“Elanor! Gran!” Hath shouted after he had let the fellow be on his way, waving his free hand through the air and seeming not to care if he were actually heard. They stepped to the one table where someone stood as they approached; Gran was as tall as his father with hair that was still dark as he clasped hands with Hath.

“He comes to table!” Gran shouted, turning upon Tahr! as Hath finally released Tahr!’s hand. “I was beginning to worry!”

“Between helpings of summerharvest, he worried!” came the call from behind him at the table.

“Well, look at you, Tahr!” Gran took Tahr!’s shoulders between his large and powerful hands. “As tall and skinny as a tree!”

“You’ve never seen a forest, you old rock herder!” Tahr! said with the warm oils of the table seeping into the fabric of his shirt and touching his skin. “I am much skinnier than a tree!”

Laughter lifted around them and swirled with the dancing light and smoke as space was somehow made for them on the long bench at the table. Tahr! squeezed between Gran and Hath, rubbing elbows with them, as he sat before a table piled high with roasted prancer, darkloaf, summerharvest, goldenheart, and wildeleaf.

“And how has the world been treating the greatest son of Hath Malor?” he shouted, watching a half-empty mug on the table before him filled to overflowing and then pressed into his hand.

“If I ever meet the world that has treated us so, I shall give him a thrashing! I lost many friends, brothers and sisters all, when the cathedral was destroyed!” Gran closed his eyes, and turned his brow to the plate of food smeared before him. “Our fields lie under a layer of rubble, and our stores our low. It shall be many a moon before I recover from my grief. But, we are Earlinstien! We are Montmorin!”

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An answering call of many voices could be heard from the adjoining tables. “We shall persevere!”

“The half-wit has neglected to mention that the fresh earth that was once part of the cathedral is rich for the field,” Elanor said over Gran’s shoulder, meeting Tahlr’s gaze; her eyes flashing green in the firelight. “Even in death, there is life.”

“Even in death!” came the call from the table around them.

“And you sister, how do you fare?”

Elanor bowed her head at Tahlr’s words, pushing her face into Gran’s shoulder before looking back to him.

“You do not yet realize the extent to which the cathedral has changed us. My husband, Law, is now part of the field that we shall plant with young grain.”

“I am sorry.” He reached across Gran to grasp her hand, feeling her fingers turn and grip hard with his own.

“My closest, Amber and Thane, are also among those we have lost. How I survived, I do not know. I was with them and do not remember walking back to my own door.”

“The world is funny,” Hath said. “Ask too much of him, and he will answer, caring not if your question should match the answers that he would give.”

“The world is not for us to know,” Chance said from beyond Hath, offering his mug to the clouds of smoke that brushed against the high ceiling. “We have been dealt a staggering blow by something we do not understand. And that is still out there.”

“You do not agree that the door has been closed?” Before Tahlr’s eyes, the branch had been held, raining a shower of sparks, above an open fire under the dark night’s sky.

“You’ve been consorting with magicians, again.”

“Not just magicians.” He had stood still while the young Montmorin had spread the ash across her face. “I have this from the master magician Sorcha Vedoman ap Earlinstien.”

“You have the best of sources.”

“Sorcha?” Elanor said. “And how does my cousin fare?”

“She is as well as you should know for I met her on the road from Earlinstien.”

“When I saw her, she was still in the company of magicians. Distracted and greatly troubled was how I saw her. Those masters of magic seemed to understand not a wit of what had transpired, and

Sorcha was the only one holding a candle. Should I not hope that her choice of companions improve?”

“Distraught and greatly troubled was how I found her. And, in the company of one master Balthazar. I sent her on to speak with the Windmasters. They may be of some help to her.”

“They may advise her to grow wings and a tail,” Hath said. “One must be cautious of seeking the voice of a dragon. The truth that they could tell is fire. And they know many things.”

“I have lived with the Winterbred for many turnings of the season. They would do nothing to harm us. Guardians of the children of the DiKena, they have always been.”

“Of that, I have not had the chance to congratulate you on your appointment.”

“I tended your regards for you,” Gran said, holding an imaginary box between his fingers for Elanor’s inspection. “It was a nice letter. A little on the formal and impersonal side perhaps, but the script was worth a ransom.”

“Tahrl, a kiss.” Touching her fingers to her lips, she blew the turn of her hand to him, rushing and spinning past Gran’s nose on the wings of her breath.

“We have not heard your voice,” Hath said, turning so that he could take Tahrl in, and brushing his shoulder against him. “How does the defender of Kianan life and dragon honor fare?”

Tahrl looked this way and that, trapped between Hath and Gran Malor ap Earlinstien. The rush and turn of voices came from the hall all around him and swirled and pushed against his skin.

“I am lost,” he said, laughing with the heat on his face and the smoke in his hair. “I did not want to believe- not a wit- until I saw.” Iola had held the bundle wrapped in the rags of Teresa’s dress for him to take between numb fingers. “Until I saw with my own eyes.” Almost dropping the slender fragments he had been able to feel through the wrappings, he had begun to unfold the ruins, and Gran took the mug before it could slip to the floor. “The broken, shattered, pieces.” With the light of the sun, the shards had flickered at him like tiny stars. “Of Alexander’s flute. Then I knew. Then I understood. He would never let such harm befall that silver flute as long as he should live.”

He raised his arm, draping it around Hath’s shoulders so that he would not slide from the table and sink through the floor.

“Now.” He looked hard to the Montmorin’s face and to the ridges

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above his eye and felt the warmth streaking down his own cheeks. “The troglodytes grow bold. Armada is wounded by something I thought could only walk in nightmare. Something is about in the world. How do I know? The Winterbred fear it. And I fear. I fear that Alexander had a hand in waking it.”

There was quiet all around him; off in the distance, there was the sound of voices and laughter while mugs and plates were hammered against far away tables. A touch at his shoulder, and the mug, sloshing to the edge of falling with graceberry wine, was presented under his nose.

“Drink,” Gran said, holding the mug until Tahrl accepted it with cold hands. “Eat. You are one of us. The morning will see to its own.”

Tahrl tipped the mug, tasting the musty fires of the liquid fill his mouth, and turned his arm from the support of a mountain to look to his plate piled high with untouched summerharvest, wildeleaf, and prancer. Striking the mug to the table, spilling wine, he ripped strips from the prancer with the aid of a knife. Hath slapped him several times on the back as he lifted the dangling strands to his upturned mouth, dripping red juices from the fire. His lips closing around greasy fingers; teeth slicing through the tender meat as its rich flavor of flowers on the morning dew touched the back of his nose.

“We have all lost,” Hath said at his side. “The pain biting us all differently in little ways. We must be strong. Darkness fades as the sun would rise, and shadows grow, as the sun would fall. We understand this for we are Montmorin. It has been long since you last shared our table. You are one with us; remember that.”

“I have not forgotten so much.” He stabbed at the summerharvest with a flat spoon, piercing the flaky bread, and drawing forth wisps of steam and dark milk.

“What of your own? How do they fare?”

Almost dropping the spoon, he turned it around, widening the hole in the pastry.

“Well; I suppose. You have probably heard from them more recently than I have.”

“Tahrl, your own family?”

The old polished wood of the spoon was dry and rough between his fingers as he looked to the milk that was dripping from its tip. Nothing was reflected from the hard wood, and the turn of faces toward him would not be visible in its depths.

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“What can I tell you about my family? If you know them, you know me. You would know.”

Somewhere there was laughter, reaching for the sky and tumbling tables, spilling mugs, and platters tossed about on the sound. Voices stretched and turned over the life of the day, the reflection of yesterday, and dreams for tomorrow.

“You said you met my granddaughter Sorcha on the path to Earlinstien.” Hath’s voice pulled him from the spoon, and he turned, feeling the weight of drifting smoke upon his shoulders, to look to the Montmorin’s eyes. “She is a master magician, did you know that? A Kianan magician. How often do we see her, Elanor? You asked after your cousin.”

“At the turning of the season, grandfather. If that often.”

“If that often. I could say something. I could have told her that this is not the way of the Montmorin. It was completely in my right to forbid her from having joined the ranks of the Kianan.”

“But you did nothing,” Gran said from behind Tahlr’s shoulder.

“But I did not.” Hath looked to Tahlr with eyes that pushed him against Gran. “Do you want to know? Ask me why I did nothing.”

Hath’s face was streaked with the twisting light from the firepits, and behind him, Chance took a slow drink, tipping the mug until its tail was gracing the smoke of the ceiling. At the next table, they were ripping apart the ribs of a thunder boar, spilling bright juices, and dark red meat clung in ragged strips to the bone.

“Why did you say nothing?” Tahlr said with a mouth that wanted to be filled with the colors of the flesh from the next table.

“Because if I had forbidden it, I would not even see my granddaughter with the turning of the seasons.”

Tahlr choked on the breath of a laugh that filled his lungs with dark juices, and he coughed, tasting the beat of his heart on the roof of his tongue.

“But- but Sorcha could choose not to be a magician as easily as she could choose not to breathe. What if she knew? Knew how it ripped at your heart. What if she did terrible, strange, and unnatural things? If she could choose not to be an abomination.”

“My granddaughter is the first Montmorin to become a magician. We are, all of us, very proud of her.”

“Very proud.”

The light burned at his eyes, and Tahlr turned with the smoke digging into his vision with the prick of a thousand daggers. He

wiped at his face, smearing his cheeks with the oils and rich blood of charred and roasted longhorn prancer. There was a hand on his shoulder, turning on his back and brushing at his hair, and the weight, trying to force him to the floor, lifted, tingling as if the skin had been peeled free.

“There are no monsters here.” Hath’s voice carried through the clatter and roar of the Montmorin at table. “Any monsters? Do you see? Gran? Elanor? See any monsters?”

“No, I don’t see any. Not a wit.”

“There are no monsters here. Only family.”

With the hair falling across his eyes, teasing drops of rain, Tahrl looked to the soft patterns in the grain of the table, holding a fist to the surface, pushing it into the wood.

“To answer my own question,” Hath said from somewhere at his side. “The house of Morgan fares well. They are, in their own way, proud of their son. The lot of the radical is never an easy one on the family, but the change from outcast to defender of the realm has made you the envy of your neighbors.”

“Just carrying on the family tradition.”

“It has been a hard path, Tahrl, and for that we honor you. Defending the dragons from those who would call them evil. Even I. Yes, even Hath Malor ap Earlinstien doubted if the truth you spoke was real.”

Tahrl took the hard wood spoon back between his fingers, scooping summerharvest from his plate, and tasted the rough surface drenched in dark milk on his tongue.

“You should come to our table more often, Tahrl. I see Sorcha more often than I see you.”

“Putting Highwall in order has been time consuming,” Tahrl said, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. “Kianan and Dryn soldiers sharing the same roof. Try it sometime. It is not easy.”

“The Kianan must have faced quite a shock. Nothing like they expected.”

“That they did. That they did.” He lifted another spoon of summerharvest to his mouth with warm milk dripping to his chin. “Many a broken bone, rib, arm, and leg, the Kianan soldiers did suffer before there was an understanding.”

“I do hope that Teresa’s daughter fares well,” Elanor said. “I would so very much like to meet a Dryn.”

“Armada needs little more than rest, I think,” Hath said. “The

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governess of Greenhaven would not be displeased if you wish to tend your empathy to her daughter.”

“We have all suffered at the fall of the cathedral.”

“To what purpose?” Tahrl lowered the moist spoon to the edge of his plate, and the air had been damp, drifting and spinning, beneath the dragon’s wing. “Did Alexander close a door? Or, did he open it? Cloudbreaker said that it had been waking for some hundreds of years.”

“One must be careful to listen and observe what a dragon might say. As for the cathedral.” Hath lifted his mug, watching the reflections of the fire-pit in the engraving, and took a sip. “She had been out of sorts for the past few seasons.”

“Dark and brooding is how I would put it,” Gran said. “After spring equinox last, I had taken to advising people not to explore. The cathedral had a queer sense of humor even at the best of times.”

“I remember.” When they had stepped carefully through the passages of the cathedral, Tahrl had never been convinced that the halls stood still, and markers to guide the path tended to disappear or turn up in odd places. Turning around in the fuzzy light of the cathedral, he had imagined echoes of the breeze to be ghosts whispering to the dark and casting shadows in the wilderness.

“I found nothing to be overly concerned about,” Hath said. “The ancient homes of the DiKena are still the ancient homes of the DiKena. I would have worried more if the mood of the cathedral never changed.”

“I remember as a child you would tell me stories of the great darkness of a century back. It gave me nightmares.”

Tahrl breathed deep at Gran’s words, feeling the tightening bands high on his chest press down, and the rumbling of tiny footprints trickled across his shoulder blades and down his back. Rumbling that had echoed between Cloudbreaker and Moonlight with the lightning and the rain playing around them before they had given Tahrl a name.

“As it did me.” Thumping her chest, Elanor squeezed Gran’s shoulder, leaning toward Tahrl and Hath. “I thought those stories were only to torture your grandchildren. Now, I learn you’ve made wide use of them?”

“Wait, I remember,” Tahrl said, holding his hands to his face, pressing them against the ridge of his nose. “Guards had to be posted.” He turned, looking wildly to Elanor to Gran to Elanor to Hath.

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“I never associated them with the cathedral. I thought they were monsters, creeping out of the deep mountains to steal children.”

“There are no deeper mountains than the cathedral, Tahrl.”

“But, I thought those stories were part of the old legends. Now, you say this happened only a hundred years ago?”

“The cathedral had a queer sense of humor,” Hath said, “giving people ideas and turning them about in their head.”

“I remember- I remember great weapons were forged in the fires of the earth’s heart. And, the champions waited with stout hearts for the smell of fear would draw the dark legions forth. Like troglodytes only more so and cavern trolls.”

“The sword and arms I gave as gift to you are of that time, baptized in shadowspawn’s blood. Fitting gift for the defender of the Kianan. But, legions, Tahrl? Memory grows as it fades into the past of childhood. I stood with the guard against the dark that day when I was young.” Hath raised his mug, drinking of it, and held it aloft so that it would be refilled. “They were few. Terrible creatures. Impossible to describe. Many died.” He clinked refilled mugs with Chance before taking a long drink of the graceberry wine. “Many died.”

“How- what happened?”

“We won.”

“No.” Tahrl raised his hands against the blurred and faded shades of bone-thin creatures the color of dry blood, struggling to be free of the drifting smoke. “I mean- Did you- did you close the rift? Wake something? Drive something dormant? Spill blood until you were hip-deep in the gore of nightmares?”

“The cathedral was in a foul mood. Angry for some cause I know not what. It was a genocidal battle. We fought until not a life stirred or creature breathe that we did not wish it. Are you asking if things compare? No, I do not think so. Before her destruction, the cathedral had been more sad than vengeful.”

“Alexander- Alexander would have known all this history and known it without the deceit of a child’s memory. Would he have believed a connection? Did he? Before going to the cathedral, did he come here? Speak with you?”

“Yes.” Hath placed his mug to the surface of the table and looked for a long moment across the vast expanse of the banquet hall. “A connection? Alexander was odd.”

“Drawn and haggard,” Gran said. “As if he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. As if the cost were high.”

“He did ask after how the cathedral fared, but I do not think he was worried if the cathedral raged. He went armed for battle. With his magicians in tow, he went to confront something. Not the cathedral. That was not what he feared.”

“I think.” Elanor looked about as if the flickering light and dark smoke might have ears to judge her words. “Sorcha spoke long with me. I think Alexander was afraid that the cathedral was being deceived. Tricked and beguiled by something far darker than the blackest depression that she had ever experienced. Alexander only wanted to help.”

“What caused the fall?”

They looked away from Tahrl, turning to their plates or the smoke filled ceiling or the Montmorin passing with a tray piled high with richwood. Hath coughed as if he were grinding gravel in his throat, and his thumb pushed at the lip of his mug, scraping an imagined speck from its surface. Lifting it, he swirled the graceberry wine through uneasy ellipses in the confines of the mug.

“That I do not know,” he finally said, taking a slow drink, tilting the mug only slightly. “The magicians were not very communicative.”

“They were in more shock than we were,” Chance said. “Hard to comprehend since those were our family who were lost. Our fields that were buried beneath the wall of the cathedral. Our cathedral that they unceremoniously destroyed when you stop to think about it.”

“We could have used their aid. Not all died in the path of the explosion. My hands are still stained from digging at the fresh earth.” Hath raised curled fingers to hold before his face, turning the fist around and about under his gaze. “They left.”

“They left. No explanation- by your leave- sorry, for the mess. I am sure that they did not mean to piss her so.” Leaning back, Chance looked Hath up and down, fascinated by the hand resting protectively over his mug as if it might fly away. “Have you eaten anything, brother? Is that it? Dirty hands?” He dipped two fingers in his own mug, and then taking Hath’s hand between his own, began to wipe at the back of it. “I shall have you clean in but a moment.”

“Leave off.” Hath shook his hand free, spinning it about. “They were as pristine as new felled snow until you soiled them with your greasy fingers.”

“Which have served me well.”

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“Which may serve you yet if you keep them to yourself. You must not have two eyes in your head to think that I have eaten so little. This mouth stretched to twice the size of your head for the last three bites I took.”

“I remember the days when I could finish off four such bites.”

“I wish they would return-”

“What of Sorcha?” Tahrl said, turning to Elanor and Gran with his back blurring the voices of Chance and Hath. “She told me that you were well.”

“Against the wishes of her fellow magicians, she stayed to help while the others left,” Gran said. “She has not forgotten what it means to be Montmorin.”

“For that we honor her.” Elanor raised her mug and tapped it to where Gran’s own still rested on the table.

“There was little that she wished to speak on. We were all of us so drained from the aid we could administer to the injured. The grief for those we could not. She spoke of digging deep into the cathedral’s heart. Farther than she would have ever attempted on her own. She said it was like. Like- how did she put it?” Gran lifted the half-sphere of a goldenheart that rested against his plate, holding the hard dark shell to show Tahrl the orange and yellow interior of the melon. “Like trying to pull a rotten core from the flesh of a goldenheart.”

“Not as pleasant a task as it sounds.”

“No. Something tried to stop them. They pulled it free? It was defending the rot- I never quite figured that part of it from her explanations.”

“If something was already there like the dark ones of a hundred years ago or if it came at their bidding. That is what I wonder,” Tahrl said. “The Windmasters told me that it is something that has remained hidden since the Age of Madness.”

“When the DiKena found their very dreams and nightmares take shape and form before them,” Elanor said. “Could such dreams and nightmares survive the sundering of the DiKena? The dragons do.”

“Things happened and could take their shape and form in the instant between the thought and the realization that the thought was wrong. The desire to strike you in the flush of anger; but, not doing so because I am master of myself.”

“For which I am grateful, but you have already thought it. In that between, a DiKena has fallen to the ground, clutching at his cheek. I

know the legends as well as you; perhaps, even better. We are their children; we are not them.”

“It is enough to make me wonder. Why now? Because the Windmasters are no longer hunted by the Kianan? If the Greater Darkness was content and free of fear of our guardians- why? I don’t know- Why anything? They said it has been grow- no, awakening for three-”

“Talk! Talk! Talk! Talk! Talk!”

They looked to the approach of a Montmorin from the other side of the table where the servers carried their trays. Urtha was tall for a Montmorin with hair spun of gold flowing over her left shoulder and large eyes that seemed to shimmer in the shadow of the flickering light. Placing her hands to her wide and shapely hips, she studied them from across the table, and her smile revealed the edge of ivory teeth.

“Given a chance brother, you would spin tales of the DiKena until morning light,” she said to Tahrl with a scolding finger held over the table.

“And you would listen, sister.”

“There is a time for the telling of stories, and there is a time for dance. I am here for my husband.” She held her hands out for Gran. “This is not for lore spinning.”

Gran rose from the bench, taking Urtha’s hands in his own, and stepped from the bench to the table, crossing to her, and jumping to her side. Tahrl breathed laughter, feeling it stretch to his toes, and heard, for the first time, the sound of woodwind and string. Looking to Elanor looking to him, her eyes were bright with the swirl of fire and the heartbeat of a drum. A hand grasping each other, they climbed from the bench, and Elanor held her skirts to her knees as they ascended the table. Stepping carelessly between platters and plates, Tahrl sent a mug, spilling wine to the floor with a laugh, and they jumped, trailing Urtha and Gran between the fire-pits.

The banquet hall was wide as Montmorin lifted the long tables, moving them to the walls, and Urtha crossed to the center of the hall where two tables had been placed together. Stepping among the musicians, she climbed from the bench to the flat tabletop and turned with Gran at her shoulder to face the assembled hall.

“We are here for memory!” she called to the hall. “We are here to honor those we have lost! We grieve! Though the moon has turned

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once since the cathedral fell, our loss is still fresh! We honor our loss! We honor the family we still have! We dance!”

They cheered and whistled and called, and Tahrl cried with his fist in the air and his arm still entwined with Elanor. Urtha began to tap her foot to the table, and the thunder of her heart reverberated throughout the long hall, sending tremors that found root in the fiber of Tahrl’s life. The musicians were swept into the tapping of her foot, taking the beat, and the voice of a flute lifted to the smoke under the roof. Another cheer roared over the table in a rush of sound to be carried into the answer of fiddle and guitar.

Urtha turned, raising her hand wrapped around Gran’s arm, and they spun together, dancing on the table for all to see. Tahrl hollered with the flames racing through his chest and yielding bright flame, and Elanor screaming with her voice in his ear. They stood with their hands together as around them the Montmorin moved, and then someone was at her side, taking her other hand. Beyond her, another took the next hand, forming a great circle around the table dancers, and from nowhere, Hath was at Tahrl’s side, taking his hand. The circle began to move, turning a great wheel in the beat of Urtha’s heart, while behind them, another ring of circling dancers traced the counterbalance.

Laughter flowed in the rush of his breath and the balance of his step, and the song grew deep, stretching wide the sky, spinning the dark smoke to the gentle stars. Blurred lines, burning bright, in the changing of the beat as Urtha and Gran leapt from the table breaking the chain at Elanor’s side. The circle swung in upon itself, whirling and spinning into smaller rings, and Tahrl found himself shoulder to shoulder with Urtha, Gran, Elanor, Doralin, Chance, and Hath. The timeless motion of bright songs spun around them, and the ring changed with first Hath and then more trading lines as the circles bounced and brushed together. Turning and shifting under the firelight with jewels of dew beading on his face and in his hair. With their faces together, Elanor’s hair was damp and rich with the musty scent of the cathedral, and his hands gripped her shoulders, squeezing against her arms, with her hands tight to his waist. Lips brushed together, tasting graceberry wine, and her mouth was sweet with the lingering touch of summerharvest and longhorn prancer.



*The pale silk wrappings emblazoned with their shadows of clouds and light breeze were tied back from the bed and held against the corner posts. Amid the twisted and disheveled covers, Armada rested against the many pillows and cushions with her arms folded, and the fingers of one hand drummed against the other arm. In a cushion to one side, Chrystal sat with her feet propped against the bed, touching ever so slightly to Armada's toes. Tahrl stood to one side, making room for Elanor to reach the edge of the bed, and she held a number of scarves of bright endeavor and swirling design that were wrapped carefully around a string of round stones.*

"I am Elanor Malor ap Earlinstien," she said in Montmorin. "I am very pleased to meet you, and I am sorry for your loss."

Chrystal and Armada both looked to Tahrl, and he glanced for the slightest of moments to Teresa who was on a cushion back from the others with one hand resting upon the surface of a table.

"She is Hath Malor's granddaughter," he said in Kianan, and he could see Elanor turn ever so slightly toward him with the traces of a smile playing at her lips. "Meeting the Dryn has been a life-long dream of hers, and she says that she is sorry for your loss."

"As I am pleased to meet you." Armada unfolded her arms and raised a hand, which Elanor took quickly with one of her own, holding the scarves together with the other. "I have only met two of the Montmorin. Your sister Sorcha less than a full turning of the moon ago, and I have slept through most of the last day and a half."

"She is pleased to meet you too, Elanor, and she is as curious of the Montmorin as you are of the Dryn. She has only ever met Sorcha, and that was on the way here. We didn't give over much to polite conversation that time. She thanks you for your concern. And they are cousins, Armada, not sisters."

"I brought a gift for you." Elanor held the scarves for Armada, unfolding them, and Armada propped herself on her elbows to look to what was there. On a twine of gold and silver there were several small stones that had been polished smooth as if by the flow of a river, and they seemed to be etched with the mark of deep colors and turn of line that could never have been dreamed by hand.

"They are earthsheart from the depths of the cathedral," Tahrl said to Armada as she accepted the necklace with its string of stones. "They belonged to her husband, Law, who died when the cathedral was destroyed. It is custom to give away many of the things that the loved one held dear. You have been given a precious gift."

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“They are beautiful.” Armada took up the twine, holding the stones tightly between her fingers. “Thank you.”

“They’re not trinkets, Armada. Such stones are relics and great talismans to the Montmorin.”

“They are so cool; almost cold.” She touched the stones to her lips. “Thank you. If only your lover didn’t have to die to give this to me.”

“She accepts them gracefully,” he said to Elanor, “and will carry the memory of your husband with her for as long as she holds the gift. She grieves for your loss and wishes the best for you in the future.”

“As I wish the best for her.” Elanor looked to Tahrl and then about the room to where Teresa rested and Chrystal’s feet touched Armada. “I will go now. I did not wish to intrude. She must rest.”

“No, you’re not intruding. She really is curious of the Montmorin.” Tahrl walked with her to the door and to the anti-chamber where Iola and Daena rested. “Especially one from my past.”

“Children growing up together. In all that time, you think I would have learned one word of Kianan.” She turned on him, stopping in the doorway with the Dryn looking to them. “Do you ever miss those times?”

“Leaving for the Ivory Tower was the most painful thing I ever had to endure. I learned to love the cold halls of the tower, but I always dreamed of the life and adopted family that I had left behind.”

“Take me there sometime.” She looked to him, and her eyes stretched beyond the farthest reaches of the Earlinstien mountains to the halls of the magicians, the forests of the Dryn, and the tower of the Kianan.

“I will.”

Her eyes shimmered, turning sparks and diamonds in their depths, and with her lips trembling at the edge of a smile, she turned, crossing quickly from the room. Tahrl stepped slowly from the door with the eyes of the Dryn upon him to where Teresa sat against the table.

“It has been too long since I was last with the Montmorin at table. My voice is still sore from trying to be heard,” he said, touching a hand to his throat, and watched as her eyes, shimmering quietly, drifted across him with fingers resting beneath her chin. “Will you speak?”

She watched him with the hand turning and resting against the

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surface of the table, and behind them, the blankets rustled together as Armada looked to them and Chrystal lifted her feet from the bed. Teresa turned her head, dislodging her fingers from holding her mouth still, and the hand fluttered to hold her side.

“You have heard all from the others,” she said. “There is nothing more.”

“I want to hear it from you.”

“I am a mess.” She looked away from his eyes, following the sweep of her hand as it brushed over the tattered brown and red fragments of her dress. “Chasing the night as if I could turn back time and save him. If I had been there would it have made any difference?” She turned a hand to the table, pulling at a bundle of earth smeared cloth and revealing the shards of a silver flute wrapped within.

The world was thick and pushing at the back of his nose where breath turned almost quietly in the dark, and he reached a hand toward her as if he would fall through the floor. Teresa looked back to him and away from the fragments of Alexander’s flute, and the distorted traces of a smile quivered on her lips.

“He did not go there to die. No, the cathedral was not his first choice for a gravestone. The confrontation was only to be the first move. The first touch of understanding to what we must face, and something to wake the magicians from their ignorance.”

“Why? Why now?”

“There was no war. No armies. No battle plans. There was only confusion, madness, chaos, and death. Something had to be done. Something had to be faced. Something fundamental to the DiKena had to be sundered. Cast out.”

“Wait.” Tahrl shook his head with the rain and mist on his face, and the dragons surrounding him with one wing held to protect him from the force of the storm. Shivering, he felt the tremors hiding in the small of his back and the base of his neck, and he resisted the urge to turn, seeing if Chrystal and Armada had been ripped to shreds. “Some- something remains.”

“Yes.”

“Something drove the storm. Something manipulated the troglodytes. Something faced us on Alexander’s grave.”

“Something can be held in the palm of your hand and will slip through your fingers before you can drink of it. You can grasp at it. You can take some of it, but the whole will escape you.”

“No.”

He moved, shifting his hand to press his fingers against the table and feeling the cool touch of the old wood. The room was more broad than deep with its bed of soft feathers and blankets, the table against one wall supporting a polished mirror, and candles slowly dying, bleeding pale wax, for the flicker of fire. The breath passed through him, shimmering down through his legs and into the depths of his feet, and he sank to the floor, folding his legs while his hand stayed suspended against the wood.

“It is the unbidden guest who will not make his presence felt until you remember him.” She touched her fingers to the back of his hand, and the trace of her nails rushed through his arm. “The Windmasters taught Delan as much.”

“Why? Why did they- why did he say nothing to me?”

“A long time ago, a wizard came to Greenhaven. He was awash with power that he barely understood or controlled. Magic that had not existed since the fall of the DiKena. Together we explored it. Understood it. Controlled it.”

“The gentle magic?”

“No.” She looked to the table, tracing her fingers over the fragments of the silver flute. “The Windmasters. Are the gentle magic. Power without power. Flame without a candle. A song without words.”

“The power that heals but cannot be taught.”

“Yes. To control his power, Delan had to understand himself to the very breath that flowed in his heart. When the Windmasters told him that he had touched the gentle magic, it cracked the core of his belief. Do you understand? To control his power, he had to comprehend it.”

“He feared that he would create monsters?”

“He feared that he was a monster. Something long forgotten that would remain at peace until remembered. That is why he sought answers from the Windmasters.”

“They sought answers from him.” Moonlight had stood to the open storm with the wind swirling around her and the rain cascading down her flanks. “They looked to him.” He shivered at how the memory of her voice rumbled through him with its edge floundering against the floor and drowning in a pool of the storm’s tears. “He was- He was their hope for the future.”

“They told him of the darkness. Yes. Never directly. Never nam-

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ing it. They were afraid of drawing its attention. They taught him how to sense it; how to feel it growing.”

“To what effect? They named him the Avatar. They drove him back to the magicians.”

“It was necessary.”

“Necessary!”

“Yes, necessary. I knew. We both knew that one day he would have to reclaim his past. He couldn’t hide from what he had been.” Her gaze leapt to the floor, traversing the patterns in the dark stone, and finally lifted to the sputtering candle, casting reflections over the flute. “The wizards had made him their Avatar. They thought they believed that one Kianan. Trained in the arts of wizardry. Could control the power that the DiKena had not understood.”

“They failed.”

Tahlr turned with the room spinning around him to look to Armada, curling like a knot among her covers.

“In their dreams of reclaiming and harnessing the magic known only from legends, they forgot. They forgot Delan.” The traces of a smile flickered across Teresa’s lips in the turn of the candle, almost laughing, and she looked to him with half-hidden eyes, pulling the hair back from her face. “That’s how I faced him when he first came to Greenhaven. That smug, self-important master of Kianan magic. I held up a reflection so that he could see Delan hidden behind the trappings of the Avatar. It was in the reflection that he first glimpsed the consequences of his power.”

“He was free.”

“It was only a reflection,” she looked to Armada. “You should know this. Understand it.”

“But.” Tahlr saw the blankets and covers twisted tight and stretched from their hold on the bed, and the hand turning in Teresa’s hair and brushing at the strands as her eyes moved. “Why? Why now?”

“Why now? The Windmasters were frightened. They would act. They were afraid to act. They did not wish a return of the Age of Madness when nightmares roamed at will and slaughtered at random. Delan felt their hysteria. He wanted to do something before they unwittingly invited the darkness in.”

“It is here.”

The candle sputtered, flickering dark reflections over the walls and across the room while shards of lightning played like lost shad-

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ows over the silver flute. Armada turned, spreading her hands, and shifted the blankets, trying to untangle the many covers. The hand returned to her sand and white hair, brushing and pulling at the long strands that fell almost to the floor.

“I know.”

Teresa rose from her cushion, crossing the chamber without the slightest trace of sound to accompany each footfall, and stood to where Armada’s belongings had been discarded in a corner as if they were brown leaves that had been brushed aside by the wind. She knelt next to the pile with her long legs folding beneath her and turned a hand among the contents of the pack and ripped clothing. Finding a dagger, she stood, holding the faded white metal before her eyes as if the end of time could be seen by its light. Taking a clump of sandy white hair in her fist, she ran the blade through the locks, severing the strands like fine silk thread. The stones shook beneath him, trying to pitch him to the floor as Tahrl climbed to his feet while the hair collected in long and twisted piles beneath her toes. She turned, shaking her head as she brushed a hand over the soft remnants of sand that remained. The dagger slipped through her fingers, clattering quietly to the floor as it landed on the severed strands of hair.

“We must—” She stepped from the pile, raising a foot slowly, parting strands of soft sand with her toes, and stood to the edge of her daughter’s bed. “We must be ready.”



*The candle was bright in a swirl of deep blue, red, and forest green that the flame would send in rivers of hot wax to gather in a puddle at the base of its holder. The quiet fall of the candle in upon itself was the only mark to the passage of time. In the hall beyond Armada’s chamber, the torches would burn themselves to small stems and be replaced while the faces of the Montmorin waiting patiently in the alcove should anything be required of them changed. The sounds of voices, passing in the distance, told of the fading of the day, and Tahrl coaxed Iola and Daena from the anti-chamber to visit the Montmorin at table. The two Dryn were mostly quiet in the great hall, watching, and answered questions put to them by Hath Malor in the Kianan tongue. Elanor watched them from the corner of her father’s shoulder and did not shout enough for her questions to be heard over the sounds of the hall. After the tables had been*

put aside and all tired from dance, Tahrl guided Iola and Daena through the long hallways and back to their chambers, laughing, and awash with graceberry wine.

Another change of the faces in the alcove brought the morning, and Armada walked, leaning awkwardly against Teresa, to the door of the Earlinstien mountains. The great doors had been modeled upon those of the destroyed cathedral and tried without quite succeeding to be as grand and as broad as that entrance. They looked across the edge of the mountain, drinking deep of the crystal air, to the low hills beyond them where the trees had stood and the farms had been. Carved into the side of the mountain, the door gave passage to many of the Montmorin traveling with great wagons to trade with the Kianan or the other Montmorin families. Speaking in voices too numerous to trace conversations, the Montmorin moved around them and many marched to the new fields so that they would be ready for planting.

The moon had time to turn barely a quarter before Armada could be made to rest no longer and demanded that they return to the Redstained mountains and Morningsglory forest. Hath Malor stood to the great door, watching them ready their horses. He had given as gift to Teresa a mare built more for the pulling of wagons than a rider, but no other could easily carry the tall governess of Greenhaven. In the quiet of the dark before morning, Tahrl had stopped to speak with Teresa and had found her bent almost double to the floor before the small fire-pit in her own chambers. In the heart of the flames, twisting this way and that, he had seen the remnants of her dress and the long strands of her hair. Teresa stood tall in the morning with the riding gear that the Montmorin had made for her draped around her.

Gran was there with Urtha, speaking quiet words to Teresa in Kianan, and they had given her a leather pouch to carry Alexander's flute and many fine scarves to wrap it in. Elanor held tightly to Armada's hand while Armada traced the string of earthsheart stones that she had been given with her fingers. Tahrl remembered the words he had not spoken with Elanor the night before as they had stood to the wall of an alcove near her chambers with only the dark and a thin curtain to hide them from footfalls of the Montmorin passing through the hall.

They turned from the door to the halls of the Montmorin and followed the path that would lead them past the graveyard fields and

the husk of the Earlinstien cathedral. Tahrl did not look back to the faces watching them from the door in the mountain as they passed to the low hills and traveled among trees strewn like old sticks all around them. They traveled quickly over the open land of the Kian-an, trying not to push the horses, and would stop at the settlements and towns to learn of any news that might have been following them to Earlinstien. Looking to the stars through the night's sky, they would watch more than half a turning of the moon before reaching Windvale.

Tahrl brought his horse, Vixen, up short, looking to Windvale in the late afternoon light, for around the town many tents had been pitched haphazardly about as if they had been blown there by the wind. The people who could be seen did not appear to be his soldiers, and many of them seemed to be wandering aimlessly among the tents as if they could neither see nor care where they stood. He pushed Vixen forward and then was among them, seeing Gannon, Elwin, Gillian, and Alanna's daughter. He looked over his shoulder to Teresa to Armada, trying to push the rock of air through his lungs, and then turned, sliding from Vixen's back.

"Gannon?" he said, stepping to the man and taking him by the shoulders. "What are you doing so far from Edgewood?"

The man turned under his hold, looking to the sky; his eyes turning around as if something fluttered through the air on the breath of the wind. He mouthed words without a voice as if someone had asked him a question more than half the day ago and he finally knew the answer.

"Gone," Alanna's daughter said, and Tahrl looked to her, keeping his grip tight on Gannon's shifting shoulders. "Everything's gah—"

"What?"

"It came." She wrapped her fingers to her shoulders, shivering as if the wind was cold and twisting all around them, and her eyes darted to the gaps between the tents, looking at nothing. "In the dark. It came."

Under his gaze, the Dryn were still as stone upon their horses as the words drifted over them. Teresa's eyes were dark and hidden as she looked to Gannon and Alanna's daughter, and Armada sat straight as a sword with her fists entangled in Shadowfox's reins. Tahrl felt the creeping of the breeze around his ankles and behind his eyes as imagined figures of dried blood and burnt wood stood among the houses and homes of Edgewood.

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“Aaron!” He pushed at Gannon, turning as the man stumbled backward with his arms spinning wildly unable to stop his fall to the ground. “No- Chetwin. The ambassador to the Dryn! Is he safe?”

“In the dark. Voices screaming. Voices.”

“Is he here!”

Alanna’s daughter blinked her eyes, stepping back as if she might stumble and fall, and looked wildly about as if the world would bite at her.

“Who?”

“The Dryn ambassador! Chetwin! Is he here!”

“No!” Screaming, she placed her hands against her head as if she would squeeze her palms together. “Nobody’s here! It can’t find you if you’re not here!”

“Tahrl!”

In the distance, he saw someone waving to him, and he left Alanna’s daughter whispering to herself as he looked to the figure. They reached each other between empty tents with the Dryn trailing behind him, and he grasped Ransom’s arms.

“Aaron. Chetwin. Alanna. Michael. Are they here?”

“Chetwin is in town and so is Aaron. Alanna is dead. Michael. Brand. Dead. So many dead.” Ransom looked from the dust at their feet and into his eyes, gripping his arms more tightly. “Rae is dead. I’m sorry.”

“As am I. Fire and blood, Ransom! What happened?”

“No!” The man pulled back as if he had been struck across the face, staggering, and his eyes turned to the ground. “Don’t ask me that. I’m doing better- I’m doing better. But don’t ask me that. I wish I couldn’t remember.”

“It’s okay. I didn’t ask. I didn’t ask you anything. Now. Listen now. Where can I find Chetwin?”

“In town. Ask. He’s at the inn or with the guard or the healer or something. I don’t know.”

“It is enough.” Tahrl turned, returning to his horse, and took the reins from Iola as he climbed to the saddle. “We’ll try the Ravenhouse first,” he said to Teresa who had eyes only for Ransom. “Find answers there.”

“Same to the forest trolls,” Iola whispered.

He sat unmoving on Vixen’s back as the barely understood Dryn words washed over him, and the shambling trees that wandered the forest scavenging for food turned a dark corner behind his eyes.

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The screams of the troll had once echoed and reechoed between his ears, seeming to bypass sound, striking directly into the mind.

“More,” he said and pushed Vixen between the tents and toward the center of Windvale.

The town was three gray streets of dust and gravel that were edged by the many houses and trades that saw to the traffic on its path from the Ivory Tower to the Earlinstien mountains. Beyond the road, many more homes and dwellings rested, tending to the fields that fed the town, and beyond and between those dwellings were the pale and off-white tents from Edgewood. To the center street, Tahrl brought Vixen and stopped before a large building of wood and stone with many windows in the face of the three stories looking over the road. A guard, standing on the porch of the Ravenhouse, turned and entered the building as they tied off their horses, and then a woman appeared at the door. She was tall and wiry for a Dryn almost as if she were little more than skin and bones, and her face was drawn and deep as if she had been marked by many scars.

“Teresa,” Lyncia said, stepping to the edge of the porch and taking the governess of Greenhaven’s hands with a grip that would stop her from being swallowed by the wind.

“When?”

“A little shy of three-quarters of the moon ago,” she said in Dryn, standing tall while Teresa stepped to the porch, and did not loosen the hold on her hands. “Forest trolls attacked the Kianan settlement of Edgewood. We could feel them gathering. Ede sent us to understand. To prevent them from doing harm. But. There wasn’t enough warning. They struck before we could reach them.”

Tahrl was cold and wanted to draw his riding jacket more tightly around his shoulders to ward himself from Lyncia’s words. His old cottage in Edgewood had stood almost to the touch of the forest, and it would have been so easy for a branch to turn, caressing the thatch of the roof, pulling it asunder.

“They are scavengers,” he said, finding the trace of his own words at the edge of hearing.

“They had always been so and solitary, but something drove them. We first met Kianan fleeing into the forest. Crazy. Worse than the survivors here. They could tell us nothing. We ran through the night. When we reached Edgewood, something was there.” She released Teresa’s hands, turning, and paced away from them. “Like a troll. Only greater. Darker. Older. It controlled the others.”

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“Such a thing lives in our forest?” Teresa said.

“Never.” She turned back toward them. “I’ve never seen its like. Like a great old tree that had grown dark and the wood had rotted away. Stronger than I. Rohana came. Andrea and Margaretha. Even Ede would not sit still in Greenhaven. We burned it to the ground! And scattered its ashes to the wind.”

“The forest trolls?”

“Hunted. They ravaged Edgewood. I never dreamed they could do such a thing. Splintering wood and rupturing Kianan homes. The threat cannot be tolerated. Ede has spoken, and we are agreed.”

Teresa bowed her head, looking to the long grain of the porch, and Tahrl turned in the stillness of the moment to see Chetwin standing in the door of the Ravenhouse and watching them.

“I am sorry,” the governess of Greenhaven said to the wood they stood upon and to Lyncia’s feet.

Stepping away from Teresa, her children, and grandchildren, Tahrl stood to the door where Chetwin leaned slightly into the frame. Teresa looked to them, brushing a hand at imagined hair that could no longer cloud her eyes, and she let the fingers flutter uselessly to her side.

“The relic, Tahrl? Is it the same one you spoke of?” Chetwin said without releasing his hold on the door.

“Yes, I do not know. For the Montmorin, it is akin to the ancient troglodytes. The Dryn find something of the forest trolls. I have learned all and know nothing.” Tahrl snapped and bit at the air as if he could stop the flow of words. “That is not true. I know that Alexander is dead.”

“I feared as much. I will miss him. He was always planning and guiding. Did he have our best intentions at heart? Could have made a great leader. Now I will never know his thoughts for the future. Never cross wits with him again.”

“He sought nothing but the best for all of us,” Armada said, stepping toward them.

“I meant no disrespect. He sought nothing less than peace among the three children of the DiKena. I would give many things to know how he hoped to finish what he had begun. He was a great man.”

“Yes. And how do you fare, Chetwin?” Teresa stood to the door and raised a hand to touch to his face. The man shied back as if the brush of her fingers would spark fire through his hair.

“Lyncia has been seeing to my recovery.” He stood still as her

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fingers traced the grain of his hair and the side of his face. “What was that thing?”

“I do not know. I will stay no longer than to rest the horses. I will learn what I can from the ruins of Edgewood.”

“We will learn.”

“No!” Chetwin stood tall, facing Tahrl, and stepped away from the door. “The reports from Highwall speak of the troglodytes growing bold. You have neglected your duties long enough.”

“I want to see it!”

“No,” Teresa said, and Tahrl turned on her as if he would raise a fist between them. “Edgewood is on the path to Greenhaven. Highwall is on the other side of the mountains. We have, both of us, been irresponsible.”

The branches turned the wood, aging and splintering in the heart of a breath under the touch of leaves, and he saw how the forest could move, stretching long fingers outward to the homes of the Kianan. The scream of the forest trolls would bite through the air, drawing the people from sleep, and sending them into the cold and the dark to be wrapped in branches and bored with roots. Torches would have been raised amid the screams of Aaron, Gannon, Chetwin, Rae, and Alanna, and they would be held against the enveloping dark, taking the forest trolls like wood, burning them like fires rising in the night, and burning their own homes.

He shook his head, seeing the houses and trades of Windvale standing all around him, and Teresa stood before him with her eyes dark and clouded with mist. The long hair that had graced her like fine silk had been taken by the flames of a fire-pit in the chambers of the Earlinstien mountains. His eyes fell to the pouch held tightly to her side where the shards and fragments of her lover’s silver flute would be carried finally back to Greenhaven. He closed his eyes, nodding his head once, and tried to block the memory of the one who had governed Greenhaven for some two hundred years curled and broken before a fire in the depths of the Earlinstien mountains.



*The fire was quiet and dark, burning low in its pit against the wall. Light flickered over Chetwin dozing in his chair with Iola watching over him from the edge of the flames. The others had stayed no longer than to sit with the Kianan Ambassador, speak of the ruin of the Earlinstien cathedral, and wait for the horses to be rested. Beyond*

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the fire, they would have finally settled into their own camp long after the fall of night with only a small light of their own, trailing smoke, to hold back the dark. Tahrl looked over the wisps of the flames to where Teresa would have finally consented to stop and wondered how far they would have gone and how far they would push their horses with the morning. A rustling turn at the edge of sight brought Tahrl from the fire to Iola draping a blanket over Chetwin's shoulders. She turned, moving quietly back toward the small fire-pit set partially into the wall of the Ravenhouse, and sat next to him.

"It is cold," she said.

Wrapped in his blanket in his chair, Chetwin bore little resemblance to the man who had faced him before. He had been told that it was not acceptable to move supplies and men from Greenhaven to Highwall on a whim. There were steps that had to be followed and people who had to be considered. Running the troglodyte defense and relating to the Dryn had consequences.

"He will be all right," she said, following his gaze back to Chetwin. "No harm that rest will not mend."

The flickering light played across Chetwin as the darkness must have swept over Edgewood, digging into the people's minds. Wood splintered, and stone would have cracked as the creatures of dark wood took the town. Teresa would see the ruin as well as Armada and Chrystal, and they would be lead there by Lyncia. He looked away from the light of the fire to where the sun had set and to where the stones of Highwall waited.

"I am not a shadow. You- We know what we know, Tahrl. We must prepare for tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, we return to Highwall."

"No. Yes- no." She looked to the fire and watched how the flames flickered and faded and cast orange and red shadows across the room. "There are things we know and things we do not. There are things we can do and things we cannot. We must do the things that we can."

"We could have prevented the destruction of Edgewood-"

"No. Not us. That was not for us. That is for my mother, and even she could not do what she did not know."

"Ignorance is no excuse."

"The cost is dear, I know. We can only do what we know."

"We know nothing."

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“We know the troglodytes. That is for us.”

Tahlr touched a hand to his shoulder and could feel the prick of many sharp teeth against his skin. The touch had been cold and strong against his fingers and saliva had dribbled down his outstretched arms.

“We must know more from Highwall.”

“We know enough to plan.”

“There are plans.” His hand twitched from over the old marks as Iola raised her fingers to brush against his own. “I had considered the possibility that the troks would one day grow bold and move freely during the day. I do not think this is that time.”

“The ambush.”

“May not have been as much of an ambush as we might fear. No. I have thought about this. It is likely that they had taken refuge there from the sun.”

“Made bold by the darkness.”

“Made bold by the Greater Darkness. We will not know for certain until we reach Highwall, but I doubt very much that we now have to face them both day and night.”

“Only in stumbling across their hiding places.”

“Which is not a great thing. No. The darkness has made them bold, but the sun bothers them more. They are torn between their new found bravery and the burning of the day.”

“None of which we know for certain.”

“Which is why we need to reach Highwall.” The fire rose to fill his vision, and he watched the flames flicker and dance. Edgewood had not been taken in flames, sweeping over the rooftops and turning everything dark with smoke. The darkness had swept out of the woods to drink from the minds of the Kianan and leave Chetwin quiet and frail. “We-” The creature of burnt wood and dried blood had stood over Armada in the ruin of the cathedral. “This is nothing but a stopgap measure.”

“We must do what we can.”

“Even if we do not know what we can? Twice those things were summoned to the Earlinstien cathedral. We shall draw them to the Redstained mountains.”

“We must be ready.”

“The soldiers will fall before them. Like- like the survivors of Edgewood. What if the graths grow bold as the troks?”

“They are warded.”

“What of the cavern trolls?”

Iola raised her hand back to his side as if she would brush it against his shoulder, holding her fingers above the cloth of his shirt. The hand hovered between them with the fingers twisting and turning.

“We are not alone.”

“They must do what they can. What they know.” He brushed at her fingers, pushing the hand back and away. “I do not know what they know.” Holding his hands to his lap, he looked to the fire, feeling the dark and the cold that the flames could not hide. “Alex-He- The Windmasters. He feared they would simply summon the darkness.”

A sound lost between a low moan and a sharp cry of pain and fear filled the room and silenced the flames. Tahrl looked to Chetwin turning about in his blanket and to Iola walking to stand at the ambassador’s side with the dark light and red flames playing over them. She held her hand to his forehead, saying nothing, and her breath was filled with silent language whispered to the stars. Chetwin grew still, unfolding the hard knot of the blanket, and his cry was forgotten in the flicker and spark of the fire.

“We should move him,” Iola finally said, brushing the palm of her hand over Chetwin’s shoulder.

Tahrl stood, moving to take his feet as Iola lifted Chetwin from the chair. They carried him back from the room and along a short flight of stairs, stopping before a row of doors. Before one, Tahrl managed the door, holding on to Chetwin with one hand, and the room was a long rectangle taken mostly by a narrow bed of feathers and wood. They left him among the covers and blankets, closing the door behind them to stand in the hall before the stairs.

“He will be fine,” she said, raising her arms and rubbing her hands over her shoulders. “It is cold.”

Her hands grew still, resting against her arms, and Tahrl looked up into a slender face that was so much like her mother’s own and her grandmother’s. The eyes were large, searching over him, and dark like the needles of a great tree shadowed by the clouds of a thunderstorm. She was slender not as much as Lyncia but more so than her mother or Armada. She was taller than Armada by at least a hand’s width, and her dark wood and red hair drifted over her shoulder.

Tahrl closed his eyes, holding his breath tight to his chest, and

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did not want to look to her quiet and ageless face. The air rushed, flowing from him, and burned at the center of his heart in its passage. Beyond the wood of the door, Chetwin rested, and the wind that had swept through him had burned and not been kind.

“We must do what we cannot.” He opened his eyes to Iola with her arms wrapped and winding around her. “It is not enough. It- It will never be enough. We must watch the Greater Darkness without noticing it.”

“We are not alone.”

“No. We are not. We are- You did not speak with Moonlight in the storm. I do not know what the Winterbred will do. Teresa said- She said that Alex feared the Windmasters would only pull the darkness into the world.”

“It will be enough.”

“I do not know that. I do not know.”

He turned, taking the stairs slowly, and returned to the small fire, wrapping Chetwin’s blanket around his shoulders. Behind him and beyond the fire, the hall was dark and then the creek of steps on the wood stairs crept into the room. Iola crossed the chamber, taking a seat by the fire, and watched the flames burn quietly into the night.



*They left with the morning light barely gracing the night dark sky sending the stars to their rest. Torches burned at the still lingering dark as they readied their horses, and Chetwin, standing before the Ravenhouse, watched a company of Kianan soldiers, Tahrl, and Iola leave the three streets of Windvale behind them. They turned, keeping the Redstained mountains forever over their left shoulder and the town with its tent community of survivors from the destruction of Edgewood behind them. The sun passed unnoticed through the sky except as the light darkened, turning gold and red, and they needed to rest the horses for the night. Time and again, Tahrl looked to the mountains and for the speck of broad wings that would mark the flight and passage of one of the dragons.*

The mountains shifted, drifting to the south, with the town of Windvale four days behind them, and they followed the road as it turned to keep the mountains still to their left. Clouds gathered, passing through the sky, and straggled and strayed, refusing to hide the sun beyond their dark white folds. The sun graced the sky,

spreading fingers of light form behind the mountains, and drifted to the night and the dark over their right shoulder. Another day passed without the lingering traces of the dragons to be seen above the mountains, and then the walls of Highwall became visible off before them, rising like a toy castle being held up to the light. Far beyond the marker of Highwall could be seen a sliver of silver thread reaching from the horizon to the sky that was the Ivory Tower. They pushed the horses far into the dark but finally stopped, knowing that they must rest the horses if they wished to reach Highwall with the following morning.

The men in the fields, bringing in the last harvest of the season, paused in their work beneath the morning sun to watch the company of soldiers pass to the high plain that was the border and first gate of Highwall. Riding quickly among the wood buildings that had grown around the stone walls, they passed through the great iron and wood gate to reach the first courtyard of the keep. Kianan and Dryn watched them as they dismounted and made for the stables. Men appeared, taking the horses from them, and leaving the company of soldiers to their own path, Tahrl and Iola crossed into the stone passages of the keep. They made for a broad chamber filled with cushions and a long table of simple bread, cheese, and dried fruit. The half-dozen people in the hall grew quiet as the two of them entered and threw their gear to the stone floor. They took cups filled with dark mead and plates piled high with bread and cheese and dropped onto cushions, breathing deep and saying nothing.

Hector appeared to the hall and crossed to Tahrl and Iola, selecting a cushion before them and a cup of mead. Men appeared bearing a tray that drifted with the scent of fresh cut warm forest hen and red potato and onion stew. The tray was left between them, and Tahrl and Iola put aside their half-eaten plates of bread and cheese.

“We received your letter,” Hector said after Tahrl had taken a sip from his bowl of stew. “The magician Sorcha told me of Alexander. I am sorry. I never wished him any more harm.”

“He knew that,” Tahrl said, looking only to the steam rising from the bowl between his fingers. “Now, what news from Highwall?”

“As your letter warned, troglodytes have been encountered during the day. Their behavior is different. More chaotic and unpredictable. I cannot piece a pattern together from the reports.”

“Can you gather anything from the reports? Is it completely random? A clean break? Or are they acting as if they are struggling with

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a newfound freedom?” The clicking of stone against stone had fractured the morning light, frightening the horses, and the voice of a dragon had rumbled through him that they were driven. “Uncertain if they should maintain the old ways or embrace the new?”

“No- I don’t know- you ask too much. The encounters are far too sporadic and unpredictable for that. I mean, during the day, they have been found far from their normal paths. Even at night. The old patterns don’t fit. As if they were searching.”

“Or being driven?”

“Driven? That is not the word I would choose. If driven then by conflicting desires.”

“The old way struggling with the new?” Iola said.

“That may be too much speculation,” Hector said.

“We have reason to feel that they may be driven. In all the years that my sisters have patrolled the mountains, we have never found what governs them. They are intelligent after a fashion. They don’t hunt in packs. They patrol.”

“You’re suggesting that the new driving force is in conflict with their old leader?”

“Perhaps. They may be fighting amongst themselves. It might explain the disruption of their patterns.”

“I simply cannot figure enough from the reports.”

“Then it is good that I have returned.” The breath would not push through, and Tahrl bit down on his next word, looking to the table and the mountains beyond. “That I have returned.” The bowl was a solid block that he pushed to his lap, and the steam was rancid in his nose and burned beneath his eyes. Beyond the mountains was where Chetwin rested from something he could not see. “You’ve heard the news from Edgewood?”

“Yes, and it troubles me greatly. Troglodytes are passing familiar but this?”

“For now,” Iola said, “leave them to my sisters.”

“The forest trolls?” Tahrl said.

“And whatever it is that drives them.”

“What drives them is our concern.”

In the quiet of the stillness that filled the room, he looked to Iola resting her barely touched bowl against her knee, and she turned as if she would speak without a voice to find words. With a sharp shrug of her shoulders, she shook her head as if she were trying to dislodge hair from her eyes and then turned her attention to the

bowl in her hands. Lifting a red potato with long slender fingers, she held it before her eyes as the juices smeared her hand, and she placed it in her mouth.

Hector was looking across the room over Tahlr's shoulder as if servants were preparing to reupholster the cushions and he wanted them to be quiet about it. Tahlr rubbed at his face, feeling the heat behind his eyes and the cold on his cheeks. His bowl of stew was held by one hand, and he returned it to the tray where the still steaming slices of forest hen looked frozen and dead.

"We cannot do nothing. Even blind. Even groping in the dark." He watched her. With eyes turned ever so slightly to look to him, she held the bowl between her fingers and ran one hand around the rim lifting juices.

"We—" He looked to Hector whose eyes turned wide and darting and bounced off the walls, floor, and ceiling as if he had never seen the chamber before. "We are not alone. The Montmorin have knowledge of things that take shape out of the dark."

"Then we must contact them," Iola said.

"Yes. Yes, we must." He bit down on a laugh, forming like a hiccup at the back of his throat, and tried to swallow past the weight in his mouth. Closing his eyes, he held one hand to his face as if the coolness of his palm would quiet the burning behind his eyes.

"We must do what we can."

"No. Not enough. We must do what we cannot." He held the hand still, feeling the pressure against his eyes and the cold like the walls of the castle in a storm. "The Windmasters. The magicians. We must contact them." Opening his eyes, the weight of his hand dropped to his lap, and he looked to Hector, blinking his eyes past the sting of water and flashes of fire. "Where is Sorcha?"

"The magician Sorcha? She was here for a day or two more than half the moon ago."

"Balthazar?"

"Never here. I know. The letter said to let the both of them speak with the dragons, but he never came. The magician Sorcha said that he had returned to his home."

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me."

"Now, the magician Sorcha, she did speak with the dragons. What about? I don't know. But. After it was over, she was troubled."

"How so?"

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“I do not know. She did not speak to me of such things. But. That doesn’t matter. After it. After the audience. The dragons argued.”

“No.”

“Shook the whole of Highwall with the noise of it. Argued. I don’t know how else to describe it. Seemed to go on forever. Then Graywing and Cloudbreaker left.”

“Left?”

“Gone. Still screaming at each other at Moonlight as they circled the place. The magician Sorcha stayed till morning. Wrote a letter. Should be half-way to Magincia by now.”

“Where did she?”

“Said she would join master Balthazar on the other side of the mountains. She seemed deeply troubled. Who wouldn’t be? Everyone was troubled by. Well, by Graywing and Cloudbreaker’s departure.”

“Moonlight?”

“Still here. But. She has been very quiet. If you had seen. If you had heard.”

“She has done nothing?”

“They had done nothing. Since the day of the storm. Nothing until the magician Sorcha was here. As if they didn’t care. Until the magician Sorcha was here.”



*The language of the dragons was deep and rumbled at the back of the throat in a way that no Kianan could ever imitate. It was rich and vivid and sounded nothing so much as like the echo of thunder rolling across the sky on a cloudless night. The voice of a dragon seeped into your body and reverberated in your bones, stretching from the hairs on your head to the tips of your toes. Anger and the roar of a dragon ripped at the skin and tore at the lungs and shook the body until it felt as if it would fly apart. The stones of Highwall had been filled with the roar and cries of dragons in anger. Three voices raised to the sky, raining words that none among the Kianan could ever hope to understand.*

The wood of the final door that separated the apartments of the dragons from the rest of Highwall looked whole without a crack or fracture and dark. Tahrl remembered how the wind and the storm had beat against the door and how the wood had been slick with moisture. He pushed at the door, breathing out, and stepped into the

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domain of the Winterbred. Iola was little more than a pace behind him, and before them, Moonlight knelt against the stone floor with her wings curled tight and held beneath her. She seemed dwarfed by the gray walls of the apartments that had been built to support as many as six of the dragons. Her head was held high as the many layers of her eyes shifted and turned at their approach. The empty hall swallowed all sound, including the beating of his own heart as Tahrl looked to Moonlight's face and the eyes that stayed focused upon him.

"Tell me."

Moonlight shifted; her gaze wandering as she turned her head to look to the far end of the apartments where part of one wall and the ceiling had been removed to accommodate the comings and going of the dragons. Against the edge of the opening could be seen the tattered remains of a great cloth like the sail of a ship that had attempted to help hold out the storm.

"They have gone home," she said.

"Why?"

"We are all monsters." The words had been nothing more than the whisper of the breeze in the high mountains, and her gaze remained fixed past the tattered fragments of white draped limp beneath the sky.

"Tell me."

The wind did not stir, and the cloth remained motionless beneath a blue sky streaked with dark clouds.

"The others felt that remaining here was worse than pointless. Atrophy. Death."

"We need you."

"That is why they left."

"They abandoned us?"

"Never." She looked back to him, lowering her head so that they were almost touching. "Cloudbreaker believes that there are no more words."

"They will act."

"I fear it."

She pulled away, bowing her head almost to the stones of the floor, and he could feel her breath wash over his face. Brushing at his hair, the touch was warm and dry, tasting of soft earth and new felled snow. He tilted his head, wanting to hold the breath to his face and never breathe again.

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“Fear that confronting the Greater Darkness will only make it stronger?” Iola said, and Tahrl blinked past undiscovered tears, looking to her as if she had just stepped out of the wind. “That any power will only draw its hunger? I saw how that thing fed upon Armada.”

Moonlight crumpled, sagging against the floor as if the earth pulled at her. Tahrl tried to step closer, feeling nothing except the burning of his heart behind his eyes and the breath that would not flow in his veins.

“There is nothing left,” Moonlight whispered.

“Why?”

“Because the song is broken.”

“The song!” Tahrl turned, feeling the breath behind his eyes and rushing warm against his cheeks. “I had forgotten about the song! Alexander is gone. I know that now. I have seen what survives of his flute. Broken.”

“It was warm.”

“What?”

“The fragments of my grandfather’s flute,” Iola said. “They were warm. Did you touch them?”

“No; I don’t remember.”

“There is life there. Hope.”

“No,” Moonlight said. “The song has been broken.”

“Song?” The word burned at his chest and the back of his throat. “You talk about it. What is the song? You talk about. Why didn’t you tell me? Warn me!”

“In five hundred years, the walls of this castle will crumble into dust.”

“Do you wait until the walls topple on your head before saying anything! Why did you tell Alex? Hide the truth from me!”

“You would not understand.”

“Of course not! I know nothing of magic!”

“Do I know nothing of magic?” Iola said.

The dragon raised her head from the edge of the ground, looking to Iola, focusing on her eyes.

“You hide behind ritual in much the same way that the magicians defy it.”

“Moonlight!” Tahrl said, drawing her away from Iola.

“I speak truth. It is the weakness that separates her from her grandfather.”

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“Would you have sent her to her death, too?”

“We did not expect him to move so quickly.”

“And he feared that you would act rashly. That you would. That. You speak in ambiguities. Talking around the thing almost as if you were afraid of defining it. If you had spoken plainly just once, would it have made a difference?”

“No.”

“When will it be enough?” He turned, looking to Iola, finding her curled against the floor, and stumbled, stepping to her side. Lowering a hand cold as the wind to her shoulder, he looked over her head slumped to her knees and the hair shrouding her face.

“This is not what I wanted,” Moonlight said.

“No?”

“I am of the Winterbred. A Windmaster. Moonlight.” As she spoke, he could feel her breath caress him trailing warmth and flowing through Iola. “I would give the life from my heart for you.”

“Why didn’t you?” Iola whispered.

“This is not what I wanted.”

“What then?”

“Hope.” Her voice was a whisper turning in his ear, and her nose was a touch he could feel against Iola’s hair. “I wanted to believe in the sunrise.”

“What does that mean?” he said.

“That Alexander understood,” she said, pulling away and looking down at them. “That the one who sang of the earthsheart was ready. I wanted to believe.”

“That he understood the gentle magic? Is that all? Do you? Understand? You talk around it. Speak in ambiguities. Know everything and understand nothing. I have seen them. Them! The monster that attacked Armada. Did you know she summoned it to the ruins of the Earlinstien cathedral? Calling for her mother.”

“No.”

“What are they?”

Moonlight looked away, turning her face to the far corners of the apartment.

“The Greater Darkness?” he said. “What attacked Edgewood, driving the forest trolls before it? Why didn’t you warn us? What do you fear?”

“That it is stronger than all of us.”

“What is?”

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“The thing that has survived.”

“What thing? Do you even know? Is that why you talk around it? Because you don’t know? Fearing what you do not understand?”

“I know!” She turned on him; eyes folding in upon themselves to hold on him. “I know.”

“Then tell me.”

“It is hungry.”

The thing of dried blood and burnt wood had ignored the others and focused on Armada; even after she had been tossed aside and lay unmoving, it had turned without touching him to reach for the one who had accidentally called it into the morning.

“Moonlight,” Iola said, raising her head from her knees. “Sorcha, the Montmorin magician, she was here.”

“Yes.”

“Did she speak?”

“The Greater Darkness had taken root in the Earlinstien cathedral. She feared that it would find other places to grow.”

“Has it?”

“After a fashion.”

“What did she want?”

“To understand it.”

“How has it taken root?” Tahrl said.

“You spoke of an attack on Edgewood.”

He had seen splintered wood and broken stone reflected in the eyes of Alanna’s daughter, and a darkness that swallowed thought had uncoiled around her, spreading branches over the small town. Ruins were all Lyncia could describe and were all that Teresa and Armada would find, and Aaron had not been among those in Windvale.

“Yes.”

“It seeks weakness in our armor. Somewhere to put down roots. It is not wholly awake yet. Shaken by its defeat at the cathedral.”

White robes had fled before dark shadows and creatures of burnt wood and dried blood with only a slender silver light to hold them at bay until that spark had been shattered and its pieces had been wrapped in the tatters of Teresa’s dress. The flash as the flute was broken had ripped at his heart and thrown the walls of the cathedral over the fields of the Montmorin and smothered the life from too many of his family. Nevermore would he hear the spark of silver

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music that could draw him from the depths of the Ivory Tower to the heights of the mountains or hold bone thin figures in the dark.

“Defeat?”

“Yes, defeat. It was driven back. Deprived of its hold on the cathedral. The price. The cost to us was too high.”

“We must finish what has begun,” Iola said.

“There is nothing left.”

“Why? Because the song is broken? The gentle magic buried in the ruins of the cathedral?” Tahrl looked from the dragon slumped before him to the far corners of the apartment, hearing the echoes so much like thunder of voices raised in anger. “They did not think so.”

“They dream of fire in the wind.”

“Did Sorcha spark that fire?”

“No.”

“She did something. One step out that door and the castle is shaking with your voices. She wanted more than understanding. Wanted something from you.”

“Yes.”

“What did she ask of you? Want you to do?”

“Fight the darkness.”

“Will they?”

“I fear it.”

*Chapter Five*  
**At the Edge of Twilight**

*Like the memory of an echo that has lost its voice long forgotten in the mist and the wind, the skeleton of dark wood and bleached stone stood alone, supporting empty air, and refused to fall, brushing the ground with dust. Silent shells ribboned with cracks and empty husks flaking in the late afternoon dark were scattered, laying discarded, by the gravel road that stretched from the Ivory Tower to Windvale. They stood, Teresa, Armada, Lyncia, in the midst of what had been called the town of Edgewood, having ridden hard with Windvale two days behind them. None had been upon the road with the ruin of Edgewood behind them and the hope of Windvale to wash in their faces. Only Teresa, Daena, Chrystal, and Armada with Lyncia to guide them had taken the path to Edgewood, stopping once maybe twice for sleep, and Armada wondered if they were even two days out of Windvale. The small groups of settlers who had put down roots along the road had abandoned their homes for the white tents that surrounded Windvale.*

Edgewood was ruins and broken homes of splintered wood and fractured stone where fingers had bitten into the life of the town and ripped it asunder. The branches and leaves of the trees turned gentle fingers never touching the ruin, and Teresa stood apart from it, turning a glance to the forest without tasting it, as she had remained distant from it since turning the corner of the mountains. Feeling the quiver of excitement and gossip of the leaves, Armada had not held back but had drunk deep of the forest with the first chance that she had as they rested the horses. The forest had sighed; trees losing the breath they had held since Teresa had first fled the forest searching for her lost lover. In distant Greenhaven, she had felt her sister Ede caress her, letting fear drain out of her hands and from between her fingertips, knowing that their mother had returned. The Dryn were in the woods, hunting, following the traces of the forest trolls that wandered half-awake between the trees. None

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were left to search and scavenge the woods, and none would be left to gather and draw the darkness back into the forest.

The sun faded, falling toward morning, with the shadows, growing, etched in the wind, and the memory of darkness was carved into the heart of Edgewood. A creature of dark light and mockery of wood had sunk roots, ripping at the ground, into the clearing beside the road and next to the ambassador's home. Armada stood before the burnt and blackened clearing, feeling the memory of dark branches etched into the wind. Before the clearing and touching the road was a bronze statue that lay twisted in upon itself and melted against the ground. Breathing deep, her eyes turned over the ruptured land, looking to the twisted and broken house where she had stood with Tahrl to tell the Kianan Ambassador that they were chasing her mother to the Earlinstien cathedral. In the memory of the wind, she could see the branches that had leached out, rotting the wood and splintering the walls of the house. The wave of fear and grief darker than a starless night had swept out around it to crash into the houses and homes of the Kianan and smother them in its wake. The Dryn had circled it, burning fire; a flicker of life in the wind to hold against the dark thing. Playing out and cresting the wave of chaos, they had struck fire like lightning into the dark leaves and twisting branches. The memory of fire held in the air before Armada as she felt how the flames had taken the thing so much like a forest troll so much like a tree until there was nothing left but ashes twisting in the breeze.

She turned, leaving the clearing with its melted statue behind her, and stood among the houses and homes of the Kianan. The forest trolls had moved silently at first like so many trees detaching themselves from the forest. Once they had taken root in the town at the heart of the night, they had screamed with a voice that knew no sound but struck directly into the mind without once touching the ears. The Kianan had shrieked from their beds and dreams into nightmare, finding roots that sunk into their floors and branches that ripped apart the walls of their homes. In a fog of fear and confusion, they had staggered, running, and had fallen beneath the roots of the trolls. The thing had then appeared out of the forest, drinking deep of the fear, chaos, and blood of the town. It had controlled the trolls, driving them into Edgewood and driving them to kill the Kianan.

Armada turned, facing the forest that marked one edge of the

town and then facing the fields turning gold and the river beyond town. The others stood upon the road through town with Crystal and Daena seeing to the horses and Lyncia standing before the clearing and holding her hand flat before her eyes and away from her face. She saw the fire that Lyncia must have held in her hand as they stood against the creature of darkness and mockery of wood. The forest trolls had summoned it as it had controlled them to gather; the thing had driven them to gather so that they would summon it. One feeding upon the other, causing it, with neither beginning nor ending.

Lyncia stood with her face turned to the sun hovering low in the sky, and Armada remembered that the sun had been much higher in the sky not even touching mid-sun when they had reached Edgewood. Armada walked slowly to her mother's side, letting the turn of her thoughts touch between them, and Teresa let her breath out in a sigh that shrunk her shoulders and pulled her face toward the ground. The touch of their thoughts mingled, sagging in the late afternoon light, pulling this way and that, and Teresa turned, raising her hand and running her fingers through Armada's hair. She pulled away, looking to Teresa's eyes reflecting both blue and green and dark as winter, and her gaze drifted to the stubble of white blond and silver which was all that remained of her mother's once ankle length hair. Raising a hand, drifting upward, she stood still with Teresa's eyes upon her fingertips, and her mother touched her hand, gripping fingers, before Armada twisted away.

The echo of darkness that was laced in the wind burned at her, feeling of broken mountains and splintered rock. The shards and shadows had swarmed around her, folding her own thoughts and voice back around her, engulfing her with a touch that was colder than ice. From the ruin of the Earlinstien cathedral, a creature the color of blood past sunset and darkness beyond light had stepped out of the wind folded in her thoughts. It had played with them with her on her father's grave in the Earlinstien mountains, sinking daggers like teeth burning with cold into her mind. Her mother touched at her shoulder, brushing the memory free, and Armada did not pull away, standing with Teresa in the heart of Edgewood.

They turned back to the horses with Lyncia still standing before the charred and blackened clearing beside the road. With nothing left living in the ruin of the small town of Edgewood, they made for the forest and the trees that would sweep and swirl around them

as they followed the path to Greenhaven. Arriving with the morning still chasing them and the horses both winded and surprised to find themselves home, they stepped into a crowd of Dryn, flowing like leaves and branches touched by the wind. Voices moved around them as the breeze would carry them, and Armada moved from eye to eye, holding tight to her reins. The touch at her knee was Rohana, and Armada loosed her voice with a cry like a roar, falling into her sister's hands. The call was answered in kind with voices raised to the canopy of leaves far overhead at Teresa's return. The Dryn seemed not to give, pressing only more tightly around the governess of Greenhaven so that she could not disappear again, and allowing Armada and Rohana to draw back from the swirl of the group. They found Winonah, pulling toward them, and she threw her arms around the both of them, drawing them close.

The swirl and flow of voices grew faint against the pull of her sisters, and Armada could feel Rohana's arm around her and the touch of her thoughts against her skin. She tried to pull back from the contact, hiding the scars and lingering numbness that the creature of the Earlistien cathedral had burned into her. Rohana only held her more tightly, saying nothing among too many voices to count or name. Armada turned in her sister's embrace, searching for Ede, finding her back from the others. She could not sense her sister's thoughts leaping over the heads of the crowd or holding tight to her chest and away from all those around and before her. They both looked back to Teresa who was separated from those around her by remaining on the back of her horse.

As they had entered the forest Morningsglory, leaving the shadow of Edgewood behind them, Armada had felt the forest reach out to her, embracing her. She had touched the wood, tasting Ede in every rock, every branch, every breath, and in every leaf of every tree. The touch had washed over her, singing through her in the half-light and glow of the late afternoon sun, and then the feeling had paused, rushing up against an old tree-stump tangled in the brambles. Armada had turned, looking back over her shoulder to where her mother had just entered the forest behind her, and she had felt the wood reaching out to Teresa and trying to embrace her. The numbness had burned fresh in her, turning cold, as she had felt the forest washing over her mother turning this way and that, and the governess of Greenhaven had only pulled her cloak more tightly around her shoulders to hold off the warmth of the wood. The

numbness of the scars she had endured at the Earlinstien cathedral had burned at her eyes, blinding her, feeling rain fall against her face, and she had turned away from Teresa who had simply met her gaze and said nothing. The night had been long, blurring around her, and she had raced the moon to reach Greenhaven.

Teresa left her horse to Daena and to Chrystal and made her way toward her daughter Ede, passing among the Dryn who seemed to yield a path to her. She stood before the daughter who had held the mantle of governess in her absence, and the voices around them grew as still as the wind without a trace of the breeze to touch it. Not wanting to breathe, Armada reached out with her thoughts, feeling Ede in the turn of her awareness stretching to touch Teresa, and their mother stood still, facing Ede with hidden eyes. She watched Ede raise a hand that was cupped open with the fingers barely touching to the governess of Greenhaven, and she felt the winter dew shake loose from the trees, dripping like flakes of snow. Teresa touched the hand, entwining fingers, taking Ede in her arms, and a shout like thunder broke from the Dryn to shake the branches and make the leaves dance in the trees.

Teresa turned with her arm still wrapped around her daughter as the Dryn began to drift back to the trees of Greenhaven, and Armada with her sisters Winonah and Rohana made their way to their mother's side. They walked between the tall trees of Greenhaven until they reached the one dwelling shaped from earth and wood and scattered with green and brown, red, and gold leaves that was their home. Salton was waiting before their great house nestled against the trees, saying nothing and knowing enough to let them pass, and only stopped them long enough to touch Teresa's hand. They left the second Kianan Ambassador to Greenhaven standing at their door as they passed from room to room. Finally reaching a small familiar room, Winonah and Rohana stood for a moment, watching Teresa begin to build a fire, and then they left, leaving Armada and Ede to draw the curtain closed, blocking the doorway. They stood together, watching Teresa carefully arrange the wood in the pit, and she turned back to her children with the light flickering and burning and traces of smoke beginning to rise behind her. Seemingly lost to the wood and numb to their touch, they watched their mother settle slowly onto one of the cushions placed around the fire.

"You are tired," Teresa said.

"You are tired?" Armada felt the flames leap and play among the

branches in the pit of her chest and beneath the skin of her heart. “You are tired!”

The words cracked and splintered in the heart of the room, sending fragments and shards swirling and fluttering slowly to the floor to be lost in the wood and the dust, while Teresa sat looking to the gentle slope and curve of the wall, and her gaze drifted slowly over the fire and the cushions huddled around it. Armada hiccuped, biting at her breath, and swallowing words before they could erupt from her mouth sending her sprawling to the soft wood of the floor. She shifted ever so slightly, looking to her sister, and Ede seemed to drink deep of the room, pulling the smoke and the scent of the earth into her lungs.

“What have you done?” Ede said, breathing scented air touched with smoke and the dust of life.

Teresa looked to where they stood before the curtain, and she held a hand against her chin with the fingers spread over her face and touching her cheek. She said nothing; her eyes drifting and stained with water. Armada searched for a voice, finding it lost in the corner of her mother’s eye, and stretched, feeling her arms locked at her sides with fingers biting into her palms.

“I am old,” Teresa said, letting the fingers drift across her lips, curling them beneath her chin, and her eyes turned, drifting back to the flickering light of the fire. “I have never felt old before.”

“We need you,” Ede said. “I let that thing into the forest.”

“It was not your fault.”

“Not my fault? How can you say- Those people died because of me.”

“They died because of me.”

She was looking at them, half-turned upon her cushion, with eyes that were locked, lost, and wavering from their faces. The fire sparked and flared, cackling at them, and cast Teresa’s shadow across the floor, bathing it in flickers of orange and red light, and smothering it with dark smoke.

“All the more reason why we need you,” Ede said. “I do not have your familiarity with the wood. Your experience.”

“A shift now might allow another one to enter. Disrupt the balance.” Teresa turned back to face the empty cushions, turning her head, looking over her shoulder to speak to them, and Armada bit at a breath trapped in her throat. “I can advise. I am yet strong; there is much I can do.”

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“Did you lie to Tahlr?” Armada said.

“Lie?”

Armada felt the breath flow around the thorns lodged in her throat, swirling upward and dragging claws like daggers ripping at the roof of her chest bleeding fire that dripped into her lungs.

“We have been negligent,” she said around flames. “We must remember who we are.”

“I remember.”

“No! You don’t! Do your words now mean nothing!”

“You are unkind.”

She bowed her head, trying to breathe past the fire that curled in her chest and the flames that burned behind her nose and beneath her eyes. Tahlr had burned, wanting more, sitting before her on Highwall’s practice floor with the storm in his eyes blind to death, and he had fought to follow a patch of darkness burned into his brain, wanting to understand it, comprehend it, consume it.

“Have you forgotten?” Ede said, shaking her out of memory and the image of Tahlr wanting to resist the dark even in the face of his duty to Highwall.

“No,” Teresa said to the fire.

“We must plan,” Armada said. “We must act. We need you.”

“I am tired. So tired. And, I grieve. Are you that blind? Let me grieve.”

She felt the darkness of the wood creeping in all around her and the silence that echoed on forever and would never more be broken by the music of her father’s flute. The silence of her father that had already crept into Teresa and made her blind to the hollow call of the forest was chill, touching at her skin and the fire burning in her heart.

“We all grieve,” she said with the words sounding as nothing against the emptiness of the night and the cold. “We cannot allow that loss consume us.”

“I know. But, I am old, and I have carried this weight for so long. Give me time.”

“I would give you forever if I could,” Ede said, stumbling forward as if she would drop to her knees before their mother, with her voice trailing after her. “I would turn back time. I would.”

“I know. We must plan.”

Ede seemed to take those words in her hands, holding them gently, and moved to one of the cushions facing their mother.

## **The Magic Flute**

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“We cannot have the trolls in our forest. They are few. Have always been few. Soon they will be none.”

“That is first.”

Armada stood back to the edge of the room, watching the withered tree that was her mother that had always been a giant in the forest reaching forever for the sky. Never marked and never branded, Teresa had always been the root and the branch of everything, holding the leaves together to dance in the wind, but those branches were drooping and cracked, drifting brown and dry leaves to slip into the dirt. She shook her head with the fire burning behind her eyes, and their voices were lost in the silence of the empty forest.

“Did he mean nothing to me!”

“What?”

“He was my father! I felt his life crushed! Ripped out of my heart in an instant! Who am I!”

“He was our father-”

“Who are you!”

“Please-”

“We are Dryn! We thrive in the deep forest where light never touches! We stand on the mountain where nothing else grows! We-”

“Stop!”

Teresa was standing; her arms at her sides with hands that were squeezed into little more than lumps of skin and bone. Ede was behind her, standing with one foot still curled and tangled in the cushion, breathing shallow, and saying nothing.

“Have you forgotten?” Armada said without a voice to hold the words and felt the breath draining from her lungs.

“Your father? He was mine. Mine!” Teresa thumped her chest with one swift strike of the flat of her hand. “Comprehend that if you can.”

With her mother standing before her blocking the light, Armada bit down on her teeth, trying to pull air into her lungs to fuel the quavering fire of her heart.

“We must not forget,” she said, trying not to gulp at words. “We are Dryn. We thrive in the deep forest where light never touches. Remember the rest.”

“We stand on the mountain where nothing else grows. We are no man’s slave.”

“Remember.”

There was silence that filled the room and seeped into the walls,

touching the dark forest, and squashing the cackle of the fire. She could feel her mother's step on the smooth wood of the floor and could not find sight to watch her approach or breath to pull into her lungs. She had spoken with dragons, fought with troglodytes, defeated a magician, and faced a creature of dark light and blood that had killed her father. Facing her mother with the silent echo of the forest all around her, she could only look to her toes and struggle for breath. The touch of her mother's hands on her shoulders was warm and sent a spark racing beneath her skin and swirling into her heart. She looked up into her mother's dark eyes and tasted the scent of the forest as she filled her lungs with air.

"I could never forget all that I have seen. Memory is burned into me," Teresa said. "I will not sit in the forest, waiting for nightfall. I will stand on the mountain where nothing else grows."

"They will not let you," Ede said as quiet as the wisps of the breeze. "I will not let you."

Teresa turned, twisting her shoulder with hands sliding slowly from Armada and the touch lingering with the trace of fingertips brushing against her skin. She felt the scent of the wood and traces of smoke drift, swirling, as Teresa reached out, shaping the room. The forest reached, holding still, wanting to brush against the governess of Greenhaven and seep into her skin. Ede was standing free of the cushion that had tangled her knee, and hands held still at her sides, reaching for their mother with thoughts full of the flavor of green leaves brushed with snow, red wood turning gold in the sun, crystal water rushing over damp earth, and morning scented dew dripping from pine needles and dark branches so life would thrive. Teresa raised a hand to her cheek as if she held the gentle fabric of the turn of the season like spiders' silk in the palm of her hand. She stepped through the small room of wood and earth with the touch of the forest swirling all around her and stepped to the cushions, sliding into one, letting it comfort her.

"I am not ready."

"When?" Armada said; the word pulling sharp from her heart.

"I do not know."

She could feel her mother leave the scent of the forest to drift and swirl all around her, and Ede touched the wood, taking it between her fingers and toes, letting the old wood smoke flavor her hair.

"We must speak with the magicians," Teresa said. "The Kianan. We must plan."

## **The Magic Flute**

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“Word has been sent to the Ivory Tower.” Ede returned to her cushion, standing over it, looking to Teresa. “North to Magincia. To Highwall.”

“Tahrl must be some two days from Highwall,” Armada said. “Longer for word to reach us.”

“It is a start,” Ede said. “Reports from the mountains are scattered. The troglodytes’ behavior is erratic. It is as if they have lost all focus for the hunt.”

“That is curious.”

“One would think the opposite. More drive. More focus. Bravery in the face of the light not burning them to death. I have nothing but the odd fragment and rumor to work with. The patrols all report to Highwall.”

“That must change,” Teresa said.

“Yes. Perhaps when Tahrl has had a chance to look over the reports. The mountains prevent us from conferring properly with Highwall. Dryn and Kianan alike must have one source. You agreed to this.”

“I agreed.”

“Our first concern is the forest trolls. Why-”

They looked to the curtain breathing inward as Winonah pushed into the small room carrying a tray piled high with scents of the morning and Rohana followed with a pitcher steaming with the flavor of apples. Armada turned, finding a small table in a corner of the room, and unfolded it between the cushions. She watched her sister Winonah and noticed that her brown and earth red hair had become streaked by time with threads of silver and gold. Winonah was the eldest daughter of Teresa and Delan and was young in comparison to her parents being maybe two-thirds of their age. The few who spoke of remembering the founding of Greenhaven spoke from the memories of childhood, and none were left who could truly claim to remember how things had been before Teresa had united the Dryn of Morningsglory forest. Her sister Winonah was not one of those for she had been born many years later, but her years could be noticed in the turn of her hand, the shape of her arms, and the way she held the tray, lowering it to the small table. Many she had shared her childhood with were gone, and Winonah had not fought to follow their mother to the Earlinstien cathedral. Next to Winonah was Teresa, their mother, looking over the tray, who had always seemed no older but surpassed all others in Greenhaven by more

than a century of years. Half of her life had been spent with one lover, and that half had been taken forcefully from her by strange shapes clawing from the dark amid the fears of Windmasters. The years that had made Winonah reluctant to demand one of the horses to follow Teresa weighed heavily upon their mother now that she had been found.

“The forest trolls must not be allowed to gather,” Ede said, and Armada turned slightly, sharply, from Ede to Winonah, and Rohana to Teresa as they looked over the tray picking out slices of beer-batter fried red apples.

“I agree,” Rohana said. “That thing we faced in Edgewood. If you had been there. It must not be allowed to happen again.”

“If we had known-”

“If I had known,” Teresa said. “If I had realized or seen more than the scavengers, I would have driven them from the forest long ago.”

“How could we have known.” Armada looked to no one, and her voice was for the tray, seeing seven spiced bread and apples and stuffed autumn mushrooms. “The forest trolls were as next to nothing. The cavern trolls. The troglodytes would summon the Kianan if left alone.” The life of the forest was filled with fried apples and mushrooms, bread and goldenheart caramelized with maple where no trolls roamed or dark things crawled. “How could we have known?”

She took an apple slice from the tray, holding it still warm between her fingers, scenting her hand with cinnamon, and sunk her teeth into a tender ring, severing the circle, and tasting juice against her tongue.

“They shall be driven from the forest,” Ede said.

“Then we must prepare for the future,” Teresa said. “We must consult with the magicians. The Kianan. With the Windmasters. We must seek it out. A waiting war. A war of attrition. We would lose.”

“We must consult with Balthazar. A force of Dryn already guard the graths. It is a start.”

“How has he taken to our presence?” Armada said.

“He likes it not at all. We cannot touch the graths, but he did agree to confining them in a much smaller pen.”

“Consorting with Balthazar.” She had crushed the magician into the dirt, forcing the breath from his body. “As if he could stop us.”

## **The Magic Flute**

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“We need him for the other magicians. So, we do not harm the graths. They are dangerous.”

“We must plan to destroy the graths without his consent. How shall we consult with him?”

“There is another magician,” Rohana said. “A Montmorin.”

“Sorcha Vedoman ap Earlinstien?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“We left them bound for Highwall.”

“That was more than a full turning of the moon ago. Two. She had been to Highwall. Balthazar had not.”

Armada stretched through the winding leaves and branches of the wood, sensing Margaretha at the edge of the forest, feeling the shared touch of recognition, and the Dryn raised her eyes to the morning light touching the Redstained mountains and the mansion that rested before it. Beyond the home of the magician Balthazar was a fence that encompassed a great field but did not stretch from the mountains to the trees as it had once done. The young wood of the barrier was anchored deep in the earth, holding many sharp barbs and long spikes to contain the creatures within its walls.

“If they are feeding the darkness.”

“Wizardry and magicians will not listen.”

“I will go.”

“No,” Armada said to Teresa’s voice, pulling herself into the room, letting the forest slip from her fingers. “Speak with Balthazar? You would speak with the other magicians?”

“You would be a better choice?” Teresa said. “With your history with magicians?”

“With your history with wizards?”

“I could still touch the forest.”

She looked to her mother, saying nothing, with the forest flowing all around her and brushing against the closed fist that the governess of Greenhaven turned to the wood. The room was silent with Teresa’s eyes locked to the floor, and then her gaze drifted, fumbling, from feet and cushions to the walls and the tray. The traces of a flicker from the fire touched Teresa, and Armada remembered the touches of dark red gold from her youth that had flowed amid the silver weave of her mother’s hair.

“I will go,” Armada said. “To deal with the graths. To speak with the magician Sorcha if I can. Learn her conversations with Cloudbreaker and Moonlight.”

## **The Magic Flute**

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“Not alone.”

“Where you fled I followed.”

She held her breath, flooding her chest with smoke and flame, as Teresa reached an awkward hand to the tray and fumbled with apple slices and goldenheart.

“The graths are dangerous. Do not go alone. Rohana. Lyncia.”

“Margaretha is already there. Like Edgewood, something may try to free the graths. With darkness. With troks.”

“Something may remain quiet until noticed.”

“There will come a time when we will want to make noise.”

“Let us choose that time.” Teresa turned a hand to brush protectively against the pouch that had been Hath Malor’s gift and that had remained at her side since they had left the Earlinstien mountains almost a full turning of the moon ago.

“What will you do?”

Fingers dug into the leather skin of the pouch.

“I do not know.” Teresa looked from silent face to silent face, and at each turn, Ede, Winonah, and Rohana could not hold her gaze. “You should know.”

With her children gathered around her, she lifted the gift, bowing her head and freeing the leather strap from her shoulder, and the only sound was the rustle of the fire as she loosened the clasp that bound the pouch. By the flickering red and white light of the small fire behind her, she pulled the scarves free from the depths of leather, turning them this way and that to unwind the shards of silver that they held.

“We must not make the same mistakes.”

“Mistakes?”

“Yes. Mistae- yes.” Teresa held the fragments of her lover’s flute half-shrouded in their wrappings in her hands, letting her fingers brush against the silver. “I shall carry these, I think. For a little longer.” She bowed her head, sinking into the cushion and holding the flute to her lap. “We must not be hasty. We must know what we are facing. We must not try to protect each other from harm. We must plan.”

The room was a silent shell where even the fire seemed to be holding its breath, and the flames that had burned at Armada were cold echoes secreted in her heart. She moved through the room, stepping between flickers and streaks of light from the fire, and

## **The Magic Flute**

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stood next to Teresa, kneeling at the edge of the cushion, brushing her cheek against her mother's shoulder, and leaning against her.

"Such a weight could drag you from the highest peaks."

"Such a weight," Teresa said with a voice that was little more than an echo of the wood of the fire, and she folded the cloth over upon itself, taking the shape of the fragments. "The magician Sorcha may speak with you. The Kianan Balthazar will not."

"I expect as much."

She felt her mother reach for her with a soft hand brushing against the traces of the scars in her thoughts, feeling the cold warmth burning ice behind her eyes.

"Such a weight," Teresa said, touching her lips to Armada's brow, with a hand tracing the curve of her shoulder and back. "Take those who seem appropriate. Leave when you are ready."

"I will."

"Do not forget who you are. Where you are." She pulled back from Armada, looking to her eyes with a hand brushing at the edge of her daughter's hair.

Armada breathed deep of the forest with the scent of dew on morning leaves filling the corners of her lungs. The flavor of fried apples and Autumn mushrooms rested, rising softly, on the table before them while wood smoke curled and danced against the soft wood of the ceiling.

"There will come a time when we shall want to make noise."



*At the edge of the forest with the home of the magician Balthazar resting in the field between the mountains and the wood, they roasted featherhare over a great fire under a star lit night. To the edge of the flames with the shadow of Balthazar's mansion at her back, Sorcha came to them to ask after her family. It had been less than half a handful of days since Armada had reached the Dryn gathered around the mansion and since she had last spoken with the magician Sorcha.*

"Armada ap Morningsglory," Sorcha had said at that meeting, speaking Kianan. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Yes," Armada had replied, thinking of the ruin of the Earlinstien cathedral. "Yes, I did."

Such words did not seem to be on the young magician's mind as she found Rohana and Chrystal making room for her at the edge of

the fire. Armada said nothing as she watched the magician who had been little more than a shadow on a cloudless day since that conversation. Sorcha looked from face to face over the flow and sweep of the flames that licked at the skin of the featherhare turning it gold.

“How fares my grandfather?”

“Hath Malor ap Earlinstien? He weathers the storm with great dignity. He has gathered promises of support from the other houses for the coming winter. None will starve in Earlinstien.”

“That is good.” The flames were her face, teasing and playing over the curve of Sorcha’s skin, as her eyes would not hold upon Armada. “Some things were still uncertain when I left. Though I wish I had not.”

“They speak well of you.”

“You are kind. For those words, I thank you. And, what of the rest of my family? My uncle Gran and Urtha?”

“They share the burden, carrying it together. Already they have begun to prepare the new fields. Urtha says the new soil is rich for the harvest. My father’s last gift as she says.”

“Your father?”

“He wished for you to call him Alexander.”

“Your father? Alexander? Your- I am sorry. I have done you wrong. I did not know.” She seemed to move, sitting still with the fire forgotten, and looked over her shoulder for one moment to the field and the mountains that stretched into the night. “I have thought unkindly of you. The news that I gave to Tahrl Morgan, knowing him to be close to Alexander, I should have given to you.”

“It is enough.”

“No, I have done you wrong in your grief. Please, I have been cruel. Your father. I offer you my apology. I am sorry.”

“It is enough. How could you have known?”

“I should have. I grieve for your loss.”

“Others have lost.” Armada touched the necklace of wind polished stones that she had worn for the past two days, feeling their weight against her skin.

“I know. Those close and those far. Family all. I did not know. Alexander spoke only of Tahrl Morgan. Nothing of family.” The last was said with downcast eyes and a hand that turned at her throat as if she wore a necklace of her own.

“That does not surprise me.”

“His own family?”

## **The Magic Flute**

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“He wanted to protect us. From the other magicians. Keep the disassociated parts of his life separate. Tahlr? He was familiar to you.”

“I had never met him.”

“But?”

“I am Vedoman. He spent some years there, summering. I am slightly his elder. Hath Malor is my grandfather, but I grew in another house.”

“And the Earlinstien cathedral.”

“And the cathedral.”

They grew silent; the flicker and snap of the fire speaking for them, and the others, Margaretha, Rohana, and Chrystal tended to the fire and the featherhare, letting the wood among the flames speak for them. When she had first reached the mansion, seeing the new fence with its barbs, Armada had seen Balthazar not at all and the magician Sorcha only briefly.

“Armada ap Morningsglory,” Sorcha had said, standing much as she had that night when they had last spoken with the magician Balthazar gagging for breath beneath a starless sky. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

“Yes,” she had replied, thinking of the dark and the screams of the wind. “Yes, I did.”

“That is good. I hope you are content.”

“Content?” The screams had burned at her, tumbling one upon the other in her mind, with the light fading over her father’s grave. “No. Humbled perhaps. It marked me.” She had raised a hand to the side of her face, turning her head, as if she would show an invisible scar that ran behind her ear. “The shadow of the cathedral did.”

“We all have our marks.” Sorcha had held aloft one hand as if to display a bracelet or ring. “Cuts and bruises that we carry with us through time.”

“Burdens can be lightly born.”

“Or smother us in the dust.”

The magician Sorcha had returned to Balthazar’s mansion, leaving her on the open field among the other Dryn. For three days thereafter, she had kept with her fellows, seeing to the strength and wards of the fence, watching the graths watching her from the confines of the cage. She would turn to the mountains, looking for sign of the dragons or of the troglodytes, and she would turn to the forest, listening for news from Tahlr who would have reached High-

wall. As the days passed to night, she was not surprised to have no sign of Balthazar who seemed to have secluded himself in his home as much a prisoner as his graths. The magician Sorcha, she had glimpsed once maybe twice out among the other Dryn, but they did not speak until the white robed magician had appeared at the campfire asking of family.

“Did you speak with Moonlight and Cloudbreaker?”

“Yes,” Sorcha said, holding a slice of featherhare suspended before the fire on the edge of a knife. “Master Balthazar did not.”

“What did they tell you?”

“Of things that have slept since the DiKena were young. Of things that crept through the halls of the Earlinstien cathedral seeking passage. Of shattered hopes and broken dreams.” The slice of tender white meat, dripping juices, toppled from the blade edge to fall to the dirt at her feet, and she kicked it into the ring of the fire. “Not all at once. In pieces and fragments and neglected questions.”

“Beware the truth that a Windmaster speaks.”

“For the truth is a fire that burns. I had never seen Windmasters before. Never spoken with them.”

“They can be intimidating.”

“They were inscrutable. Curious. Interested in me without wanting to speak with me.”

“Protective.”

“Like family.” She smiled at her own words, taking a breath, looking over the fire. “I asked what could corrupt the cathedral. What could grow in her heart? They did not want to answer, reminding me of dark times and forgotten moods. I asked why they had done nothing.”

She watched Sorcha look over the fire to the forest beyond, and Armada could feel the flames grow still behind her eyes, turning in the dark and letting the branches fall. The touch of the wood at her back was silent without a trace of the forest trolls remaining in the wind. Before her eyes and beyond the mansion, she could hear the growl of a grath calling one to the other.

“For that they did not have an answer?”

“No,” Sorcha said. “They were afraid. I asked why they did nothing. They are without hope. The song is broken. There is nothing left.”

“I did not know.”

“Have you not spoken with them?”

## **The Magic Flute**

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“Not for almost a turning of the season.” Her voice faded slowly before the fire with Moonlight and Cloudbreaker turning in her memory and coming to rest beside her folding their wings next to where she rested near the trees looking over Highwall. “When my father died, I felt it.” She closed her eyes at a flicker of light and breath that did not want to become words. “Tear at my heart. I wanted to run. I did not think of dragons.”

“I am sorry.”

“No, be not so. I have seen the Winterbred be brave. Fought with them against the troglodytes.”

“The life of their heart is fading.”

“I am sorry.” Armada looked to the roots of the flames playing among the red coals of the dark wood and saw how the shadows resembled the creature that had stood over her at the Earlinstien cathedral. On another dark lit night, Riverstone had swooped low over the troglodytes, scattering them in their path, and Snowflower had taken the first one in her jaws, grabbing sky while sinking teeth into flesh.

“How could you have known? You were grieving.”

“They are afraid. My father said as much. They will act. They will not act. He said as much.”

“Alexander wanted to shock them out of their cowardice. He said as much.”

“He broke them.”

“I am not of a mind on this. The fire has faded. It has not been smothered. I asked them to fight. Demanded they fulfill their destiny. They are not of a mind on this.”

“You told them to avenge my father’s death?”

“I told them to avenge my family’s blood. They argued. They are divided. Cloudbreaker and the other one have left Moonlight alone in Highwall.”

“What?”

“Yes. Moonlight would speak with no one after that.”

“This is most curious strange.” Armada ran a hand, fingers curled, through her hair, feeling fingers brush rivers of flame against her skin. “They will act. They will not act.”

“They are not of one mind on this.”

“They are dangerous.”

Flames of orange and yellow light flared around a forgotten featherhare as it slid from its charcoal and crumbling stick into the

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fire. Gold skin blistered, turning black, and ruptured, withering in upon itself amid the sizzle and crack of wood and flame. Short wings held tight to the body pulled skin away revealing bone, and Armada turned from the fire, looking to Sorcha and the mansion behind her and the shadow of the mountains.

“We must be ready,” Armada said, and the others, Margaretha, Rohana, Chrystal, and Lyncia looked to her, dragging their eyes from the featherhare’s pyre. “We must act.”

“We are not of one mind on this.” Sorcha tilted her head, glancing to the mansion that rested upon the field behind her. “I must consult with the others.”

“Do.” She looked to yellow and orange flames playing over broken skin turned black as night and looked to flickering light glowing red from the heart of the wood. “Remembering. Some are more dangerous than others.”



*Decisions had been made around a small fire in the chambers of Greenhaven after Teresa’s return. Several days would then pass before Armada set out for the home of the magician Balthazar, and in that time, she would have the old weapons brought from their places of storage. The Dryn at Balthazar’s home were prepared for an uprising among the graths should they attempt to breach the fence or sever the wards. They watched for forest trolls to crawl unexpectedly from between the trees or for creatures far darker to step out of the wind. Armada gathered the long spears of carved and sculpted iron from their resting-places in Greenhaven, and many Dryn paused at seeing them once more in the sun. They remembered the great spears that were more blade than wood, taller than the tallest Dryn, and were etched with marks of ancient power. Watching, they stood as Armada oversaw the cleaning of the weapons that had once been needed to fight cavern trolls. They remembered the days when Greenhaven was young and troglodytes had driven the last of the Kianan from the Redstained mountains. They remembered the troglodytes that had skirted even to the edge of the forest and the cavern trolls that had followed the trail of the smaller creature’s migration. In the air, Armada could feel it, the hope that such weapons would not be needed again. She could feel how the darkness called for them, and shadows moving against the wind and between the trees, shattering homes, toppling mountains, would summon them.*

## **The Magic Flute**

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The edge of the blade burned against the cold scar of memory, losing a drop of blood, tracing the DiKena words etched in bright metal for the scream at the broken heart of shattered mountains and for the echo of darkness that had engulfed Edgewood.

From Greenhaven, Armada went with enough of her fellows to double the number of Dryn gathered around Balthazar's home. She watched the graths in their wood cage, testing the boundaries, pacing this way and that. They were creatures of long hair and blunt faces with large padded feet that concealed claws, which could rend wood and scar stone. Around her the other Dryn worked, bringing wood cut from the forest, and she had noticed the magician Sorcha watching the barricade being built between the mountains and Balthazar's home. Watching the four recoilless catapults being assembled, Sorcha said nothing, speaking occasionally with Armada over roasted featherhare and smoked thunder boar. Before her, the graths paced, watching her watching them, and their voices were deep rumbling growls that were lost somewhere between the call of a great wolf and the roar of a mountain cat.

"I do not want that one near the graths!"

Armada turned slowly from the fence and the creatures that it held snapping at the wind to face the magician Balthazar, standing to the back door of his home, stalking toward her.

"Afraid I might contaminate them?"

"Yes!"

"Afraid that I might corrupt them? That they would turn upon all without thought?" She turned to the magician who had been nothing but a shadow for the past handful of days and who now stood before her blowing strands of hair from his lips. His tongue pushing at the corner of his mouth; touching the tarnished gold of his beard. "Then I shall do as you request. We dare not harm you precious monsters."

"They are not the monsters you should be concerned with."

"You are right. I am far more disturbed by the creature that made them."

She turned back toward the cage and the creatures that had once roamed freely through the mountains. Creatures that could move silently, running through the night, overtaking Dryn patrols, waited beyond the wood for the chance to sink long fangs into her skin, tasting blood.

"Have you ever wondered why?"

“I know why you bred them; though, I wish I did not. That is enough.”

“We had the same purpose,” Balthazar said. “Their creator and I. Graths are fast as lightning. Their claws can scar stone. They can climb cliffs taller than any castle wall. What were they bred for?”

Though she had been too young to journey on such patrols, she remembered the stories of how the Dryn had fallen before the graths in the mountains. There had been few of the creatures, and they had always sought to avoid them as they had tried to avoid the cavern trolls. Such creatures had only followed after the troglodytes and had stayed mostly to the deep mountains where the Dryn seldom ventured. The deep mountains were places where the Kianan had once lived and only the dragons remained.

“How do you fight the Windmasters?” Sorcha had once asked her as they stood watching the construction of the barricade that faced the far mountains.

“You don’t,” she had replied, thinking of a featherhare smothered in flames.

“The Kianan have done it.”

“We are not them.”

“No. The Kianan fought them. Slaughtering them. Because they were afraid.”

She had turned a glance to the young magician, reaching out, feeling the pulse beneath Sorcha’s skin and the thoughts spinning between her ears. The heart had raced, burning strong, and she had felt how Sorcha’s breath dragged at the air, pulling it within her body as if she had been too long without the taste of the wind.

“The Kianan were stupid. They sought to destroy that which they did not understand. What they could not control.”

“They feared for the future.”

“They killed from hysteria. Controlled by the few. We are Dryn. Montmorin. We remember. We both severed the last of our ties with the Kianan when the slaughter was over.”

“Out of fear that we would be next.” Sorcha had turned to face her, looking to her and ignoring the barricade being built around them. “It has been almost one-thousand years. That is a long time to remember.”

Armada had studied the face of the young Montmorin magician seeming both full of knowledge and questing for answers, and she had wondered what conversations had passed between Sorcha

and the dragons and between her and Balthazar. She had not seen Balthazar or noticed the sound of his voice floating around Sorcha, and he had finally appeared as she stood watching the graths that he had gathered from the mountains and wherever else they might be found. He had brought them to his home between the mountains and the forest, and he had begun to breed them to fight dragons.

“Are you still insisting that Windmasters are evil?” Armada said, looking to Balthazar with the fence stretched out before them and the graths stalking about in their cage, and the echo of Sorcha’s words faded back into memory.

“They seek to control us.”

“Who? The Windmasters? The guardians of the DiKena’s children?”

“They are dangerous.” Balthazar raised a hand, stretching long fingers toward her with one talon draped in white aimed at her heart. “They control you.”

“If me then why not you?”

“Because I have seen the future.”

“The future?”

“Yes, the future. I have seen that which is and that which shall be. The darkness. The shadows out of ancient time and chaos. They have brought the darkness down upon us. This is nothing. A holding action. We have already lost. The Ivory Tower shall fall.”

Balthazar stood, looking beyond her as if he had forgotten that she was still before him, and the hand was turned, curled into a fist, burning white before her eyes. She turned her thoughts to the edge of his shadow, feeling resistance against his skin at her touch, and remembered Dryn words that had once been spoken in her ear. She remembered words that had been spoken roughly and haltingly and that had made her look to the sky. She thought of how a magician had once set his home between the mountains and the forest to gather graths. Before he had begun to breed them and even before he had chosen to settle between the rock and the tree, she knew that he must have ventured into the mountains. He may have been looking for traces of the long forgotten Windmasters, and looking to him, she wondered who had whispered ancient and dusty words in his ear.

“I am not blind, Balthazar,” she said, allowing her touch to slide off of him and the turn of his thoughts to slip untested from her fingers. “I watch the sky for shadows. But this.” She turned, drawing

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his eyes to the shapes in the cage with claws that could scar stone and teeth that were slick with the blood of their brothers and sisters. “This is not the way. We do not destroy to heal.”

“In healing, we ruin. In creating, we destroy.”

“But we do not destroy to create. You should know this. We help to help. We heal to heal. In doing, we wreck. In doing, we ruin. We are cautious.”

“Do you think I do this because I hate them? Are you that blind, Armada? Fight it. Fight the hold they have on you.”

“I belong to none.”

“No, you do not realize, Armada. They are subtle. But there is hope for you. I see that now. You have been manipulated. Molded.”

“By who?”

“Is that such a mystery? Two hundred. Three hundred years ago, the Dryn were a sundered people. When the Kianan still lived in these mountains.”

She touched the wind with the tip of her tongue, tasting the dust of far away mountains and the ruin of old Kianan towns in the hills. Between hard rock and cold stone, some of her great aunts and grandmothers had been forced to live at the whim of Kianan men as cold and hard as the stone.

“They are gone.”

“Driven away by troglodytes and cavern trolls. Graths,” he said. “Where did these creatures come from? Where did they go?”

“They thrived in the dry blood of the Windmasters.”

“After a fashion.”

“Fashion?” Troglodytes, racing among old rocks, turned behind her eyes, brushing sparks against the stone, and the echo of stone striking stone touched at the corner of memory. “The Windmasters had protected us from such creatures until the Kianan turned on them.”

“Protected us by controlling them. We both know that the drakes were not driven from the face of the earth. They used the troglodytes, allowing them to flourish, to drive the Kianan from the mountains.”

“So that the troks would turn toward my people?”

“Have your people been driven from the forest as mine were driven from the mountains? Troglodytes and cavern trolls no longer reach to the edge of the forest.”

“Because my people drove them back.”

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“Yes, a sundered people now standing together. Stronger than they ever were before.”

She stepped away from the Kianan magician, holding a hand turned into a fist between them, feeling the blood race and fire burn beneath her skin. His eyes were steady and dark, watching her, and he stood with the strength of a mountain turned cold where ice cracked and snow never melted beneath the summer sun.

“This is how they control us? Manipulate us? It is a twisted tree that grows in your mind.”

“You do not understand. You must. You will.” Closing his eyes, turning to the ground, he drew his arms together with the folds of his sleeve enveloping his hands like a lock. “I am not the only one who knew the truth. Who knew what was at stake. Who failed.”

“If you mean that they created my father only to destroy him.”

“No, I have said nothing. You do not understand.”

“We are not lost, Balthazar. We watch the night dark sky. We prepare.”

“You prepare for flood in a drought.”

“You are wrong, Balthazar. Your words speak for you. My sisters drove the troks back from the forest. Not the drakes that haunt your dreams. We stand together with the Montmorin and the Kianan against the dark.”

“We have already lost. When you stopped me.” He looked to her with the light burning cold and flickering behind his eyes, and the breath that traced from the edge of his lips was touched with the dusk of moonlight. “You are a fool.”

“Then I am a fool.”

He turned, drifting with the wind, and began to wander away from the pen that held the graths and back toward the door of his own cage between the forest and the mountains.



*In the moment between one breath and the next, Armada was awake, throwing her blankets to the ground, and looking to those moving around her. Fresh wood was being fed to long slumbering fires, lighting the court between the barricade and the mansion. The sky was dark and shadowed with clouds yielding little of the heavens to fields of flickering stars. To the mountains and barely more than a slender knife's edge, the moon drifted above the tops of the peaks, fading to red by the night dark sky. At the edge of the moun-*

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tains and low hills under the shadow of the red moon, a single light like the flame of a candle danced and burned. It was the spark of knowledge that the moment Armada had known would come had arrived without ever actually wishing that it would happen. One of the warning fires had been set, sending its signal that the troglodytes were swarming from the mountains. She stepped quickly to the all but finished barricade while around her the Dryn saw to their arms and defenses, laying out a forest of arrows, checking the catapults, and unbinding the great spears for fighting cavern trolls. By the dark light and cloud-shadowed sky, the Redstained mountains were little more than a faded outline traced in black ink, revealing nothing. Armada reached, trying to feel her way across the tops of the tall grass to the slender fire, but the forest was behind her, leaving her sense of the mountains hollow and empty. The light flickered, wavering for their attention, warning them that troglodytes were come to free the graths from Balthazar's hold.

The Dryn she had sent to watch at the edge of the mountains would have set the signal fire and moved on if they could. The signal fires were set on stilts where the troglodytes would have difficulty reaching them, and the creatures would reach for the flames, sensing the light and hearing the crack, smoke, and burn. They were nothing if not thorough, hating anything they could not touch or explore, and they were intelligent in their own way. The Dryn of the watch knew the danger of holding the tower and also of leaving it behind.

A second light took shape at the edge of the mountains as another in the line of signal fires was sparked into life, giving off its warning that dark things from the mountains were coming to free the graths. Armada looked, glancing back over the court between the barricade and the mansion, taking at a glance the preparations of her sisters. At the sound of a startled breath, she turned back to the mountains where a third fire had been sparked against the black line of the hills. She stood still, taking in the strength of the wall beneath her feet, knowing that the barricade was solid, knowing that there were no gaps in the wall, but she knew that they needed more time before all the barrier was as strong as the mass of troglodytes that was approaching. A voice at the wall called out, raising a hand to the signal fires, and against the face of the mountains, dark silhouettes like slivers could be seen moving before the light. Dancing back and forth before the point of fire, the Dryn defended their post,

wielding long spears and dropping heavy stones from the edge of the tower. The light twisted, turning slantwise like a torch swept through the air, and fell, disappearing among the far hills beneath the mountains.

“No.”

Armada imagined the splinter and crack of wood as the tree trunks that had been used in the tower were smashed and broken. She reached, feeling out, feeling nothing, and knowing that troglodytes were not strong enough to cut and sever the wood they had planted to raise the towers of fire. The Dryn were gone or lost or trapped beneath splintered logs that were thicker and heavier than their own bodies. Troglodytes would swarm over them, searching every corner of the fallen tower, looking for life, feeling it, scenting it. She felt the cold and the dark creep through her, turning at the edge of her heart as she searched for things that could splinter trees at the edge of the mountains.

At the edge of hearing, there came a sound wanting voice on the wind. She reached, gripping the wall, feeling it bite at her skin while all around her the Dryn were silent as midnight. From the mountains, a scream slit the air, tracing it with a knife point. Voices raised together, mocking, in defiance of the dark.

A flicker of color sparked into the sky at the edge of the mountains, and Armada recognized the flight of the warning arrow that she had insisted the watchers carry with them. Around her, the Dryn were frozen, watching the path of the solitary twig as it flew for the clouds and stars far overhead. The colored, burning, light was specific, and the message was clear. Around her, the Dryn remembered, and the Dryn knew. In years long past, she had traced the mountains, looking without finding what some of her sisters had faced. The Dryn remembered times of darkness in the mountains and times when entire patrols would be ripped to shreds by troglodytes and graths. They remembered that this arrow in its shades of blue and red flame warned of cavern trolls. Creatures of ancient rock and cold stone were once more on the move and walking far from their holes in the deep mountains. The arrow began to falter, turning back to the earth, and Armada realized that the roar of her sisters in the mountains had died. Cavern trolls had toppled the watchtower, and cavern trolls had found the Dryn who had escaped from that perch. In her heart, she felt the fire burn and push at the confines of her chest, and as the arrow fell twisting for the earth, she

loosed her voice. All around her, the Dryn screamed, mocking, in defiance of the night and the warning spark as it fell, disappearing beneath the earth.

She turned, loosing the wall, and made for the main fire in the center of the court where the great spears for fighting cavern trolls were assembled. She worked with the others with Chrystal, Rohana, and Margaretha as they tipped the troll sticks into the flames, letting the fire temper the spears and wake the wards and glyphs that were scarred into the blades. Her heart raced, and fingers trembled at their work while the heat of the fire caressed her face and turned in her hair. Breath swept out, tasting fire and drinking it into her lungs while she remembered dark things touching her like echoes between licks of flame. She gripped the hilt of a troll stick with the others stopping their work and watching her, and she felt the warmth of the fire filling the blade. The darkness would not take her as it had swallowed her father, and it would not smother her in the dirt as it had once tried to do. She loosed the blade, turning to see that all were being made ready and seeped in flame.

From beyond the turn and flicker of fire, she felt the tug of a distant pulse like the fading echo of the beat of a heart from the farthest reaches and depths of memory. Turning from the fire, she took a step toward the barricade with the echo reaching for her as if it were pulling all thought and knowledge through a pinprick in the side of the mountain or drawing closed a spider's web. The cold that was not an echo of sound leached at the air, draining all light from the stars, and she watched as the second of the warning fires slipped into shadow. The troglodytes, the cavern trolls, would be upon the field before the low hills with maybe an eighth or a sixteenth before they reached the wall, and a scar of dark light and shadow was behind them, driving them, and pulling at her mind. She half-turned, feeling the tug of darkness smear her vision, to find Rohana and Lyncia watching her. The fire had Rohana's face in a shower of dark orange and yellow light, and her eyes flickered gold as she glanced for one moment to the barricade and the mountains beyond. The only sound was the crack and crackle of the fire and the touch of the echo of darkness that was not a sound. Her sister's mouth was a flat line as she nodded her head once with a swift jerk of a motion that existed between one splash of light from the fire and the next. Armada let her breath go, feeling it sink through her bones as she sunk roots into the soft earth beneath her feet.

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“Thalia!” she said, turning. “Fire in the sky!”

Between the fire and the barricade, one Dryn, Thalia, stood crooked, watching her for the briefest of moments, and then turned back to the catapult, shouting orders. Voices called, passing the word to the four catapults spaced around the barricade facing the mountains, and they were slowly turned from the mountains. Armada watched, following the voices, as the four were loaded, and torches were held to the bundles, taking fire. As one, the catapults were fired, and four balls of flame were flung into the sky, streaking in long arcs that carried them over the court and beneath the stars and the clouds, falling like lost stars among the graths in their cage. By the glare of a shock of flame that rose over the pen like a cloud, it looked as if all the graths had gathered, having been drawn to the one spot at the edge of their prison by the echo of darkness. The fire washed over them in a wave that turned the court to day and made the clouds as red as drying blood in the sky, and a cry that was lost somewhere between the roar of a mountain cat and the howl of a deep forest wolf lashed out like a spark of rage and pain.

“Again!”

Armada ran for the fence, watching the graths drenched in fire, bursting like overripe fruit, staining the ground with a smear of blood that threatened to douse the flames. Watching for the bodies that had been sundered when the bolts had fallen and looking for the graths that had escaped the flames, she almost fell as someone grabbed her arm and pulled her around. The magician Balthazar was in her face with eyes that glowed with blood and hair that was bleached red by firelight.

“Drae!”

Hand blocked his fist. Fingers gripped, twisting, and dropped Balthazar, pushing him against the dirt.

“Listen!”

“Monster!”

“Listen!”

“I’ll kill you!”

“Listen!”

“Let him go!”

“Drake!”

“Listen!”

Armada moved her free hand, grabbing Balthazar’s hair, turning his head.

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“Let him go!”

“Open your ears you stupid Kianan!”

“Let him go! Armada! I’m warning you! Don’t touch me!”

She turned, following the magician Sorcha’s voice, finding Chrystal and Rohana between them blocking the Montmorin magician with arms raised out of reach of the others.

“Listen! Sorcha! Do you feel it!”

“Armada! Last time!”

“Do you feel it! Sorcha! Do you feel it!”

The magician lowered her hands, stepping back, jerking forward, and stepping away from the Dryn blocking her, pacing her.

“Yes.”

“Kill you!”

“Listen!” She twisted the arm even farther. “You stupid Kianan! Do you feel it! In the air! On the wind! Feel it! You weren’t at Earlstien! You weren’t at Edgewood! Learn!”

Releasing the arm, she jumped back five paces.

“That is darkness stalking us!”

Sorcha was around Lyncia.

“That is death approaching!”

Balthazar twisted onto his side.

“Cavern trolls will be here in a sixteenth! It wants the graths! Feel it! It wants the graths!”

The muffled sound of wood striking wood followed four flaming stars, streaking the sky and falling toward crimson swirls in the grath pit. Striking empty air, the fireballs exploded above the pit, smearing the sky with flame that fell in broken rivers around a translucent rock sculpture. In the midst of a hot wind blasting into her face, Armada felt the cold take her skin, pulling all the warmth into the ice growing at her core. The flames poured through the air like water, tracing a skeleton of fire and wind that rose above the grath pit like a tree. A figure as tall as the forest, bleeding into space before them, moved toward the edge of the cage, and its voice was the roar and howl of the dying graths. Armada took a step toward an inferno, brushing against a wall of scalding wind, and stretched, reaching back over her shoulder and across the court. Beneath her touch, she could feel the Dryn turning toward the pen and watching the creature of fire and light, and she could feel the darkness beyond the barricade driving the troglodytes and cavern trolls. She reached, feeling for the bonfire where the troll sticks glowed, tasting

her own troll stick, Nightmaresfall, between her fingers. Grasping it, she felt the weight of it in her hands, resting it against her hip, and took a step into the wind. The blade sparked and glowed like lightning, and its edge split the air like a thunderclap.

The thing of sweeping and swirling fire lowered a gnarled and taloned hand to the fence, wilting the wood, reducing it to splintered shards and fragments of flame. She raised Nightmaresfall, reaching, feeling the fire and blood at the core of the figure before her, feeling the death that fueled it. It pulled its fist away from the edge of the blade, trying to stand, and she could feel its youth and the tenderness of its hold on the flames. She felt the others around her, searching, testing for the soft spot at its core, and the creature roared with no voice of its own and only a scream without sound. Flaming claws leapt for her. She turned the blade, stabbing the hand, driving Nightmaresfall through fire and scalding wind, and the creature tried to pull away, failing to free its hand. Rohana and Lyncia held the soft core, and Armada freed the blade, turning it toward the center, severing the root. The skeletal figure of wind and flame splintered and ruptured, and the hurricane scattered the fragments like a million fireflies to the clouds and the night dark sky.

Armada staggered, almost falling under the heat of the wind battering at her and the weight of the troll stick in her hands. Looking to those behind and around her, holding the tip of the blade almost to the ground, she turned, watching the catapults being turned back to the barricade and the darkness beyond.

“The catapults. We cannot-”

“Armada!”

Tumbling, spinning to the ground, raising Nightmaresfall through an arc, she struck a grath, sinking the long blade into its shoulder. It fell, turning, with claws snapping for her skin. On one foot, dragging the troll stick, slicing deep and all but severing its shoulder, she felt a claw catch her legging, tearing through. It was cold as stone brushing against her skin as the grath’s hind-foot pushed out and down. Rohana swung a troll stick still glowing fresh from the fire, splitting the grath’s head in two, and driving the point into the ground.

“Fire and blood! How many of those things are left!” Armada said as she skipped and was half-pulled away from the still twitching claws. Testing her leg and feeling no pain, she saw that only the

protective legging had been sliced open. “We need archers- Rohana!”

A blur of sand and blood on the fence was reflected in the firelight. Troll stick free of the earth; Rohana went down on one knee, raising the blade to the grath pouncing upon her. It struck the point, sliding down the long blade, reaching for Rohana with a roar turned to pain filling the air. She disappeared beneath sand and blood with a forepaw on her shoulder, and its head blocking her own. The troll stick, turning sideways, sliced free of the grath’s ribs, yielding a cascade of dark blood, and the body shuddered, slumping heavily to the earth, twitching claws raking the dirt. Dropping Nightmaresfall, Armada was at its side, grasping at the folds of skin and fur on the neck behind its ear, and the head twisted, searching with half-dead eyes, trying to snap at her.

“Get this thing off of me!” Rohana’s voice came muffled from beneath a mountain of singed and damp fur.

The magician Sorcha raised a hand, touching the grath’s head, and its glazed and sightless eyes turned to reflections of ice. Crystal and Lyncia joined Armada, grasping and heaving at the body with fingers slipping over coarse fur, and Sorcha bent almost double, pulling Rohana from beneath the grath. Rohana choked on a shout of rage as she came free, shaking, trying to stand, leaning on the magician Sorcha.

Armada took her sister in her arms, wiping at Rohana’s face, brushing back the hair matted with a grath’s blood. She searched her sister’s shoulder, finding the tunic ripped and the sleeve torn. On the shoulder against the skin were black marks where the creature’s claws had constricted as it died, but the blood that stained Rohana’s clothes was not her own.

“I’m fine. I’m fine,” Rohana said on a wisp of breath.

Armada squeezed her sister, drawing her close, holding her tight, and kissed her once on the cheek.

“Where are those archers!” she said.

“Here!”

“Here!”

Armada turned, looking to the fence where Dryn stood, holding long bows and scanning what was left of the pen. A flicker of light like a falling star caught her eye, and she looked to where a fireball arced through the sky beneath the stars to become a cloud of flame beyond the barricade.

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“The troks!”

She left Rohana, reaching for Nightmaresfall where she had dropped it next to the grath.

“It hasn’t even been a sixteenth,” Rohana said, retrieving her own troll stick, half-lifting, half-dragging it from beneath the grath’s body.

“Too soon- too soon,” the magician Sorcha said. “It cannot be them. They have not even reached the first mark.”

“Markers?” Armada stood still, looking to Sorcha with Nightmaresfall balanced over her shoulder. “Can you sense them? How many? How far?”

“No and no. The marks are passive; not active. But. There is something wrong. Confusion. Interference.”

“The shadow thing.” Armada turned, reaching, feeling the pull of dark like a sucking wind trying to drag her down a black tunnel. Feeling branches of shade and night reach, gripping and turning at the edge of the sky, she looked to the low hills and mountains beyond the barricade.

“This is different,” Rohana said. “More.”

A muffled thud of wood striking wood spun a spark of flame into the night dark sky to disappear beyond the edge of the barricade.

“What are they- we need wards!” Armada said, taking in Rohana and Lyncia with a glance. “Spread the word. We need dampers on the wall. Stronger than we prepared for! Now!”

She turned and ran for the catapults with Nightmaresfall balanced in a seldom-practiced hold over one shoulder trying to weigh her down. Turning the edge of Balthazar’s mansion with the catapults spaced around the barricade before her, she watched as a bundle was being loaded onto the nearest one.

“Thalia! What!”

One Dryn turned from the catapult’s side, looking to her, and the others paused with the burning torch held almost too close to the bundle, waiting.

“Did you see it!” Thalia said. “Armada! Out there! Movement! Did you see it!”

“What? Focus! It’s too soon! Remember your training! Focus! Dig past the scream of a forest troll!”

“What- Forest troll?” The Dryn shivered, looking to the barricade, holding a hand flat to pause the catapult, and someone behind her lifted the torch away from the ball wanting fire.

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With her breath flooding her chest in hot waves, Armada felt the darkness shrug at them in a pulse like someone striking a monstrous bell beyond the horizon. The night seemed to move in liquid shapes, undulating and twisting this way and that over the earth and beneath the sky. Holding Nightmaresfall with a harsh grip, she felt the spark at the blades core, breathing out, and pushing at the mass of dark shapes all around them, forging a bubble where the cool night breeze could flow.

“I’m no wizard, Armada,” Thalia said, wiping at her eyes and brushing at the edge of her hair. “Been here for twin moons. Heard about Edgewood. What is out there?”

“Many things.” Armada turned, making for the barricade. “Spread the word. No more bolts until you hear it from me!”

She climbed to the barricade, looking over the field to where the dark light from several fireball strikes still glowed. The darkness was a breeze sweeping among the tall grasses and seeming to make them dip and sway with shapes hiding on the field.

“Margaretha,” she said, turning to the Dryn wizard on the barricade near at hand. “We need wards. Dampers and saps against that source.”

“There is something wrong.”

“What?”

“It’s not like the one we faced in Edgewood,” Margaretha shivered, pulling her arms together. “Darker. Stronger. Older.”

“Focus, Drae! Focus! It’s had more time to grow. Edgewood was still fresh from the ground. No room to grow in our forest. But the mountains? The mountains are vast.”

Margaretha looked to her, turning from the shadow rising from out of the mountains.

“There may be more than one.”

Armada dropped to one knee, smashing Nightmaresfall’s hilt against the barricade, dragging it, scarring its mark into the wood. Where she touched the troll stick, letters seemed to burn, glowing emerald and red with an inner spark of fire, yielding heat. Margaretha watched the marks with blinking eyes reflecting light and touched a hand to the side of her head, occluding her view of the mountains.

“Yes, of course.”

“Spread the word, Drae. Now!”

Armada watched Margaretha turn and make her way along the

barricade to spread the scope of the ward she had planted on the wall. She turned, facing away from Margaretha, and paced along the barricade, stopping to add more marks for the ward. Looking over the barrier of logs stacked and bound together and twice the height of the tallest Dryn, she turned to the dark beyond the wall with its faint glow of smoldering brush. She waited, seeing nothing, with the dull pulse of midnight's strength burning at her ears and pulling at her mind with long hooks of twisted wire from somewhere out there. She waited, feeling the Dryn around her holding bows or troll sticks or slings with fire-stones that were a child to the fireballs the catapults could send. The Dryn struggled against the flicker and pulse of the dark thing that was trying to pull their minds apart without fully realizing what had them at the edge of control like a bunch of saplings facing a forest troll for the first time.

"They are past the first mark," Sorcha said in a faint and silent whisper that was carried to her on the breeze.

"We are ready," Armada said to the twist of wind at her ear while holding fast to Nightmaresfall.

"The second mark should give them pause. But. They are in the dome now. I should be able to read them. The interference. Mud-dling. Like at the cathedral."

"You're not at the cathedral."

"The second mark! Can you see them?"

Armada reached, skipping across the tops of the grass, trying to feel past the shadow and fog, and felt the uneven dance of stone striking stone in the dark. In that instant and all around her, the Dryn grew still, and in that instant and all around her, the Dryn listened, turning ears to the night. Less than a whisper and faint as the stars on a cloud shrouded sky, the click of stone striking stone filtered down to them from the depths of the field at their feet. Armada reached, feeling outward, riding the wave of the troglodyte's substitute for sight, and touched small shapes racing through the grass. Reaching, stretching her fingers, she felt them all around her flowing through the dark, and among them were shapes of cold stone to dwarf a Dryn. Shapes with gigantic arms able to smash wood and crush stone loomed before her; shapes that could move like the wind to strike as fierce as lightning were moving toward them. Beyond them was a hole in the world spreading twisted branches to leach at the sky and roots to rip at the earth and tear it asunder. It was a glimpse into darkness where nothing else grew or a sliver of

chaos where only the nightmare survived. Faltering, pulling back, with tendrils ripping at her, she stumbled, almost falling from the wall, and the night was a dagger pressed into her mind.

“Catapults!” She shook her head savagely from side to side, trying to dislodge the edge of iron and ice embedded there. “Extreme range!” In the court, there were shouts and movement as her words were scattered to the Dryn. “Staggered fire!”

Behind her, there was the dull thud of wood striking wood, and a bright ball of flame shot over her shoulder and out into the night. Striking the ground in an explosion of dark red and orange flame, she could see figures moving both small and wiry as they jumped and skittered, swarming around the cloud of flame which had struck just shy of them. Other things that seemed not to notice the fire at all could be seen by the harsh light; massive shapes, looming low to the ground, looked as if they had been carved out of the natural stone. A shock took flight from the wall as all around her voices were raised in a shout of rage and defiance that swept like a wave toward the long and jagged line of troglodytes and cavern trolls that could be seen by the firelight. A fireball rode the wave, smashing into the mass of bodies with an explosion that ripped and tore and burned. The line splintered, faltering around another explosion, but the creatures, troglodytes and cavern trolls, raced on, leaving the burned and broken bodies of their fellows behind. The fallen were troglodytes. An exploding fireball seemed to impress the cavern trolls not at all as flames slid like water from their rocky hides.

Armada looked along the length of the barricade at the Dryn holding troll sticks or stretching bows. She watched the faces looking out from the wall to the creatures that were massed before them. Troglodytes were pack hunters who searched the mountains in ragged dozens and could be monitored by patrols of no more than twenty soldiers. Through the fire were racing dozens of dozens. Hundreds. More troglodytes than any Dryn had ever seen assembled in one place for one purpose before. Among her six score of warriors and two dozen wizards, there were none who had ever faced a cavern troll much less fifteen or twenty of them.

A swarm of arrows took the sky, falling among the troglodytes, bouncing broken and useless from cavern troll hides. The trolls were silent as the dark, riding a wave of troglodyte chatter that shook the barricade beneath Armada’s feet. Troglodytes fell amid high pitched screeches cut short by arrows or flames while the gray

stone cavern trolls marched on. Halos of red light drew patterns in the air above Dryn heads before sling stones were released to strike into the troglodytes. A glowing red fire-stone struck a cavern troll in an explosion of brilliant fire that made the creature pause, and the sling thrower at Armada's side did not ready another stone as they watched the troll grip its shoulder with one massive hand. The stone had cracked, and the cavern troll raised its head with a mouth gaping wide to the sky as it roared with the voice of an avalanche. The Dryn answered with a shout that shook the sky, seeing that a troll could be hurt, and then the troglodytes were upon the barricade, climbing the wall amid wind, fire, and blood.

The troglodytes swarmed, glowing red by the firelight, and Armada jabbed with Nightmaresfall, tumbling blood red and silver creatures from the wall. At her side, they poured pitch, cooking the troglodytes with boiling fire and sticky flames, as they fell, screaming, away from the wall.

To her left, a cavern troll ripped at the barricade, peeling away long stripes of wood with each clawed fist, while ignoring the boiling flames the Dryn were dumping upon it. Armada stepped along the wall and punched with the troll stick, feeling Nightmaresfall bite stone. The troll grabbed for the troll stick, and she swung it around, feeling it strike with a clang and spark of iron against rock. Screaming, fists struck the wall, shaking the barricade, and a Dryn fell, spilling pitch. Armada struck at the troll, trying to block the screams as someone scrapped at the sticky fire burning Chandra's skin. Troglodytes swarmed around the troll, climbing the barricade, and Armada ignored them, scaring stone and scraping at the troll's hide. Around her, Dryn pushed at the troglodytes, and Morna marked the stone with her own troll stick. With a scream of shattering rock, Armada smashed the troll's arm, scattering fragments, and the creature fell back, grasping at the stump of its arm. Swinging wild with Nightmaresfall, she lodge the blade in its skull, and as it groped for the troll stick, Morna struck its neck once then twice. Armada felt the fire along the whole length of her troll stick as she pulled it free and then swept it down into the cavern troll's shoulder, pressing it against the wall. The head seemed to slip from its perch, falling in pieces from the creature's shoulders, as its slumped against the wall.

“Die already!” Morna screamed, swinging her troll stick at crum-

bling stone, and a troglodyte leapt for her. Twisting sideways, Morna fell back, and the creature had her by the shoulder, digging claws.

A sword caught flesh and a scream. Armada pulled at the troglodyte with one hand, holding onto her troll stick. Claws raked at her arm. The sword moved, and they pushed the creature from the wall. Armada lifted Morna, holding her with a bloody arm around her shoulders, and she looked to where Morna's troll stick had fallen among the bodies of troglodytes and fragments of wood. More troglodytes swarmed around the broken and ruptured bodies, climbing at the wall, and they were smeared red and ghostly silver by fire and blood. Morna stumbled, and Armada helped her, half-falling, half-carrying her to the base of the court while dragging Nightmaresfall behind them.

Armada left her with Thalia, turning back to the wall, seeing Dryn outlined against dark clouds reflecting blood and red light. Frantic silhouettes, struggling against crooked shapes, draped in flickering red and black, moved upon the barricade. Somewhere along the wall, she felt and heard timber crack, and logs like twigs splintered inward spilling smoke and shapes like liquid nightmare into the court. Troglodytes swarmed around a cavern troll smashing at wood with Dryn falling back before it in a wave, and Armada realized that she was running for the breach with Nightmaresfall over her shoulder. All along the barricade, figures could be seen stumbling toward the brake like a river cascading over rapids, and she stumbled to a stop, watching the wave dance to the beat of dark things beyond the wall. She gripped Nightmaresfall, feeling the heat and light at the heart of the blade, pulling the fire around and between her fingers, and she ran with lightning in her hands, looking for other wizards racing through the dark. To the edge of the troglodyte wave and its boundary of Dryn, she stood, drawing a ragged breath, and reached over her sisters, weaving fire and light among the creatures. Troglodytes screamed, splintering and bursting, and falling under her touch. The Dryn parted before her, and she swept Nightmaresfall in a slow arc across the line of troglodytes, scraping the air with sparks of starlight.

The pale and silver creatures fell back as a cavern troll crested the wave, parting the troglodytes like twigs pulled from a tree. Armada raised Nightmaresfall and found Margaretha to her side with her own and another Dryn and another and all held troll sticks. The gray creature swung a clawed fist, striking sparks off Nightmares-

fall. They jabbed at the troll, turning it away from the blades. Roaring like thunder, it swiped at troll sticks. They danced around it, striking a rhythm with sparks. It killed Zarah, smashing her troll stick with one fist. Into its hip, Armada drove Nightmaresfall, twisting, cracking the stone. The cavern troll fell as she pulled back and away, and troglodytes surged toward them. She pushed with light and fire, and the creatures twisted, shriveling. Flesh slipping from bone. Troglodytes fell. Dryn shot arrows from three paces back. The cavern troll raised the shattered skeleton of an arm, trying to stand, trying to crawl away from the Dryn smashing it to splinters and fragments.

Armada looked to another cavern troll plowing into the line of Dryn with great sweeps of its hands, and she took a step toward it when a shard of darkness pulled at her, turning, stumbling to look to the barricade. The wall was ribboned with a spider's web of cracks, and a great gaping maw was ripped out of the barricade by long tendrils of darkness like thin branches pulling at the wood. A stain in the flickering light stood among the fragments of the fence with fingers twisting like branches in the wind and dripping with leaves. Her voice was pulled soundlessly from her throat in a hot rush as if she were being strangled as she watched troglodytes swarm around the thing towering over them that was an absence of light. Dryn moved, facing the troglodytes, pushing into the wave of dark night, and the flicker of a white robe caught her eye. From the depths of smoldering ash and fire beyond the wall, a skeletal figure of flame like the thing from the grath's pyre pushed into the court. Armada moved, pushing troglodytes into the earth, moving around Dryn, but was forever drawn toward the towering thing of darkness so much like a forest troll and so much like a tree.

A face among faces grabbed her, and she found herself between troglodyte bodies, Dryn blood, and the fragments of a cavern troll looking eye to eye with Chrystal. They stood, holding troll sticks, gasping for breath, and found an old forest rich with midnight dew dripping in soft drops akin to rain from branches in each other's eyes. Around them light swirled, twisting and undulating in indecipherable patterns as darkness pulled Dryn from the ground trailing roots holding tight to fragments of soft earth and deep water. One glance to the splintered and decaying barricade. One glance to the ocean of swarming creatures. Eye held to the depths of an eye, and forehead brushing gently against forehead. One hand raised to the

back of Armada's neck, turning fingers between strands of hair, and lips touched to lips. Fire raced, burning between them in a rush that left the wind cold. They pushed apart with Chrystal turning one way and Armada the other never looking back.

She ran for the red thing, tracing the path of the twisted shape of fire, finding a white robe blocking it. The thing was writhing on the ground, sending sparks to the empty air as the magician Balthazar held all of the earth against it. She drifted to a stop, letting Nightmaresfall almost slip from her fingers, watching the magician squash the soft spot at the center of billowing flame. As if feeling her gaze, Balthazar looked up from the swirl and pulse of fire at his feet and turned, looking up, following her eyes into the face of a Windmaster hovering in the air behind him. It seemed to drift there in space without any motion or sweep of its wings to hold it in the sky while looking down at the magician. With its arms spread wide and the sails of its wings fully extended, it dwarfed Balthazar and simply hovered in the air like a living shadow or cloud. She recognized the Windmaster as one of the Winterbred born in the time after the Kianan had slaughtered their people. It was Cloudbreaker hovering in the sky beneath the clouds far from her home in the heart of the Redstained mountains and even farther from where she had been staying at the pinnacle of Highwall. From where she stood between darkness like a tree and troglodytes and cavern trolls, Armada watched as Balthazar turned looking up into Cloudbreaker's face and matching her eyes. He raised an arm with the fingers spread wide, and the sleeve of his white robe appeared to billow and shimmer by some unknowable light. A flicker of silver light, sparking like liquid lightning, passed between them, and where it touched, the world blazed with white fire.

The red thing of twisting and swirling flame vanished, consumed, and dissolved in a white blaze, and where the magician Balthazar had stood was a torch with an upraised hand turning the court to day. Armada screamed, feeling her guts rush for the wind as she watched the stick that had been the magician Balthazar twist and slowly topple over burning against the earth. Cloudbreaker brushed her wings to the air and sailed over the court, leaving the pyre behind her, turning to the thing of shadow and darkness like a tree. With a shimmer and spark that was hard to follow, liquid light arced from the Windmaster, touching white fire to dark branches against the barricade.

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There were Windmasters in the sky and above the court, and where they flew, lightning shimmered and shone, touching among the troglodytes and cavern trolls, yielding white flame and brilliant fire. Figures withered like branches in an inferno as twisted shrieks were smothered by flame, and cavern trolls melted in rivers of molten stone. The wave of troglodytes broke amid high-pitched screams and the occasional click of stone striking stone. Troglodytes swarmed, grasping and clawing for the gaps in the barricade, trying to escape from the consuming flames, and the few remaining cavern trolls floundered aimlessly about as if they had grown both blind and dumb. In the barricade, a twisted tree of dark wood and shadow seemed to shimmer and shake as if it would dislodge the flames that were consuming its branches.

The Windmasters swooped low over the court, sweeping this way and that, bringing brilliant death to troglodytes and cavern trolls, and beyond the barricade, Cloudbreaker was touching flame to a second dark and gnarled tree. As the dark things burned, Armada could feel the pulse that had struck at the inside of her skull and sap at her heart begin to congeal and fade, and she ran among the Dryn, searching for faces and for the wounded or dead. She stopped among her sisters, helping someone to limp away from the line of charred and blackened bodies and toward the shelter of the edge of Balthazar's home. A sharp cry like the roar of one of the Windmasters made her pause, still holding her wounded sister, and she looked to where the Windmasters flew and the darkness still shimmered and moved. The pulse-beat that tugged at the edge of her mind since the shadows of trees had first descended from the mountains was faint but focused around the flash and spark of Windmaster light as it caught fire in the dark. She could feel the sweep and swirl of it as the dark things like trees fell away from the barricade surrounded by Windmasters bathing them in sparks and streaks of light. Waves hooked at the air around flashes like lightning where the thunder would have been, and she felt the cold prick at her skin as it had when that thing of burnt wood and dried blood had ripped a scar in the world over the ruin of the Earlinstien cathedral. From the edge of white fire at the base of the barricade, she could see new shapes seem to twist and move where the troglodytes and cavern trolls had fallen. Figures that were stretched thin and tall with elongated faces resting on shoulders that were too wide seemed to grow out of the shadows cast by the white flames.

“Move,” she said to the Dryn she was supporting, and they hobbled again for the mansion.

Ripples played against the back of her head and trickled in around her ears, and she could feel the twisted figures ripping at the barricade, racing for the Windmasters and hunting for Dryn bodies. The roar of a Windmaster filled her, knocking her, stumbling, falling to the ground, and she twisted, turning, looking, still tangled with her fellow. Dark splotches streaked the air around flashes of fire and lightning as twisted shapes raced the land and Windmasters fluttered through the sky. The ground ruptured in a broken wave, rising, falling with a crash as what remained of the barricade splintered in long rotting fragments that danced between the earth and the sky. Dryn fell, running, scrambling to their feet, racing for the forest; everything else forgotten. Lightning glimmered like ice as it splashed across the sky, scarring the wind, and left long jagged furrows in the ground. Touched by nothing but the breeze, she saw Margaretha tossed into the air, screaming, stretched and twisted like mud until skin burst and bones stained red with blood fluttered to the ground.

Figures raced the forest, racing the Dryn as the land dipped and swayed, and Armada found a stick tall figure of burnt wood and dried blood racing for her. She shook fingers, grasping for Nightmaresfall, finding empty air. She crawled, scuttling over ripples in the ground, and spotted her troll stick. The creature fell at her, and she roared with the memory of dark shapes clawing at her dreams and memories, lashing out, striking the figure. It turned in the earth, clawing for purchase in the sky, and she reached Nightmaresfall. Hefting the troll stick, she heard her fellow scream, looking to the creature with its hooks in the Dryn’s arm. Armada ran, leaping. Blade bright with fire, turning, caught mid-swing by a taloned hand. Twisting, Armada freed Nightmaresfall in a shower of bone thin fingers. The creature screamed with a roar like fracturing stone, smashing Armada’s fellow against the earth. The troll stick bit into the monster’s side. The thing of burnt wood and dried blood groped for her, but the blade was longer than its fingers. She felt Nightmaresfall begin to darken growing cold beneath the creature’s skin. From the dark and drifting light, Rohana stood behind the creature, smashing her own troll stick into its back into its neck. The thing fell, and they hacked at it as it screamed, clawing meaninglessly at the blades.

Without a word, Armada and Rohana turned, running for the

others, racing the wind and the shadows and the dark. Before them, Dryn were at the edge of the forest amid dark creatures and circling Windmasters. Streaks like lightning arced from the Windmasters, striking in explosions of brilliant fire, and twisted figures stitched a web from the fragments of darkness. Leaping, they caught one of the Winterbred, dragging it from the sky. Amid roars and twisted screams, it ripped and tore at the creatures as they circled, striking it, leaving long gashes in the Windmaster's skin. The Winterbred roared with Cloudbreaker spinning low and spreading a curtain of white fire, and Armada recognized the Windmaster gurgling and looking up to his sister. The trees shook and the land seemed to twist and bend as a gust of night tossed Cloudbreaker, twisting and tumbling through the sky. Claws fresh with Windmaster blood pulled at Graywing, ripping at his wings and shredding his skin. With a shattered cry that made Armada's legs give beneath her, Graywing twisted, curling in upon himself, and the creatures ravaging him became flares of light, scattering like burning ash to the wind.

Armada tried to stand, finding Rohana's arm around her, and they both wobbled to their feet, looking between swirling fragments of darkness and light to where Graywing's body lay unmoving. They took a ragged step for the trees with the world shriveling and twisting all around them between flashes of Windmaster fire and shadow thing blood. Looking, they saw other Dryn limping, running, turning for the forest with dark creatures ripping at them and Windmasters turning the world to flame. Something pulled at Rohana and Armada, and they fell, tumbling to the ground with a twisted and melted creature of burnt wood and dried blood reaching and clawing for them. Armada stumbled to her feet, leaning upon Nightmaresfall, and swung the troll stick, severing the creature's arm at the shoulder. The thing looked to her through a scream and lopsided eyes, and she felt the world go numb, spinning, falling to the earth. With arms that would not support her, she tried to stand and watched Rohana pull wind and thunder together smashing it into the thing's head. The creature shriveled, collapsing in upon itself, and Armada felt the wave wash over them like a pebble dropped into a stream.

From the wind and from the earth and from the dark night sky, a bone thin form with shoulders that were too wide leapt at Rohana. Her sister turned, swinging her troll stick, and the creature slid along the blade, digging hooks into her shoulder as the grath had tried a lifetime ago. She screamed, dropping the troll stick, and with

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her hands turning bright with flame, Rohana ripped at the creature's arm, pulling to free herself.

Armada struggled, trying to stand, reaching for her troll stick as she watched the creature of burnt wood and dried blood dig claws into Rohana's chest and pull at her skin. From the depths of the forest where nothing else grows and from the pulse of life as it flowed through her heart, Armada pulled fire and blood together in a wave that smashed the creature, twisting it into ragged fragments of bone and flesh. Rohana toppled to the ground, clawing at the air with fingers like bone, and Armada crawled to her sister, watching the sky for more monstrosities. She took Rohana in her arms, pulling the clawed hand from her sister's shoulder as Rohana tried to draw a ragged breath choking on blood and gasping for air.

Armada looked to the dark and the light as all around her the world was chaos. Twisted figures huddled on the earth, tossing dark shadows to the sky, falling beneath white flames as Windmasters circled above them. A half-dozen of the Winterbred flew around the last of the dark creatures, burning them with streaks of liquid light. Light tumbled and darkness fell until even the harsh screams were silenced by a blast of pure white fire. In the end, the Windmasters turned to the magician Balthazar's home, scarring it with flashes of lightning. Where the sparks touched, the mansion erupted in flames, and the Windmasters circled until Balthazar's home was an inferno that would burn to the ground leaving nothing but ashes and dust. Led by Cloudbreaker, the Windmasters turned from the broken land at the edge of the forest and sailed back into the Redstained mountains, leaving Armada to watch Balthazar's home burn with her sister Rohana dead in her arms.

## Chapter Six

# Whispers of the Ancient Dark

*A vision of mountains cast in clay rested on the tabletop and was smothered by a drifting wave of white pages scarred with ink. Pages lay scattered about the table as if swept there by a giant's broom, swirling and shifting until their number had grown too great, and many had tumbled to the floor. Ragged and overlapping half-circles were arranged around where Tahrl sat against the floor, resting one arm and his chin to the room's solitary chair. Amid papers and dark ink like the night were visions and stories of troglodytes living beneath the sun and stumbling across his patrols. It was the past he looked to that was scattered around him, and most of the stories were no less than half a moon old. He drank deep of the cold musty air, letting it reach all the way to his toes, and the door opened to the creaking of old wood as Hector looked into the room.*

"What do you expect to find?" the man said, turning the corner of the table with its mountains and paper snow. "There have been no new reports for half a handful of days."

"The future."

"The?" Hector stepped among pages and leaves, and where his foot touched, there followed the crinkle of tortured paper. "You know one must be careful. Looking for the future."

"A fanciful choice of words, I know. These last reports. Snow in the mountains. Soon they will be impassable. Another turning of the moon at most."

"If that long."

"If that long. Until we surrender the mountains to the troglodytes."

"Still with your fancies. The troglodytes fare no better. It is a time to regroup. Prepare."

"To fester. The troglodytes are divided, fighting one against the other, and we cannot influence the outcome while the snow falls."

"You find so much in these reports?"

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“I search for more. How long did you hunt in the mountains?”

“I-” Hector moved from the edge of the table, crossing without words, and sat on the chair, dislodging Tahrl from his perch. “Several seasons. I never wintered there.”

“No. It is too difficult. Too dangerous. We lose contact. Lose influence. So we wait for the snow to melt.”

“We must be patient.”

“Knowing not what we will find.” Tahrl stood with his hands in his hair, feeling his breath push at the roof of his mouth wanting to scream past his teeth, and he kicked at the papers scattered on the floor, sending them scurrying this way and that. “We have no news from Greenhaven. Not what they found at Edgewood. Not even if they went home. What if they didn’t? What if something happened to compel them away from Greenhaven?”

“It is too soon to consider such things.”

“No?” He felt his breath rush from his chest in a wave that left a scar that burned at the roof of his heart. “So, I wonder. I worry. I look at these. At these reports.” He kicked at the papers, sending them scurrying. “Trying to predict the future. Divine which way the troglodytes will turn. Which side will win. Wondering if these reports hold enough secrets to predict such a thing. Wondering which course to follow. Looking for hope.”

“You don’t have to search alone. Take these reports out into the sun. Look at them there. Place them under rocks so the wind won’t carry them away.”

“No escape.”

“Find Iola. Let her help you pin these up and throw darts at them.”

“Not you too.”

“Not me what?”

“Nothing.”

“I just want you to get out of this room. It will consume you.”

“I cannot do nothing.”

“Of course not. You are the head of the troglodyte defense. There are certain things that are expected of you.”

“I know,” Tahrl said, collapsing in upon himself and sinking to the floor.

“You are not happy. You could be happy.”

“Really? With all the shades of history knocking at my door?”

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“That’s just it- what?” Hector said, looking to the door as a page-runner pushed past the old wood.

“Dragon sighted,” the boy said.

“When?”

“Not even half a sixteenth.”

“News from Greenhaven,” Tahrl said, turning for the door. “Making for the apartments?”

“Don’t know, sir.”

“Good enough.”

Tahrl rounded the table, making for the door, and ran through the halls beyond, gliding from one corridor to the next without looking to those he passed on the way. To the heights and farthest reaches of Highwall, he flew over steps three at a time until he came at last to the door that separated Moonlight from the rest of the castle. He paused with one hand held flat to the door and the blood racing in his ears. Beneath his touch, he could feel the vibration of the door as it rumbled in sympathy to the sounds of dragon voices. He pushed through into the dragons’ apartments, finding Moonlight at the edge of the room facing the door to the sky where another of the Winterbred rested beneath the opening. The echo of their voices retreated to the farthest corners of the apartments where it vanished amidst the dust while both dragons turned, looking to him.

“Riverstone,” Tahrl said. “It is good to see you again. Long have I wished to bask in your presence once more.” He stood still, feeling the chill of the apartments against his skin while the two dragons did nothing but look to him. “All is well, I trust.”

“I must leave,” Moonlight said.

“Leave? I don’t understand.”

“You will,” Riverstone said.

“I am sorry, Tahrl. This is not what I would have wished for. Not what I would have wanted.”

“Why?”

“It has begun,” Riverstone said.

“What?” Tahrl turned, searching for the dragon beneath the opening to the sky, feeling the apartments dip and sway around him.

“I am sorry, Tahrl. There are no more answers,” Moonlight said. “I must go.”

“You would abandon us?”

“Never.”

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“Then what are you doing?”

“Protecting you. Every moment that I remain here, I put you in more and more danger.”

“From what?”

Moonlight was silent as her eyes drifted from his face to look beyond where he stood to the edge of the sky where Riverstone waited.

“I cannot tell you.”

“Again with the ambiguities. You’re scared. You don’t know, and that terrifies you.”

“I am not hiding ignorance. And, yes, I fear for the future. Fear for the truth.”

A long low hiss like a growl permeated the room and sent sharp jolts of frightful cold to play along Tahrl’s spine. He looked, glancing over his shoulder, to the other dragon.

“Then tell me,” Tahrl said. “Why won’t you tell me?”

“Pride!”

He choked on unspoken words left lodged in his mouth, between his teeth, and burning at his throat. Stumbling, he almost fell to the stone floor of the dragons’ apartments.

“The avalanche has begun, Tahrl,” she said, stepping around him, and making her way toward the hole to the sky. “The step that cannot be taken back has been taken. The choice cannot be unmade. Remaining here, I place you in danger. Great danger.” Moonlight spread her fingers, unfolding her wings to the sky. “I must leave.”

She was gone. Riverstone moved to take her place beneath the sky, unfolding wings of her own.

“You will understand, Tahrl,” she said. “You will learn the truth, and the understanding will destroy you.” Riverstone brought her arms down, leaping through the hole to the sky, and was gone.



*The apartments were hollow and empty with the last echoes of a dragon’s wing having long since faded from the stone chamber many days before. In the apartments between the shadows and the dark, cold turned the corner of the empty chambers and touched, playing, against Tahrl’s skin. Since Moonlight had turned from him and vanished through the hole to the sky, there had been no word from the mountains and the only voice from Greenhaven had been the expected report that Teresa had returned to her home. Armada had gone on to the home of the magician Balthazar to begin talks*

with the magicians about the Greater Darkness. With no follow-up word from Greenhaven or any word from the magicians, Tahrl worried that choosing Armada as a contact with the Kianan magicians would only cause the rift to grow. His only hope was that the magicians would send a representative to Highwall. Any encounter between Armada and Balthazar could only end in harsh words or blows or worse, and Tahrl felt that Armada among Balthazar's graths could only end in disaster.

The last patrols of the season had returned to Highwall, trailing snow on their boots, not long after Moonlight's departure. The last reports had not included any mention of troglodytes as if the entire population had crawled into the depths of the mountains to hibernate for the winter. In all things of late, the troglodytes had continued to behave erratically, and in the past, the creatures had stayed out and about almost as if they were fighting with the snow or did not understand what to do with it. Troglodytes were tunnel builders, and once the snow was deep enough, they would dig through it in much the same way they went through the earth. They were always careful and methodical in constructing their passages, which would last until the snow melted.

None of which made sense if the troglodytes disappeared before the snow was deep enough to tunnel through. It made Tahrl think that the troglodyte civil war had ended and the wrong side had won. The creatures would no longer follow their familiar patterns or simply defend their territory. If the Greater Darkness held sway over the troglodytes, there was no way to prepare for what the creatures would do or how they would react come spring. The age of sending patrols into the mountains to hold the creatures in check was over.

"Nothing?"

At Iola's voice, Tahrl turned, finding her at the door to the dragons' apartments watching him.

"No word?" she said, stepping slowly across the great divide of the apartments and stepping toward him. "Have you eaten? Have you slept?"

He watched her, thinking of dark passageways and long corridors, and seeing creatures move between rock and stone. The thoughts and flashes would come to him as he would try to rest curled among his blankets, and he would find himself far from sleep, realizing that he was searching the halls of Highwall and looking for fragments of light.

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“Some,” he said as Iola moved to stand before him.

“Some,” she said, looking from his face to the far walls of the apartments. “The waiting is the hardest.”

“Yes.”

“Wondering. The not knowing what has happened. Or what will.”

He looked to the stones beneath her feet and to the cracks in the walls and to where the castle gave way to the night dark sky.

“Do you remember how we met?”

“What?”

“I want to think of better times,” she said, lowering herself to the cold stone of the floor and patting the ground next to her for him to sit. “I want to remember what it felt like to have hope for the future.”

There had been many Dryn standing in the clearing between the trees of Greenhaven on that day when Tahrl had first arrived with the two Kianan Ambassadors, Chetwin and Salton. Alexander had been with them, and with his daughter Armada at his side, he had lead Tahrl among the Dryn to where Teresa waited. Surrounding the governess of Greenhaven had been her other daughters, Winonah, Rohana, and Ede.

“No,” he said, looking to Alexander’s granddaughter.

“Neither do I.” The flicker of a smile played at the corner of Iola’s lips, and she patted the stones at her side again. “I suppose I must have seen you that first day at Greenhaven, but that doesn’t count.”

“It doesn’t?”

“No. If you’re going to be like that, why not count the first time I saw you living at Edgewood.”

“What?”

“Grandfather wanted us to keep an eye on you. Besides, just because you were Armada’s pet project, doesn’t mean the rest of us weren’t curious. We must have been introduced at some point. Maybe not the first day. Oh, that’s Ede’s daughter. She’s almost as old as Armada. Almost as smart, too.”

“I’m sure we must have been introduced.”

“What’s your first memory of me?”

“First?” He blinked past a crowd of Dryn swirling all around him as he stood before the governess of Greenhaven. “I don’t know,” he said, lowering himself to the stones. “You were always there. Moving about in the background. Always doing something or other.”

“That’s me. The little slave girl.”

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“What do you remember?”

“Well, remember grandfather was always telling stories about you. That crazy Kianan scholar. Proved the Windmasters were not ravaging monsters seeking revenge for blood shed almost a thousand years long gone. Brought-”

“Memories are short.”

“Mine? I can remember what I had for breakfast a moon and a day ago. Kianan memory-”

“What did you have?”

“For breakfast? Butterfat fry-bread and smoked featherhare. We were still on the path to Highwall, remember? But, we’re losing the thread here.”

“Which was?”

“The conquering hero reaches Greenhaven with Kianan support in tow. Everyone was curious. Fearful for what the future would bring. Crowd scene. Impossible to get close. You and Armada and grandfather. You and Armada were inseparable.”

“Things change,” he said, beginning to feel the touch of the breeze pull at his skin as if the wind might push him to the stone floor. He watched Iola watching him as she bit at her lip as if to taste her words before speaking them.

“Armada always was the most enchanted by grandfather’s stories of you. Scholar and adviser to the Kianan king. Wanting them to remember. To stop being afraid of the Windmasters. She was fascinated and would spy on you when you lived at Edgewood.”

“Alex wanted me looked after.”

“Without letting you know we were there.”

“Didn’t know how I would react.”

“I first saw you there. In the forest near Edgewood. It was a game. How close could we get without being noticed. Armada. For Armada, it was more than a game. Her latest obsession.”

“Of the hour.”

“It was always something with her. Could do no wrong. Get away with anything. Anything. The stories I could tell you.”

“Let’s not,” he said, feeling his skin grow heavy with cold to sag against his bones.

“No one can prove it, but she once mated with two men. Two! At the same time!”

“She didn’t brag?”

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“Brag? Think about it! Think about- Two keys. One lock. What do you do with the other key?”

“I’m sure they could think of something.”

“Two keys? One lock? At the same time? Not one then the other. At the same time. That’s wasting a key. You don’t waste a key! That—that’s worse than-”

“Refusing to have children?”

She froze with her hand in the air and the fingers slightly curled together as if noticing the echo of her words for the first time.

“No disrespect to my aunt,” she said with the words rushing out in a muffled whisper. “Some burdens are hard to bear.”

“Some burdens- you wish you could cast off! Slice away like dead skin. Wondering. Why?”

“To the funeral pyre with responsibilities. Some things are thrust upon us. Unlooked for. Unwanted.”

“Responsibilities of our position. Duty. For the future.”

“I’ve been looking into our situation. Asking questions. Even learning to read. Yes. So I can understand the Kianan.” She looked to be holding her breath and counting the beats of her heart. “Would it be so horrible?”

The chill rushed through his face, burning at the edge of his cheeks and behind his nose.

“How long ago was Teresa a prisoner of the mountains?”

“It has been next to three hundred years.”

“Three hundred? To hear you talk, I would have thought it was yesterday.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way!”

“There are Kianan at the Ivory Tower! Important men! Who believe the soldiers are at Greenhaven to temper the wild heart of the Dryn!”

“They are fools! There have always been fools! There will always be fools! We know better! We don’t have to be like them!”

“It doesn’t matter! Fools turned on the dragons! Calling them Wraths and drakes. Fools shattered our ties with the Montmorin and Dryn.”

Iola seemed to fold back into herself, leaning away from him, and he tried to focus on her face, which was smeared by the shadows and dark of the apartments at night. He listened to the turn of her breath on the air and listened to the ragged beating of his own heart.

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“Sometimes,” she said, “we do things to change people. Subtly. Guiding. They don’t even know-”

“The slave-owners really learned-”

“Let me finish!”

Tahlr was silent, feeling the echo of her words brush against his skin, and watched Iola turn, looking to the far corners of the room. The only light was the faint flicker and glow of the torch that she had left by the door.

“The Kianan turned on the Windmasters. The Kianan threatened the Montmorin. Held my sisters as slaves. We must do what we can to bring our people back together. See us as more than breeders. If that means some lords of the Ivory Tower think you have your own private bed-warmer-”

“They already think I have a different bed-warmer every night.”

“What. Why- why do you deny me?”

“Why do you persist?”

“It amuses me.”

In one fluid motion between one breath and the next, Iola was on her feet, pacing away from him, and turned, facing the corners of the apartment. He listened to the night without turning to watch her while the cold pushed at his skin and suffocated the touch of her feet against the stone from the air.

“Do you think I never considered it? Juliana did- I know you serviced her,” she said, pacing the faded light of the room. “Grandfather was always telling stories about you. Did you think Armada was the only one who wanted you to father her child?”

“What?”

“She considered it. Don’t know what changed her mind. Not too hard to guess.”

He turned, almost standing, trying to follow her with the flickering light burning at his skin as he choked on unspoken words. The air was fire he could not breathe as he watched her turn and stride back to him. She pushed against him, and he slid to the stone with the cold pulling at him and sapping the strength from his limbs. She squat on his hips with her legs hiked-up and her hands holding his arms away from his sides.

“Maybe I shouldn’t give you a choice.”

Tahlr closed his eyes, feeling the fire against his face, and remembered the storm that had flooded the apartments and pushed wind and rain behind his eyes. Iola leaned into him with her breath

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washing over his face, and he could feel the tip of her nose touch against the corner of his cheek. He could not breathe, pulling at ragged air tasting of fresh turned earth in the morning's mist, and he reached, feeling the edge of his tongue brush against her lips.

"Not like this," she whispered and was gone.

He opened his eyes, trying to turn onto his side without the strength to move, and found Iola standing near at hand with her fingers gripping her hair. She watched him in the silence of the apartments and brushed the toes of one foot against his side. Without a backward glance, she turned, making her way to the door, and took her torch with her as she left him alone in the darkness of the dragons' apartments.



*Around the walls and to the very edge of Highwall, the people gathered and filled the courts. In the fields and about the houses that had grown beyond the wall, the people stood looking to the sky. From his place among those gathered to the very peaks of the castle, Tahrl watched a great dragon circle Highwall. The Windmaster was the largest one that he had ever seen, dwarfing the solitary Winterbred she had for an escort. The majestic turn and sweep of her wings like silk flowing through the sky stole at his breath and made his heart tremble for none of the Preservers had ever left her mountain home before. The dragon seemed almost to glide and slip through the air as she made her way, circling for the entrance to the dragons' apartments. With one final turn, sweeping low over the rooftops, the Preserver of the Windmasters folded her wings and dropped, disappearing through the entrance to the apartments.*

Tahrl did not wait to see what the other Windmaster would do or bother to listen to the chatter of voices rising all around him. He ran through the halls, ignoring everyone and everything around him as he raced the wind for the apartments. Hector was lost somewhere in his wake or still standing upon the wall, but Tahrl found Iola and Juliana already waiting at the wood and iron door that separated the dragons' apartments from the rest of Highwall. Standing for a moment and letting the wind burn in his lungs, he watched Iola also struggling with her breath as she ran fingers through her hair and then a hand to brush at the fabric of her shirt. They exchanged a look, tracing eyes that told of the sun first touching the morning and painting the sky both blue and red.

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The door gave without protest beneath his touch as he pushed into the apartments with trembling fingers and blood transfixed with fire rushing beneath his skin. Without a touch of breath in his lungs and the pair of Dryn following close behind him, Tahrl looked the length of the long hall that could hold six of the Winterbred without protest. The great dragon seemed to fill the whole of the chamber, brushing both head and fingertips against the high ceiling. He stopped mere paces beyond the door, watching the dragon awkwardly swing her head beneath the stones to look to him. One of the great and ancient Windmasters stood before him in the cramped confines of the apartments with the many layers of her eyes swirling into focus upon him.

“Be not afraid.” Her words filled every corner and seeped into every stone of every wall, and Tahrl felt her voice rumble gently beneath his skin and sink into his bones. “I mean you no harm.”

“I,” Tahrl said, fighting for breath and searching the inside of his head for words. “I am honored by your presence and humbled to great you, Preserver of the Windmasters.”

“Your words speak for you, Winterfriend. I am Sundancer, eldest among the Windmasters who live in the Redstained mountains.”

“It is indeed an honor to stand in your shadow. I never thought to see one of the Preservers so far from your mountain home.”

“If you had not said so, I still would have guessed from the accommodations. No, no, it is nothing. A requirement of the times. I am here to advise.”

“Advise?”

“Consult if you prefer. The Preservers of the Windmasters have debated this for a long time. It has been decided that one of us would need to come to Highwall to coordinate our endeavors.”

“Coordinate? Then the Windmasters have decided to fight?”

“It has already begun.”

The blood rushed, bringing fire to all corners of his being, and Tahrl pulled at the air, trying to hold it in his lungs. A flicker of a Windmaster’s wings turned at the edge of memory before disappearing through the entrance to the sky where one of the Winterbred now watched him from beyond the Preserver Sundancer. Voices had rumbled and torn at the walls with a magician’s words still echoing upon the air and riding a wave of shadow.

“Tell me of the Greater Darkness.”

“You have foolishly called it back into the world,” Sundancer

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said, “as you have sought to regain the glory of your DiKena heritage while ignoring the curse.”

“The magicians,” Iola said from behind his shoulder.

“The magicians. They must learn why they need the shackles of wizardry.”

“They cannot learn all in a day,” Tahrl said, hearing the echo of words that had curled Iola to the floor of the apartments. “We need them.”

“It is enough.”

“Please, we have had no word from Greenhaven in almost a full turning of the moon. Armada, a Dryn wizard, was going to speak with magicians at the edge of the mountains. Have you heard anything of that meeting?”

“No,” Sundancer said, brushing her head against the roof of the apartments. “It would seem that I must impose upon your patience. I have traveled far from my home in the mountains, and I would have time to rest and become familiar with the accommodations.”

“Of course. Please forgive me for being so hasty.”

“You burn so very fast and bright. Your entire life passing in the blink of my eye. I can understand your need to flood every moment with fire, and I shall keep that in mind as I rest.”

With those words still coursing beneath his skin, Tahrl turned, ushering Juliana and Iola from the apartments before him, and closed the door, resting his head against the cool wood.

“They will fight,” he said with the breath flowing from his lungs and brushing back warm against his face.

“We must have word from Greenhaven,” Juliana said.

“We shall have word even if we must ask Sundancer to carry it through the wind. For the first time. For the first time since this all began, there may be the possibility for hope,” he said with Moonlight’s words echoing at the edges and far corners of memory.



*The flame cast long shadows, flickering orange and red against the wood as Tahrl found himself before the door to the dragons’ apartments. It was another night of chill dreams and dark thoughts that had pulled him from the edge of sleep to crawl through long passageways only to stand before the door. Everything had its beginning and its end in the play of the wood that separated Kianan from Windmaster, and he felt the memory of ancient voices that*

had called to him from the dark flicker of fire reflected before his eyes. He pushed through the door, finding himself in the realm of the dragons, and Sundancer watched him from across the room almost as if she had not moved since that first meeting earlier in the day.

“You pass the test of patience well, Winterfriend,” the great Windmaster said with her voice filling every last little detail of the room. “I expected you to return some time ago.”

“Such words,” Tahrl said, fighting for breath that flickered and danced like the torch. “I thank you for their beauty.”

“A compliment? From one so young, a rare treasure indeed.”

“Young? I should have you know that among my own I am considered as next to the ancients.”

“Being next to the ancients should give you a wondrous view of the past as you grace the future with your footstep.”

“Grace can be learned or forgotten. I shall try not to embarrass the future should I stumble or fall.”

“With the ancients as your guide, you cannot but fail to stumble. You trace the path with that spark you hold in your hand and choose the stones most carefully. Which stones do you pick, Winterfriend?”

“The bright ones that glow like the sun. No, I think not,” he said, turning, walking to the door’s edge, and stumbling for time. “The shiny ones may be pretty, but the careless eye may wake blind.” Facing the wall, he fumbled with the brace for the torch, feeling blood race and breath thump in his chest, and he held his hands to the torch being supported by the wall. He spun, facing the dragon that made all the world rush behind his eyes, and stepped back into the heart of the room. “I choose the ones I cannot see.”

“Such a choice. May develop a taste for the salt on your fingers. Remember to count them.”

“Every time I kiss them goodnight.” He paced the room, watching Sundancer watching him, listening for the turn of her breath, and looked for the Winterbred that had accompanied her to Highwall. “Words.” In the mountains at the edge of her home, Stormsream had watched him carefully, waiting for him to slip in the stream of his thoughts and flounder half-drowned for unnoticed answers. Skysailor preferred to divine truth from the silence that existed in the forever between one breath and the next. “You pull them from the sky like stars.”

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“Or devour them whole.”

Tahrl stood with his hands unmoving at his sides and remembered his one encounter with Wintermorning who had teased him with nonsense words on three consecutive sunrises before she had added one breath of DiKena. At least Winterbred like Cloudbreaker or Moonlight could speak quite directly, and it was only once or twice in the turn of the moon that he found himself sifting through their words with his fingers. With the unpredictable moon or turn of phrase to amuse a Preserver’s ear, it was possible for them to speak words that did not need to be hooked from the sky with a net.

“Stones I cannot see, I cannot see. Are your fingers empty?”

“I have paved your way with mountains.”

“Looking at a mountain, I see a mountain. Who put it there? Find a pebble among stones.”

“Find a forest between the trees.”

“Have you seen the map room? Brush and twigs look like a forest from very far away. Hiding between sticks. Looking very small.”

“Build a model small enough, and you think yourself larger than mountains.”

Her words drained the apartment of all sound except for the brush of her head across the stone ceiling. Tahrl stepped back, counting words under the weight of one dragon arm lifted and moved toward him. From the dark at the edge of vision, a shape pulled at him, uncurling, as the other dragon unfolded from the depths of the chamber.

“We have not been idle,” Sundancer said. “Nurturing your brothers and sisters. Things used to be much worse in those mountains of wax and clay. Much worse.”

“Troglodytes drove the Kianan from the mountains long ago,” Tahrl said, rubbing a hand to the scars hidden on his shoulder. “Teresa has told me much of the life of the mountains.”

“Do you think her small bands of Dryn defeated all those monsters?”

“I have wondered.” He remembered cities he had seen of broken wood and ruined stone that were all that remained of the history of the Kianan in the mountains. Defenses numbering in the dozens of men had been toppled by clawed fingers working the stone. “Studying Dryn records, I have wondered.”

“They have no records.”

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“They have keepers of the living history. I have listened to their accounts, and I have taken many notes.”

“You would trust such stories?”

“Would not you? Your own people- Preservers such as yourself keep the living history of all people.”

“In all that living history, how did your sisters drive back the graths?”

“They didn’t.”

Creatures struck all tooth and claw and dark fur to rip through Dryn memory, and their daughters behaved for fear that such monsters would drag them from their sleep.

“They did not. The graths and cavern trolls simply faded back into the mountains. Imagine such great beasts falling, fleeing, before your sisters.”

“Because you drove them back?”

“Yes.”

Sundancer was a shadow outlined by the flickering life of the torch on the wall behind him, reflecting sparks of flame where her eyes should be, and the other dragon was lost in the caverns of the apartment, licking grath blood from his claws.

“How does removing the task of your charge strengthen them?”

“If the task would destroy your charge, what purpose is served? You think too small, Winterfriend. Are the Dryn not strong? Will Greenhaven fall in less than one thousand years?”

“The Kianan will not allow it.”

“But are Kianan and Dryn not working together because of the mountains?”

“Why not imply that I am here because of you? Have you forgotten how I came to run Highwall?” The twin sparks like towers of flame vanished, and Tahrl lost the shape of the dragon, feeling her all around him with the warmth of her breath playing across his skin. “It was only because Alexander and I brought the Windmasters out of the mountains that my people were sated.” The wind traced his spine like boiling water over snow. “Say something! Are you saying that your brothers and sisters sacrificed their lives so that I would be here? Now?”

“Not you in particular.” Her voice sounded from as far away as the mountains and as close as his ear. “But one like you. With your temper and ideas.”

“There are no others like me!”

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“Don’t be shocked, Winterfriend. You are not irreplaceable.”

“The Kianan would have destroyed you. My people would have risen against the Windmasters. Wraths and drakes. Finished the job they had started.”

“No.” The life of the torch flickered this way and that, and Sundancer was resting comfortably across the room from him, tasting his breath with her legs folded beneath her in the confines of the apartment. “We would not have allowed that.”

“They did it once before.”

“Did they? I have not heard tell of this story before.”

“One thousand years long gone. The Kianan rose against your people in twisted fear and misplaced pain.”

“How did you know that? This story. Who whispered it in your ear? How do you know that your people have done anything we have not let them do?”

“What?”

“Who made those records you’re so fond of quoting from? Who spun the stories of that time of blood almost one thousand years long gone? Would they admit to defeat?”

“No. How- my people claimed the mountains. How do you take that which you lost?”

“Do you know the terms of the surrender?”

“Surrender?”

The torch was gone; snuffed out in an instant. The dragon Sundancer, cast in a reflection of flickering orange and scarlet light with no source and no end, watched him with twin forests of flame for eyes.

“Why?” Tahrl whispered. “Why allow the slaughter to happen at all? If you could have prevented-”

“Do not presume that you know us, Winterfriend! We are the lords of the wind! Guardians of the earth and sky!”

“Why did you die!”

“Maybe we wished to wean you from our teat. Maybe we wished for the Kianan to claim the Dryn. What better way to begin than by yielding to you the mountains.”

“Why?”

“Do not presume to know that which you obviously know nothing about. I am Sundancer! Preserver of the Windmasters! The truth that I speak is a fire that burns, and I know many things.”

“Why?”

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“Do not trust me, child, for I am wild,” she said with her breath flowing around him tasting of fresh earth and bright sky. “Why did we die, child? Since that question has consumed you, I shall speak more words of fire. Maybe we sought to strengthen you. Prepare you for the battle that is to come. To harden you against the age of chaos that is upon us.”

Tahrl brought his hands to his face, feeling them grow slick with warm rain and dry blood. The wind caught in his throat, turning and burning between his teeth and behind his eyes. Lowering one hand to his knee, he found old rock and cold stone that had been dragged from the depths of the Redstained mountains against his fingertips.

“No.”

“Do you think I do this because it amuses me, child? Know this if nothing else. You are the DiKena.”

The hand slid from his face to join its brother against the stones of the floor, and he looked into a face held a mere hand’s width before his own.

“You are the survivors,” Sundancer said. “The direct descendants. Given different names because you have forgotten what it means to be DiKena.”

“What?”

“Forgotten. Who would want to remember that savage time? Know this, child. You must never remember.”

“If I cannot remember that fire burns, I will reach for the light again.”

“You cannot touch the fire. You are the fire. You are the DiKena. You made the Greater Darkness. You created the Age of Chaos.”

“Stop.” He was standing without knowing how he had been on the floor, and he raised a hand to block the wind that was tearing at his heart. “How could I?”

“You are my father.”

The room swayed as if the rain fell from the sky with only flashes of lightning to shape the dark, and Sundancer moved, circling around him.

“In the end, you understood. In the end, we were winning. But. It didn’t look as if we were winning. Didn’t feel like victory because there were so few of us left.”

“You are speaking of my parents,” Tahrl said, finding the floor beneath his curled knees, and felt the wind burn in his chest, flooding

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outward into his shoulders. Feeling voices behind his eyes, he saw shards of memory flicker and sway in the caverns of the apartment behind Sundancer. “Great great grandparents long forgotten.”

“Old. Tired. Long forgotten. DiKena. In the end. In the end, you understood. There were so few dark things left because there were so few left to feed them. You understood. You understood. In the end.” Sundancer seemed to turn, swirling shadows and shifting light, and moved to the confines of the apartment. “To stop the chaos. To end the terror, you shattered your soul. Sundered three ways. Bleached memory. Ripped your heritage- your history- out by the roots. Leaving nothing but legends of a people long forgotten.”

“The legends say nothing of this. Only that the price was too high.”

“Of course.” She was close to him, watching him with shimmering eyes of crystal and flame. “The Avatar was wrong.”

“What?”

“The three must never again be one.”

“Alexander wanted an end to hatred between us!”

“Look around you. The Great Darkness touches the land once more, waiting, knowing that the doors shall crumble.” Sundancer was before him with the tip of her nose touching almost to his own, and the turn of her breath swept all around him, engulfing him. “The song is broken.”

“No.”

“The three children of the DiKena stand together, dreaming of one, and it will destroy them.”

“Stop! Stop! The alliance?”

“Must fail. Will fail. The Great Darkness will see to that.”

“No.” Pulling away, he paced the chamber, searching this way and that for the other dragon, feeling the air pull at him and trying to draw the fire from his blood. “You wanted the alliance,” he said, turning on her. “You said- you claim to placing me here.”

“I have made no such claim. I did not want you appointed to Highwall.”

“You said.” Pulling for words, Tahrl bit down on them, tearing them apart with his teeth. “You said.”

“Someone like you? I had my eye on another.”

“Who?”

“It matters not. You are here. I have offended you enough with my words. Understand this if nothing else. The Kianan are strong.”

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Must be strong. The Montmorin are strong. The Dryn are becoming great. However. They must remain Kianan, Montmorin, and Dryn. The three divided must never stand united, or the three may become none.”



*In the mountains of his youth, he had lived among Montmorin, and his parents had kept words and trade flowing between the house of Morgan and the house of Malor. He drank from cups that had taken both his hands to hold at long tables where his feet did not reach the floor, taking autumn's best or summer harvest from steaming platters. Sitting shoulder to shoulder with family that was not of blood but of an alliance that went as deep, he would need to shout, trying not to laugh to be heard. He had cried, learning that his grandparents wished him schooled at the Ivory Tower, leaving his mother, his father, and his life behind him among the mountains of Earlinstien.*

In the dark long after the turn of midnight and still long before the sky would begin to dream of the morning light, Tahrl found himself in the halls of his castle between Kianan and Dryn barracks. He found himself floating back into time and standing before one door among many where the Dryn slept in long halls three dozen to a room. Between one door and the next, slender shards of liquid darkness traced patterns linking the past to the future behind his eyes. Voices echoing through memory laughed and cried for having been lost and reunited only to be lost again. Iola opened the door, wearing a nightdress for the cold almost winter night and a hastily added wrap for him.

“Tahrl? I felt- you look like shit. This way.”

Closing the door, she blocked his view of slender bunk beds and Dryn faces raised from sleep to look questioningly to him. Iola dragged him through the hall with laughter in his ear twisting slowly into shrieks and tears. To the common room, they stood where the Dryn and Kianan could brag or eat together once the morning had begun. The room was empty and dark until Iola touched a torch bringing a hint of the day to come to the silent chamber.

“Look at you,” she said, raising her hands to his arms, rubbing his shoulders, and hugged him close, needing to stoop to hold him. “Look at you. You’re freezing.”

“Is it all a lie?”

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“What?” She loosed her hold, pulling back with her hands staying pressed to his arms and running up and down their length.

“Dryn memory?”

The hands held still against his shoulders, and the eyes he would not match looked for him by the turn of a torch.

“I don’t understand.”

“One thousand years. What records do you keep of one thousand years long gone?”

“The Kianan slaughter of the Windmasters? We remember. Those are our records.”

“You told me that one thousand years is a long time to remember. You are a sundered people. What history do you keep of a thousand years long dead?”

“We remember, Tahrl,” she said, drawing her hands away from him. “Who could forget the broken sky raining stars like blood. Scars in the land flowing with the death of dreams.”

“That is nonsense.”

“It is truth.”

“Stories. Solitary Dryn huddling beneath trees and trying to remember why the night is so cold. Fragments. Exaggeration.”

“You condescending bastard.” She turned from him, wandering the common room with the cold spreading where her fingers had been. “You. You. Ask yourself this at least. How did we become a sundered people? You never looked at our stories of that time.”

“I didn’t have your stories of that time.”

“Would they have made a difference?”

Shadows had lived and stories had died all in an instant with their memories and echoes taking long to fade from the scars of Kianan, Montmorin, and Dryn. Struggling for life, memories had turned this way and that, hooking into root and branch and deep fissures of rock, and they had wandered, clinging desperately far from the light. A voice had rumbled through the dark, tossing the fragments of torchlight about like embers swirling in the wind.

“No,” he said, watching her turn on the word with the wrap spinning and trailing curls of light around her.

“No?”

“They seemed fanciful and exaggerated. They didn’t support Kianan records.”

“Meaning they contradicted your theory.”

“Then why did you support me?”

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“We weren’t defending your research. You sought to open Kian-an eyes to the memory of the Windmasters. If the Kianan remained blind, then we were next.”

“The Montmorin should have been your guide.”

“They were never raped by you!”

“Their records.” He gagged on words, feeling them push at his throat and tear at the roof of his mouth. Fighting for breath, he felt the world push at the backside of his teeth. “Montmorin records also show my people slaughtering the Windmasters; but, only Dryn stories would have the Windmasters fighting. Fighting who?”

“Those who sought to destroy them?”

“No. At every turn, they sought to avoid harming the Kianan. The very people intent on slaughtering them. There were no monsters. No Greater Darkness. Why did the mountains melt and the wind scream?”

“It was a time of madness!”

“The madness of the Kianan. The Windmasters gone, our blood was not sated. We turned on you. Nightmares of destruction for memory. What else could we leave you?”

“You would treat me so shamefully?”

“No.”

“My life,” she said, holding a finger to her face, poking and clawing at her forehead. “You would deny me history?”

“I want only to understand!”

“No! No, you don’t. You want me to yield to you.”

“I thought we understood.”

“What? That my heritage was a delusion?”

Tahlr stood, feeling both light and cold drain from him to leave only a touch of dust in their wake, and he watched Iola with dry eyes, trying to remember her warmth held so close to his skin and the beat of her heart.

“I’m sorry.”

The bark of her laughter struck him from across the room like a dead weight, and he staggered, almost falling, dropping onto a cushion. With his hands on his face and his fingers in his hair, he felt her laughter rip at his skin and drift slowly into the night. The wind raked him, falling into his lungs in a rush that burned, and he choked, coughing blood with his fingers in his hair. Curling in upon himself and folding around the ruptured heart of his chest, he almost slid from the cushion, feeling the fabric against his skin.

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A warmth graced him, finding his shoulder, and flowed in swirls at the base of his neck, sending armies of pinpricks to race down his back. There were fingers curled barely touching his arm while tracing lazy circles against his skin, and he looked to where she sat next to him against the cushion.

“What do we do now?” she said, holding her fingers still.

He leaned into her, uncurling, with her arm around his shoulders so that he would not slip from the cushion. Rubbing the dark from his eyes, he looked about an empty room, watching the torch play games with the shadows and the light.

“History mocks us.”

“No, do not think so.” She brushed her lips as gently as the touch of a feather against his forehead. “Memory grows and fades with the seasons.”

“I remember only what I have read.”

“Read what has not been written.”

A voice from out of the caverns of the farthest reaches of Highwall had spoken to him of Kianan memory, burning all pages to dust in its wake.

“Then dragons are evil.”

“It need not be so. The Windmasters want only to protect the three children of the DiKena.”

“We know only what they have told us.”

She brought her arms around his shoulders, pulling him close to her chest where the warmth was greatest and he could follow the rise and fall of the life of her heart.

“There comes a time when we must trust to our own.”

“Truth escapes us.”

“I know,” she said, holding him close, and he could feel the tremor tracing the curve of her arms. “I know.”

## Chapter Seven

# Tracing Patterns in the Storm

*The piles of paper had shifted and changed, swirling in more eddies and currents among the low hills and passes. Old pages had been ripped and shredded and scattered over the clay and earth mountains like so much ragged-edge snow. Underfoot the pages were a scattered and disheveled mass with no beginning and no end, and where his foot touched, Tahrl heard pages crinkle and protest in rumpled screams. Running his fingers through the make-believe snow, he looked close to the mountains, studying clay trying to impersonate rock.*

“Build your mountains small enough and you will think yourself a giant.”

“What?” Iola said.

Tahrl looked to where she stood before another section of the mountains with a scattering of the autumn reports in her hand learning Kianan.

“Something our guest said to me half a dozen days ago.”

She watched him, saying nothing and curling the reports between her fingers. Looking to the crumpled pages as if noticing them for the first time, she returned them to the table as half a ball with flattened wings to rustle among their neighbors.

“Beware the words a Windmaster might speak.”

“For they are dangerous.” He looked to broken pages, imitating snow, and the paths that were blocked until winter’s fall. “The words, too.”

His eyes raked the ruptured pages, seeing the twisted and stained remains of ink that were once words. Vanished figures played among bits and pieces of the past and someone’s imaginings of what the mountains should look like. With no destination, the stray thread of paper was as likely to predict the turn of a shadowy figure as each page placed in order of organized troglodyte movement and number. Creatures scraping tunnels through snow were

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as like to smudges of ink on dead leaves as milk to blood. He swept a hand across mountain peaks, sending an avalanche of bits of paper to swirl and gather in the low lands. Looking away from the debris, he found Iola watching him from her perch at the edge of the table and saw her in memory at the edge of another table with desiccated mountains of its own.

“Sometimes words are all we have,” he said.

Her eyes were green leaves by a twilight sun with branches that stretched, reaching for traces of light. Falling away from her gaze, he found pages like brown leaves that had been shed for the long winter floundering for purchase against the stone floor.

“Words are no more and no less than what we remember them to be,” she said. “How we remember them.”

Pages were everywhere as if the ink had drained from the sheets leaving them forever blank and meaningless.

“Do you remember the names Balthazar gave them?”

“Funny,” he said, looking to her. “I was just thinking about him.”

“We are spoiled by Cloudbreaker and Moonlight. They have our best interests at heart, but they are distant, watching for so long from the mountains.”

“Those two had always been helpful. Until.”

“Until grandfather died.”

“The song is broken.”

“Something.” Iola turned with eyes growing wide, and she made for the door. “Something’s wrong!”

“What? Iola!”

Trailing her, he turned the corner of the door and barely kept her in sight as they raced the hall. Another corridor brought them from the depths of Highwall and closer to the central court. Looking lost in a blizzard, people watched them passing swiftly from eye to eye without a voice or word raised to them. In the distance, he saw other Dryn moving with a single-mindedness of purpose through the halls. Pushing at a window, Iola stopped as if she would climb through and drop to the central court two floors below. There were three other Dryn at the window and two of the castle staff curious for the view, and Tahrl pushed at all of them for a corner of sky and the clear air of the court. A forest of Dryn, swirling and turning like branches shaking leaves in the wind, filled the open courtyard beneath his window. Voices brushed past his ear in a mish-mash that left individual words a fluttering of leaves in a breeze. Catching at

his breath and holding it tight to his chest, he looked to Iola, finding her with windows for eyes and craning to pull words out of the air.

The Dryn folded, swirling around a central point of the court where one person stood. A ripple of words spread out from the one, flowing from Dryn to Dryn, and in her voice's wake, the Dryn screamed and cried as if death had come for them. Flailing arms and beating chests, they pulled at their hair and ripped at their clothes, turning to their sisters in a swirling mass of sound and color. With the wave spreading, Iola was leaning half-way out the window as the babble of Dryn voices rose, cresting over them, and her face turned to ash and then dark as blood. The cry rose from her like a wail begun one hundred miles away and a thousand years in the past. She screamed with a cry lost to anger and despair and to sorrow and pain, beating, clawing at the windowsill with her nails.

Tahrl pulled away from the scrape and roar of the Dryn, feeling the wall at his back and the heat behind his eyes. The other Dryn at the window were screaming and pulling at their hair like wild children lost in the rain, leaving the castle staff nothing but to run. Iola turned, gripping the wall with tears in her eyes and burning at her face, and she reached for Tahrl, grasping at the air. She spoke words, making no sense for being in Dryn, and draped her arms around him like a dead weight almost pulling both of them to the ground.

"What? I don't understand." This is how he knew the Montmorin to grieve, learning of those they had lost, and how they must have cried, learning of the destruction of the Earlinstien cathedral with all its dead. The Dryn were too solitary for such a public display, and he felt the chill in his bones, imagining Greenhaven a ruin of charred and blackened stumps.

Between ruptures and deformities in her voice, Iola spoke more words of Dryn, pushing him away and standing to the center of the hall.

"Dead," she said, clutching at her arms.

"What?"

"More than a hundred of my sisters. Balthazar's mansion destroyed. Including- Rohana is gone."

"No." The shards of burnt and fractured wood and of smashed and broken stone belonged at the edge of the forest. "Armada?"

Swinging around on him, Iola's gaze was as dark as midnight, and she shoved her face into his, pressing him hard against the wall.

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“I don’t know!”

“What do you know? How? What is this?”

“Chrystal, I think. Carrying news from Greenhaven.” Pulling back, she stood with her arms wrapped around her shoulders, and Tahrl could hear the rush and flow of her breath yielding to her will. “She will have a report to give you. But this? No. It is right that we learn what befell our sisters first.”

“What happened to them?”

“Troglodytes? Cavern trolls? They fell defending Balthazar’s mansion. That is all I know.”

“How long before-”

“Not long.”

“Then we should go speak with her.”

“Will a candle not burn for hours? A fire for days?”

“The Montmorin would mourn such a loss for a year at least. Despair drives me beyond courtesy.”

“I know,” she said, bringing her hands to her face and rubbing at her eyes. “There is no time for mourning.”

“She always preferred Fallingdown West. Let’s expect her there.”

Iola held herself still with her shoulders sagging and the breath seeping slow from her lungs. He did nothing but watch her, listening to the wind shudder and turn beneath her skin, and listening to the sustained if somewhat more subdued cries of the Dryn from the court. She let her arms go, turning for the window, and looked out across the forest of Dryn below them.

“We shall have to wait.”

“Not even a test to patience,” he said, feeling the curl of Dryn voices from below pull at him and want him to dive through the window and swim to the center of the forest.

Iola turned from the window, walking slowly, and placed a hand to his shoulder, letting her fingers hold there. The touch was a gentle weight, tracing fingers of warmth through his arm, and he let his own hand turn the curve of her back to rest at the edge of her hip. Together, they held each other up against the weight of one hundred bodies and followed the halls of Highwall, turning this way and then another. They passed castle staff who looked as if they had felt their dreams pulled violently from their eyes, and the staff kept a glance or an ear to the court where all the crazy women were gathered. From hall to hall, they stepped until reaching one final door where riders and soldiers would gather after a long day in the field.

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“Find Hector,” Tahlr said to the page-runner waiting at his post next to the door. “And have fresh bread sent for. Warm tea, peppermint wine, and new cream.”

He did not wait for the boy to begin his errand but only pushed into the room, finding it empty. Studying the single table, he looked over the morning’s bread, cheese, dried meat, fruit, and two season old liarscake that someone had left behind as a joke wondering how long it would be before it finally disappeared. Leaving the table untouched, he sank into one of the cushions next to where Iola had taken up residence to wait for their guests to arrive.

Hector was the first to appear, looking as next to the other castle staff that Tahlr had seen in the halls. He watched Hector sink into one of the cushions and look back and forth between the two of them.

“Do we know anything, yet?” Hector said.

Trying not to laugh or possibly cry at the choice of words, Tahlr could do nothing but shake his head.

“Disaster at Balthazar’s mansion,” Iola said. “No details.”

“No details? I can’t find anyone who speaks Dryn to talk to me! What disaster?”

“More than a hundred dead. That’s almost the whole group from the mansion. Rohana. Margaretha. Viviana. Cytherea. Gone.”

“So many? Rohana? No. I am sorry. When? How?”

“No details.”

“We must be patient,” Tahlr said with the words feeling thick and rough and tasting of wet sand in his mouth.

He watched Hector sink farther into his cushion looking more lost than afraid of the story they were expecting. Tahlr thought of tall shapes black from fire and bathed in blood wielding long whips braided from midnight to drive the troglodytes. The creatures had always traveled in banded packs of no more than twenty, and people still spoke in hushed voices of the great battle where forty Dryn had faced some ninety-eight troglodytes. It would have taken more than three times that number to breach the wall and free the graths. Tall creatures of shadow and blood drove such a force through his eyes to tear and rip at the grath’s pen.

“It would explain the lack of news,” Hector said apparently unable to hold off the empty spaces of the room. “A series of engagements to wear away at our defenses. No time to recover. Desperate for support from Greenhaven.”

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“No speculation,” Iola said.

“I cannot help but wonder. Troglodytes free the graths, driving our forces into the forest. Greenhaven has been too busy trying to retake the mansion to contact us.”

“That’s absurd.”

“I know. But what would make sense?”

“Visions out of time,” Tahrl said. “Why must it be something we can recognize?”

“Speculation is pointless.”

Hector grew quiet, staring at his fingers, and rubbing his hands over his knees. Two of the castle staff brought in a tray, which they put adjacent to the table. Keeping their eyes to their work, the two moved bread and mugs to the table, taking the morning’s dry food, and then they left without a word to disturb the quiet of the room.

“Maybe she went to Fallingdown North,” Hector said.

They did not answer, and Hector finally turned to the far door, which lead to the central court where the Dryn were gathered. A candle could burn for hours. Figures of fire and storm gathered behind Tahrl’s eyes to step from the wood at the edge of Balthazar’s mansion like wisps of smoke or shards of darkness. Dryn arrows passed through the apparitions as through a cloud, and throats closed around vapors sticky sweet with blood. Wood withered, turning black and soft in an instant, and shattered under its own weight, vomiting graths to run among choking Dryn, slashing, ripping, tearing at flesh.

He rubbed at his face, trying to pull dark vision from his mind, and felt chill silence creak at the edges of his skin. Beyond the wall of wood, there came no sound or echo of the Dryn, and there was no window to tell what form their grief would take. The Montmorin would weep together, holding each other on their feet, gripping fingers hard enough to leave marks. A thicket of brambles locked together that no wind, rain, or avalanche could dislodge. They would find clothing of the lost brother or sister and march in a long procession of grieving songs and tears. The lost one’s clothes would be used to start the fire in the great hall, and they would feast and drink over the flames fed by the lost one. They would dance, telling stories and spinning memories of those who were gone.

Learning of death, the Kianan brought coins to the family with each visitor giving to the father one coin of stone, one of iron, and one of bronze. He had handed the three to the old man with fingers

that were so young and small that he had barely been able to grip them. The three had been separated while he watched and dropped into three bags with a soft clink and jingle and jangle as the bags were shaken. He had held the three together as hard as he could for the whole walk through cobbled streets from his door to that door only to see the coins separated, and he never saw stone, iron, or bronze again. While his mother and father had gone to a long table where many other big people were seated, he had begged the woman looking after him to let the three be together. They would miss each other and be sad, but the woman had tried to assure him that they were with their own kind and would never be alone.

The far door opened in silence, banishing three lost friends from his mind, and Chrystal entered the room with Juliana one step behind her. Chrystal walked slowly as if each step had to be remembered before it could be made, and she stopped at the table, pouring a mug of the peppermint wine. She drained it in one long motion, tilting her head back with the mug to her lips until every last drop had touched her tongue. Leaving the table and the empty mug behind her, she stepped among them, looking to each of them in turn.

“Three-halves of the moon,” she said, turning to hold on Tahrl.

“Three-halves!” he said perched at the edge and almost rising from his cushion. “The mountains had yet to be touched by snow! What were you doing! Three-halves! Moonlight was still here!”

“Much had to be done. Much sorrow. One hundred and seven of my sisters died that morning. We had never lost so many. So many. Including Rohana.”

She grew silent, bowing her head, looking to the floor, and none wanted to brake the moment with even the sound of their own breathing.

“We have held too long and cannot wait for the Kianan magicians to decide to join us,” she finally said. “Teresa is sounding for the enemy, but the work is difficult. Like a heavy jar full of pebbles. You can grasp several, feeling them between your fingers, but you cannot pull your hand free unless you release them. Hold long enough and die of hunger and exhaustion. I don’t pretend to understand what Teresa means by this. Why not simply tip the jug over? That’s what I say.”

“Because that would spill all to the floor,” Iola said.

“Crushing toes? I don’t pretend to understand. Armada is in the mountains, chasing that Montmorin magician. She believes the ma-

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gician blames the Windmasters for Balthazar's death. It wouldn't surprise me one bit."

"Balthazar? Why?" Tahrl said with the whispered echo of Sundancer's voice rumbling beneath his skin.

"We had lost. The wall breached in too many places. Troglodytes. Cavern trolls. Dark things like great trees driving them. Too many. I didn't know there were that many troks in all the mountains. We had lost. We just hadn't stopped kicking yet. That's when the Windmasters appeared. I recognized Cloudbreaker, Tallfeather, Graywing, and Rainshower."

"It has already begun."

They looked to him, and Tahrl said nothing, lowering his eyes to the floor, feeling the flow of words in his chest. Moonlight had looked to him from beneath the hole to the sky with her voice filling him with words that stretched and pulled his heart into odd shapes.

"I have never seen a Windmaster use magic before," Chrystal said. "They swept the troks with light. Burning fire as pure as the stars."

"Fire?"

"Magic fire. Like light or lightning. I do not understand. That was when the abominations appeared. Remember that thing at the Earlinstien cathedral? Many of them. As if drawn to the magic fire. After that everything was chaos. We ran. Helpless. A giant's playground. Looking today, you would not recognize the valley."

"Facing the thing would only draw its attention," Iola whispered.

"Facing the thing? We must face the thing! One hundred and seven of our sisters are dead!"

"The question is how," Tahrl said.

"Where are your magicians? Where are the Kianan? This is not a matter that can be settled with arms. No one who survived the razing of the mansion would dispute that."

"I don't know. How could they help? Alex was worried the Windmasters would act rashly, and I would say that they have. Did you say a fire like lightning?"

"I don't know how else to describe it. Like brilliant starlight. The sun reflecting off a creek in the mountains. Where they struck, fire blossomed. Where they struck, monsters grew."

"I don't doubt your description." The flash of a dragon's wing curled behind his eyes and sailed from page to page and story to story. Accounts and records told of facing the ancient dragons in the

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mountains and fighting against tooth and claw. “Have any of you known the Windmasters to yield such power? They aid. They heal. In ways more subtle than any magician or wizard. To attack. All but breathing fire.”

“Never,” Iola said.

“No.”

“No.”

“You would think they might have told us,” Hector said.

“It would have been useful.” A dragon standing before him in the mountains lowered her head so that they were resting nose to nose, and he had heard Armada standing somewhere behind him trying not to laugh. “The gentle magic.”

“The power that heals but cannot be taught,” Iola said.

“A defensive weapon at best. They lead us to believe this.” He turned on Chrystal. “What does Teresa make of all this?”

“It did not surprise her. She was far more concerned with how the enemy responded to the Windmasters.”

“It confirms all our fears,” Iola said. “Remember the DiKena legends. Confronting the Greater Darkness will only draw its attention.”

“It is already paying attention.”

“That is why Teresa is trying to sound it out. As Chrystal said. Find a way to touch the darkness that does not feed it. Grandfather must have spoken to her of his plans. Forgotten until remembered. You were there when she spoke of it.”

“I remember.”

“Unless the Windmasters decide to speak with one of us.”

The room grew cold as the darkness in the apartments where the dragon had slipped through shadow and faded light while speaking to him with a voice that made his bones ache.

“Contrary to what our guest said upon her arrival,” he said, feeling Sundancer press against him in the vast cavern that was only the apartments at the top of Highwall. “She has contributed nothing of any real value. Waiting. She is waiting for something I know not what.”

“The Windmasters are inscrutable. The Preservers even more so. She may be waiting for spring.” Iola looked to Chrystal. “We have had a change in the occupation of the Windmaster’s apartments.”

“I heard that Graywing and Cloudbreaker had left Highwall,”

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Chrystal said. "Graywing fell at Balthazar's mansion. He will not return here."

"No."

"I am sorry," Iola said, and her voice was faint, sounding shriveled and cracked to his ear. "Moonlight was summoned back to the mountains. A Preserver has taken her place."

"A Preserver?"

"Yes. Sundancer. Do we know the name of her companion?"

Tahrl shook his head, feeling the wind bite at his throat and hide his voice.

"That is not as unusual as it sounds," Iola said. "She is here to coordinate our efforts, but so far, she has said nothing of what the Windmasters intend to do. Said nothing of the disaster at Balthazar's mansion; even though, she arrived after the attack. Three-halves of the moon? Sundancer has not been here that long."

"Pride," he said, echoing words that had been spoken to him beneath the opening to the sky. "They do not want to accept the defeat. That they are not ready. Not prepared. But act."

"It is what grandfather hoped to avoid."

"By goading them into action?"

"He wanted only to get their attention."

"It worked!" The air left him in a rush, fleeing warmth, and he faded into the depths of his cushion, looking to all those around him. "It worked."

"Did any troglodytes survive the encounter?"

"I do not think so," Chrystal said.

"There were more troks than you thought lived in all the mountains? That might explain why the last patrols did not cross any. You followed the mountain path?"

"Yes, and I did not cross any living thing. I should tell you this. Crossing the mountains was odd."

"Odd?" Tahrl said, pulling out of the trap of his cushion with Hath Malor's words regarding the mood of the cathedral nipping at his mind.

"Different. Something in the air, and it wasn't the scent of snow. It made us want to be free of the mountains that much more quickly. Landmarks were unrecognizable. The Windmasters are busy, I think. Hunting monsters. The things that attacked Balthazar's mansion came out of the mountains."

"It has already begun," Iola said, echoing the words of their guest

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resting in the apartments. “Sundancer may be here to ask for our aid if they should need it.”

“Trying to protect us?” he said. “Keep us out of harms way by keeping us out of the mountains?”

“Guardians of the children of the DiKena.”

“We cannot sit by and do nothing.”

“We are but bit players in this war,” Chrystal said. “If you had been there, you would know.”

“There is little if anything we can do while the mountains are thick with snow. Wait for word from Teresa. Wait for word from the magicians. Waiting.” Tahrl pulled at his eyes, feeling them burn, and fingers like pricks of ice danced across his back in waves that left his shoulders numb. “Always waiting.”

“Exercise the troops,” Iola said. “Ready to lay siege to the mountains if we must. That is for us. Whatever the magicians are doing, sooner or later, they will consult with us.”

“We stand in the path of giants. Remember the legends? The last time such darkness stalked the land. The DiKena did not survive it.”



*The land was scarred with charred and blackened wood and stone* at the edge of the mountains and before the forest. All that remained of Balthazar’s once grand mansion was a parcel of ground bitten black with stumps of charcoal teeth that could hardly be described as land. Out of the mountains, creatures of dark and twisted shadow had come, driving both troglodytes and cavern trolls before them. More troglodytes than anyone had ever imagined living in the mountains had flowed over the Dryn’s defenses, smothering them. Dozens and dozens of dozens had crashed into the wall, and Tahrl looked to the blackened spot he had made on his map where once had been marked the magician’s home. He had smashed the simple structure of sticks and carved wood and then scarred the surviving twigs with the fragment of a torch until there was nothing left. He put his head to the table, lowering his ear to the clay and listening for the roar of dragon’s fire.

“You spend too much time here.”

Tahrl looked over the mountaintops from his vantage next to the ruin of Balthazar’s mansion and found Iola standing just inside the door to the map room watching him.

“What have you learned that you did not know yesterday?” she

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said, walking around the table. “You do not need to face troks or cavern trolls. This room will destroy you.”

Raising his head from the clearing at the edge of the forest, he turned, looking to dark stone walls and half-gutted torches. One brand caught his eye, sputtering and burning orange and red flickers of lightning that looked as next to dead. He raised a hand, moving toward the light, and felt the cool warmth on his fingers almost like brushing his hand over snow.

Iola was behind him, brushing against him, and he could feel her arms slowly envelope him with the fingers of one hand stretching and entwining with his outstretched arm. Her face was in his hair with her nose touching the top of his head, and he could feel her pressed against his back. Her heart was a pulse that he could feel through the whole length of his body, and his breath flowed raggedly in sync with the steady rise and fall of her own breathing. Her fingers coaxed his hand away from the old flame and brought his arm to encircle her own over his chest.

“What are you hiding from?”

He bit at his lip, trembling for fear that the words would explode from his mouth in a rush that would make no sense. Holding her arms, pulling her more tightly around him, he said nothing, letting the warmth between them spread and envelope both of them in its embrace.

“You don’t have to do this.”

“Yes,” he said, and the word was only the faintest trace of a whisper carried on the breeze.

She said nothing, holding him tight, and they stood locked together with the life of the torches burning away to nothing all around them. The touch was warmth between them, resting on the whispered rush of the breath flowing in her chest and playing in his hair. He shivered, feeling the wind run down his spine, and pulled away from her, gripping her fingers, and turning, looked into her eyes. Leaning into her, reaching up, he kissed her on the corner of her lips, letting the touch linger, and she responded, feeling the touch on his cheek. Closing his eyes, looking to her toes, he pulled away from her, keeping his fingers entwined with her own.

“I cannot do nothing.”

“There is more than what you can find on that table. Or in those reports. Maybe there’s something we missed in the legends. Search your books for clues. At least that would get you out of this cell.”

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“Dead words written by dead Kianan. A thousand years is more than enough time for meanings to become corrupted.”

He turned, following the wall of the small room with his eyes, and looked to the stains left by long forgotten torches on the stone.

“You don’t mean that.”

The map took most of the space in the room, resting on its long table, and he walked to its edge, looking over the stick forest to the mountains of clay where the dragons lived. Iola had not moved, following him with her eyes, and she stood with her arms entwined one with the other and the fingers gripped with fingers before her chest.

“You will suffocate in here,” she finally said. “If you left this cell even once you would know what our guests have done.”

Lifting his gaze from the table, he looked to her, saying nothing and hearing the shadow of dragon voices lost in the wind.

“Sundancer has killed four horses.”

“What?”

“Ate them. Out in the fields. Work horses. Drove the farmers away. Broke the fence holding them. Scattered them over the fields. Choosing one. Falling upon it. The horses screamed. One and another and then another. She was already devouring the third when I heard of it. Watched her chase down the fourth. Her companion took one for his own. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Tahlr gripped at the edge of the table, feeling his feet slip, and found himself on his knees, resting his forehead against the corner of the map.

“Five?” he whispered.

“Asked her why.” Iola knelt before him, touching a hand to his shoulder. “They were hungry.”

He had seen Graywing and Moonlight sweep low over a troglodyte patrol, herding them into a trap, and they had snapped at the creatures, taking them in their jaws, and lifting them high into the night’s sky beneath the stars. Sundancer would have flown low over the open fields, driving the horses, screaming, and they would have been mad with fright. A swift bob of the head, and a horse would have fallen and been trampled by the others, trying to stand, bleeding, screaming.

“In all the time, they were here,” he said. “Moonlight. Cloudbreaker. Graywing. They never spoke of hunger.”

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“They must have always returned to the mountains when such need drove them.”

“I didn’t know they required food.” Brushing the hand away, he climbed unsteadily to his feet, looking over the length of the mountains. “What I wonder. What is food in the mountains.”

“No answer to that question.”

“Trok sightings stopped around the time of Balthazar’s massacre.”

“Are you suggesting something?”

“Thinking out loud. Foolish notion. I need to learn to pay more attention to them. What else did you ask our guest?”

“When she’s going to get off her ass and do something other than abuse our hospitality. No answer to that one either.”

“But what did she say?”

“When it is time or something like that. Like I said. No answer.”

“Coordinate our efforts by keeping us out of harms way? Very much like the Windmasters.”

“Keep it up and we can all die in ignorance.”

“We shall try to avoid that one.” Most of the markers had been removed from the mountains, leaving gaps in what they knew of the movements of the darkness. “That is why this room calls to me.”

“To keep you out of harms way?”

“No. What else can I do?”

“Don’t hide from us. The men will forget that they have a leader. They do have a leader?”

“A leader of fools.”

“To stand in the face of a great enemy? Striving for answers. Is that foolish or brave?”

“Or both?”

“They may be the same thing.”



*Shimmering like stars to race the moon was how they were first described to Tahrl as he had sat at table with his half-touched plate of autumn's best before him. The watch had first spied the four riders appearing like torches trailing white fire as they approached from the south. Voices, echoing words, had already begun to spread through Highwall as a page-runner had brought news to him of the riders' approach. Through the halls, he had marched with Iola pacing him, and they had been joined by Chrystal, Hector, and Juliana.*

With the light of the fading sun reflecting off of them, the white robes of the riders must have looked much the same as Balthazar and Sorcha had looked carrying news to him of Alexander's death upon the fields beyond Windvale. He stood at the door to Fallingdown North, knowing the magicians waited beyond, with his hand held against the wood. He pushed into the room, recognizing Masters Hamarthon and Mariama from times long past at the Ivory Tower, and Master Rufus, standing before the table with its bread and cheese, had visited Highwall once or twice, speaking with Moonlight and Cloudbreaker. The other magician, pacing, turning at the sound of the door, he did not recognize. A tall man with a narrow face that was shadowed by a dark beard turning gray stood as his robe swirled to silence, and he watched Tahrl enter the room.

"Welcome to Highwall," Tahrl said, stepping to the center of the room. "Some of you I know. At least by reputation."

"I am Master Latham," the tall one said. "High counsel—"

"High counsel to Grandmaster Fagan Nye of the College of Magincia. Your reputation does proceed you."

In silence, Tahrl turned, making slowly for a cushion, and watched the others choosing seats among the half-circle of the hall. From his own place, he saw that all were seated except for Master Latham.

"You have had no word from the Ivory Tower for some time. So. I must tell you this," Latham said. "We are. All of us. In great danger."

"This is news?" Chrystal said.

"It is," he said, turning slowly. "There is something in the wind. A malignant and terrible presence casting a shadow over the land. Like a shadow, you can feel it against your skin turning the air to ice. The sun fades. But. You cannot touch it. Grasp it."

"The Windmasters have named it."

"That is why we are here."

Tahrl leaned back on his cushion, trying not to laugh, feeling the wind bubble in his throat and the words that were lodged in his mouth. Words of warning and winds of knowledge whipped unvoiced past his ear. Figures of white, trailing light, had raced between dark shadows and frozen caverns, stepping where the music lead them. They carried the echo of Alexander's flute with them but could hear nothing beyond the fluttering of their own hearts.

He looked round the room, finding Chrystal watching him, and

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she turned back to their guest who carried nothing from the ruin of Earlinstien or the charred remains of Edgewood.

“The Windmasters have been most peculiar in their answers,” she said.

“Then I must ask peculiar questions.”

“You are welcome to speak with them,” Tahrl said, feeling the words that he had written in linked phrases to catch the eye from the Ivory Tower burn from the page leaving only dark smudges and the shadow of ashes. “Although, I must say I am hoping for something in return.”

“Such as?”

“Such as coordinating our efforts. It would be nice to know what the magicians have planned for the days and moons ahead.”

“So far, you have done nothing but mimic what our reports have said,” Chrystal said. “Either you haven’t read them or know nothing.”

“This matter is not your concern,” Latham said.

“Is it not?”

“No, it is not for soldiers to decide. The matter will not fall to arms or armor. Mind and magic will settle the day.”

“Are we to be kept in the dark?” Tahrl said. “We are not without resources.”

“Natural magic and forest enchantment are one thing. No offense intended.”

“Too late,” Chrystal said.

“This requires the full knowledge and expertise of Magincia. You do not realize the magnitude of what is transpiring.” Latham turned, pacing back toward the table. “As I mentioned, there is a presence trying to enter our world, and the Ivory Tower is the key.”

“What?” Tahrl said. “What about the Earlinstien cathedral?”

“A feint. Delusion. Diversion.”

“Tell that to the Montmorin.”

Latham stood still with his hands clasped in an attitude of silent remembrance, looking to the floor.

“The Ivory Tower is the key. Something is using it as a focus. Like a lightning rod or a boulder thrown into a small pond. It is why we have not spoken sooner.”

“What is happening?” Tahrl felt the warmth being slowly sucked from his body and drained through a point in the sky that was connected to the very pinnacle of the Ivory Tower.

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“Terror. It’s not about land. It’s not about conquest. Strange things roam the streets at night, and no one knows where they come from. Or where they go.”

“Like monsters pulled from a nightmare? Skeletons of flesh? Shadows of dark things?” Flickers of dark shapes and white robes turned a long neglected corner in his mind.

“No. Strange things. Indescribable. Incomprehensible things.”

“Fragments of the Greater Darkness?”

“What? What the dragons have named it?”

“The dragons?” Tahrl said, feeling the wind and rain pull at him from the memory of a darkened chamber where Moonlight and Cloudbreaker had hidden. “I know nothing but what I have found in the DiKena legends.”

“Legends? Our thoughts and fancies taking flight? People getting what they secretly wanted and not what they were expecting? The soul laid bare in all of its hideous beauty. We are not what we think we are.” Latham stood still with his arms falling to his sides and his sleeves fluttering like ragged flames tossed about by the wind.

“Have you ever wondered?” Chrystal said with her voice touching the silence like a pebble dropped through the morning mist leaving it whole.

“What?”

Tahrl looked from magician to Dryn, saying nothing, feeling the words rub against his throat, and he remembered conversations from the depths of the forest where the Dryn lived. Wanting to ask and feeling the words smolder and burn, he watched Chrystal, knowing that the memory of Armada’s voice echoed in her head as well.

“That you are responsible?” she said.

Latham made a sound like the bark of a laugh that shook the room to its foundations and brought the other magicians to their feet.

“Ridiculous!”

“Should we listen to this!”

Turning, Latham paced away from the group.

“I was at the Earlinstien cathedral when it crumbled,” Mariama said.

Latham paused in mid-step, turning, looking back to them.

“Are we responsible?”

“You seem to think so,” Chrystal said.

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“I, for one, did not thrust the mountain into the sky.” Latham stepped back into the circle, walking toward Chrystal. “Or sketch creatures of charcoal and bone into the stones of the Ivory Tower.”

“What my sister means,” Tahrl said, rising slowly from his cushion, “is that you have considered the implications that the flourishing of magic has raised.”

“Yes,” Latham said, turning to face him, glancing for one long moment at Chrystal. “The dangers of the growth of magic are clear from the legends.”

“That is why Magincia exists,” Mariama said.

“In the past hundred years, magic has blossomed like honey-suckle wafting its scent to the wind. There is no other way to describe it. Magincia is now home to one thousand and ninety-two students. Few will reach the aptitude of the master.”

“If any.”

“One thousand and ninety-two?” Tahrl said.

“We hardly have enough instructors.”

“There-in may lie your problem.”

“We see to our own, Tahrl.”

“We are not who we think we are,” Tahrl said, and Latham did nothing but look to him. “The darkness requires no more purchase than that. You must remember what you have cast aside.”

“What could you know of magic, Tahrl?”

“I know the darkness did not savage Edgewood to cast fear into the townspeople’s hearts. It sought to claim the land and devour their souls. Look into the eyes of the survivors and learn.”

“I’ve seen such eyes.”

“Have you?”

“Balthazar must have been terrified,” Chrystal said. “The moment before he died.”

“No!”

Tahrl looked at him from a crooked angle, feeling the breath lock in his throat, and watched for a single moment as Latham seemed to flounder in place.

“You haven’t read my reports.”

The magician looked from Master Rufus to Hamarthon to Mariama, turning to each one in turn and lingering upon the spaces, walls, and gaps between them.

“We’ve been on the road for almost half-a-moon. When?”

“Twin moons.” Tahrl remembered standing before a heavy wood

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fence, watching the creatures turn and growl. “He brought it upon himself.”

“You judge him!”

“One hundred and seven of my soldiers died defending your brother. One hundred and seven! What have you lost?”

“Master Balthazar was one of the best of us,” Hamarthon said.

“He was breeding graths.”

“To help us. Training them to protect our people,” Latham said.

“By using them against the Windmasters.”

“Against the troglodytes, Tahrl. You must admit that they have aided you in the mountains.”

“Only because we forced him.”

“Are you dumb?” Chrystal said.

“What?”

“Thick in the head? Half the brains of a tree stump? All that magician’s training squeeze the juice out your ears?”

“I will not listen to this!”

“An ocean came for the graths. Things of darkness and twisted shadow to drive them. Balthazar bred his own pyre.”

“They came for the graths?”

“I was there.”

“Terror and land,” Latham muttered all but to himself. “Breeding chaos.”

“It’s not about chaos,” Tahrl said.

“What then?”

“You said so yourself. Something is trying to enter the world, and the Ivory Tower is the door.”

“Not the key?”

“You are the key, Master Latham. You and your balance of students and teachers. You must remember what you have forgotten.”

“If you knew anything of us!” The master magician sliced the air with his arm, looking as next to stone, turning, standing still. “We are all that stands between the fire and the storm.”

“You run roughshod over tradition and memory,” Iola said, drawing Latham’s attention, and she could not hold his gaze.

“The center cannot hold,” Latham said. “If the master will not set aside his chains, the student may die.”

“If you don’t teach the student to swim,” Chrystal said, “she will drown.”

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Latham laughed with the single, sharp, bite of a sound that could splinter stone.

“That doesn’t follow,” he said.

“Does it not?”

“You know nothing of magic.”

“Can’t swim either.”

“Very well. If it will settle the dispute, I take full responsibility for our inability to train our own. Creatures out of legend. The fall of the Earlinstien cathedral. Balthazar’s death. My fault. I should have trained them better. Now, may I speak with the dragons?”

Tahlr watched Master Latham, thinking circles of cords and watching them bounce and echo against the walls of the room.

“What are your intentions?” he said.

“We are desperate. The door must be held. I am seeking a second opinion if you will. Perspective. The wisdom of the ages may know something of what we face.”

“The Windmasters have not been forthcoming with what they know. We suspect they are trying to protect us.”

“Of course. This is not a matter for arms and armor. Head, hammer, and heart must hold the day. May I consult with the dragons?”



*As if she had not moved since the last time Tahlr had spoken with her, Sundancer filled every corner and every open space of the apartments, watching them from the center of the room that had been set aside for the Windmasters. Watching her, he saw where the blood would have been smeared on her claws from the horses. He had stood on the spot in the fields where bones still rotted beneath the sun and where the land was stained red from her hunger. Beside him, the magician Latham crossed the threshold of the apartments with the other masters from Magincia walking close behind him.*

“Greetings Counselor Latham,” Sundancer said after they were all gathered in the apartments. “I have been waiting for you.”

Her voice drew the breath from Tahlr’s heart, and he stood teetering on one half-planted foot, watching. Her gaze flowed past him as if he had never once set foot in her chambers, and she focused upon the magician standing at Tahlr’s side.

“You have been expecting us?” Latham said.

“Of course. There is much I must teach you of the darkness that threatens all of you.”

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“I wish but to learn at your feet,” he said with a half-bow, bending at the knee.

“The shadow that has fallen across the Ivory Tower is older than memory. The Kianan have stumbled of late. Trusting to weapons and war. Ignoring the court of dreams. But. Can a stick cut a shadow?”

“If it is a torch.”

“The brand must be raised high. You cannot be weighed down by the shackles of tradition. The future calls to you. Embrace your destiny.”

“You cannot run wild,” Tahrl whispered, feeling the shift of Sundancer’s weight, remembering echoes of the hall in darkness and words as heavy as chains.

“No, of course,” Latham said from behind Tahrl’s shoulder with the words sinking into his ear. “Grasp a torch carelessly and find yourself burned. I am not so foolish.”

“It is power that is needed,” Sundancer said. “Knowledge that is known. The darkness must be pulled from the Ivory Tower. Gnarled root and twisted branch.”

“The branches are not my main concern. They grow as quick as nightfall but wither and die with the sun. Shadows and shades and twisted nightmare appear from nowhere, seeking nothing. Where?”

“They are echoes.”

“Of the bindings and unravellings?”

“You have forgotten,” she said, turning, seeming to occupy every corner of the apartments at once.

Tahrl sought the confines and spaces of the chambers with his eyes, searching for the other dragon, and finding nothing. The cold pulled at him. The musty damp and wind touched at his sleeve and arm while the memory of rain washed down the back of his neck, tasting skull and bone.

“It is older than time,” the dragon said. “The land remembers. Chaos. Rage and pain. The tower remembers.”

“The sundering of the DiKena,” Latham said. “Echoes and long forgotten fragments. The fall still reverberates beneath our feet. Swirling in pools and eddies.”

“The soft spots must be drained if the darkness is to be defeated.”

“What?”

They looked to him, and Tahrl felt his skin crawl beneath their gaze. Words of binding and loops of chain had echoed and drifted

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between the walls of the apartment, and he felt the links turn soft as if they would bend or break.

“Simply put, Tahrl, magic has pooled around certain places such as the Ivory Tower and the Earlinstien cathedral,” Latham said. “Some of these pools are as old as the last of the DiKena.”

Tahrl closed his eyes, watching Sundancer from the inside of his eyelids as if her image had been burned into his mind.

“The darkness,” the magician said, “for lack of a better word, can sense these pools. It’s trying to reach the magic. Enter our world.”

She was there, resting at the center of the apartments with horse blood long since dried from her claws, listening to Latham’s words.

“The pools are untapped and unguarded. We don’t even know where they are. What Sundancer has confirmed is that they are responding to the dark. When a horse steps near to a puddle, do not ripples form?”

“If the pools have been here since time out of mind,” Tahrl said, looking to Latham, opening his eyes, seeing only a smear of white before dark walls. Around the magician, he saw glimmers and flashes of one thousand and ninety-two white robes studying at the foot of the master. “Why now?”

“You do not understand.”

“Has it never occurred to you, Tahrl,” Latham said, “that the reason we are so powerful is because of the return of the darkness?”

Tahrl tried to laugh, choking on the sound, feeling his lungs burn with a fire that threatened to rip through his skin.

“It has been growing for some three hundred years,” the dragon said from nowhere.

“Three hundred years ago, the Avatar betrayed the council.”

“No!”

The one word drained all sound from the room, leaving Tahrl nothing but to stand between magicians and Sundancer. It was a lost voice whispering from the depths of time and memory that he remembered. Words had been spoken to him of what had needs to be done and undone. He looked to Sundancer who was all the colors of the earth and stone.

“Please, Tahrl,” Latham said. “What you have done, we are most grateful for. Without your efforts, the Kianan and the dragons would still be bitter enemies. But. You do not understand.”

“You,” he said, turning on the magician, “must remember that which you have cast aside.”

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Latham watched him, looking to his face, and Tahrl found that he could not hold the magician's gaze, turning to study the floor.

"Perhaps it would be best if Sundancer and I continued our talks without you."

He looked to the Preserver of the Windmasters who lived in the Redstained mountains, and she did nothing but watch him with a gaze that did not waiver from his face. Words had been spoken to him that had rumbled and echoed, seeping into his skin. Words of warning and words of caution had become locked in his mind, and he remembered what the dragon had said to him of his place in the world.

"You have lain the foundations, Tahrl," Latham said. "Done more than anyone could ever ask of you. Let us build upon what you have begun. The time for arms and armor is past. We have entered the kingdom of dreams."



*Figures ran through dark hallways like smoke in the wind, trailing fragments of white fire and shards of lightning. Tunnels twisted and passages turned, tumbling forward and back. Fingers like vapor, raking claws, grasped at pale robes and fluttering arms. A brand of bright lightning, shedding sparks, was held by the one not wearing white. Together, they ran. Together, they raced. Through ruptured tunnels and broken doors, they floundered, groping, grasping for the sky. Shadow and darkness swept behind them like a wave, engulfing them, swallowing them with leathery wings. The one held still. Cracks in the flute like rivers of fire. A blunt face the color of the earth fell upon him. Eyes of liquid light, focusing their many layers upon him, danced like the sun.*

"No!"

His blankets crumpled to his waist as Tahrl choked on a forgotten breath. The room was full of shadows cast by dead torches and wrapped around a half-formed figure at the edge of his bed. Spinning away and tumbling from his covers, he touched the cold floor with hand and shoulder.

"Wait!"

The shadow was before him, fluttering, flying over the bed, reaching for him with torn and billowing arms. Turning, clawing for the floor, he searched for his feet, lashing out at the thing.

"Tahrl! Stop!"

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The words were Montmorin, and he froze. The one in faded robes helping him to his feet.

“Armada?”

“What- no. It’s Sorcha. I’ve got to get you out of here.”

“Sorcha? Where have you been?”

“No questions. Put this on.”

He pulled the wrap tight to his shoulders, looking, trying to see a shadow in the dark.

“Now move,” she said, gripping hard and pulling him for the door.

“What?”

“Fire and blood, Tahr! We don’t have time for answers. Trust in me; we are family. I’m asking you, sister to brother, come with me.”

She pushed for the door, and he followed her into the midnight halls of Highwall. Following her from empty passage to empty hall, he felt the cold stone seep into his feet.

“Why?” he said as they paused, glancing quick around the corner before hurrying on.

“The coward,” she said. “Using you. Thinking they would not reach so far.” Silence fell upon Sorcha’s words as they flew down a narrow flight of stairs making for a seldom-used door. “The balance could not hold. She has taken sides. The storm is raging. The storm is here.”

Through the kitchen, they fled among empty cauldrons and smoldering fragments of fire. Another hall of stone and wood and the door was before them. Turning the latch, feeling the cold past midnight rush around them, he watched Sorcha cross slowly through the partially open doorway, following her into the winter night.

“Going somewhere?”

Sorcha froze, pushing him back. Tahr! stumbled, almost falling, and looked past the Montmorin magician into the outline of a serpentine shadow resting on the ground and towering over them. Standing tall like a brand of white-hot fire beneath the night, Sorcha stood, protecting him from the midnight form of tooth and claw. The figure looked down at them like an abyss blocking out the stars with the many layers of its eyes focused upon them. The Windmaster who had accompanied the Preserver Sundancer from the Redstained mountains blocked their passage from Highwall.

## *Chapter Eight*

# **Echoes Out of the Wilderness**

*A brilliant spark of morning light to chase away the night, the sun rose, sending patterns and threads to embrace peaks and crags of the mountains. The wind was crisp and cold as crystal against the skin as Armada reached for the sapphire sky to embrace the sun. Stretching long branches, shedding snow, she drank of the light, feeling it fill her with warmth. For the first time in days, the world was not a swirling storm of brittle cold and piercing snow while the clouds were nothing more than a faded nightmare that had entrapped the sun. Drinking deep of the earth and the sky, she folded branches, pulling-up roots, and looked to her surroundings for the first time in days. Where once there had been trees and brush and grasses, Armada saw nothing but fields of ice and snow. She reached, feeling for darkness and the heartbeat of shadow, finding nothing but silence and snow. There was no trace of the troglodytes or touch of the Windmasters to flavor the air. Nothing to be done but pull the cloak tight to her shoulders and wade through snow for the home of the Preserver Skysailor and search for traces of that Montmorin magician.*

It had been less than a full turning of the moon since she had last been in her rooms at Greenhaven, searching, sorting through her belongings. The mountains would demand warmth and protection from snow for the Fall Equinox was a mislaid and forgotten marker in time. Time would fall where it wanted and care nothing for those who tracked the shifting of the sun or the turn of the moon. Everything was a weight to be carried and a burden that forced the motions of the stars to a more rapid pace. Casting aside her pack, she had decided to go with nothing more than the clothes on her back. She would take neither provisions nor weapons, living off what the land provided and trusting to her own strength. Teresa had entered her chambers, saying nothing, and sitting with her on the edge of the bed.

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“So soon?” Teresa had finally said when the silence had settled to the floor.

“Yes,” she had replied, wrapping her arms around her mother, feeling the life of the forest there. The dew and the rain, the wind, and the quiet whispers of the trees had all flowed through Teresa and were as much a part of her as her own heartbeat.

“What do you hope to find?”

Even with the mad approach of winter, the forest was still lush with all the flavors of green and gold, and the scents drifted and wafted around Teresa. The earth and the wood were as much a part of her mother as flesh and blood and bone, and branches spread a canopy of leaves beneath the stars. It had not been so long since the roots had found no purchase amid unyielding stone floundering and gasping for life.

“Nothing,” Armada remembered having said. “For too long, we have sought this and searched for that. I hope for nothing but to stumble across what I am not looking for.”

“And should you find it?”

She tried to smile, brushing her forehead against Teresa’s shoulder, feeling the life of the forest that her mother had embraced.

“Find what?”

Memory faded like an echo of things long remembered slipping through time as she danced over ice and snow. Crags and cliffs drifted together while markings and brush looked to be nothing more than lumps in a silk sheet beneath the sun. The frosting of snow was pure and untroubled as if none had stood where she stood in more than one thousand years. Stretching fingers, tasting the breeze, she followed a twist of wind backward, listening for voices or the brush of fingertips against the snow. The magician Sorcha was beyond sounding or echo somewhere in the mountains and weathering the storm as a branch or a leaf or a featherhare burrowed deep in the ground.

“What makes you think she is in the mountains?” Chrystal had asked her, making Armada think of a Windmaster hovering above Balthazar before turning him into light.

“She is seeking answers,” Armada had said, knowing without knowing that Sorcha had found the scar of Balthazar’s ash beneath the morning’s light. The shadows had ripped and twisted and sun-dereed the land with claws and hooks of dark light and blood, but it

had been the Windmasters who had struck with lightning turning the world to fire.

“Does she know the questions?”

Armada smiled, letting the breeze trace around her with fingertips of ice as she crossed fields of gossamer down and powdered silk white as the stars at night.

“We haven’t done very well in that regard, have we?” she had said. “Running. Searching. We know nothing and say it very loudly. Sorcha. She is not searching for why. Not looking for what. Not our what, anyway.”

“Then what? Which what? Word games rot the mind.”

“She may not be seeking answers. Only vengeance.”

With the darkness striking her like the slow beat of a drum and the troglodytes swarming among her sisters before Balthazar’s mansion, she had stood still, feeling the breath drained from her heart. The magician had raised one hand against Cloudbreaker as if he were shielding his eyes from the sun while the twisted thing of fire born of darkness had writhed and curled in upon itself beneath his feet.

“Balthazar? He got what he deserved.”

Tracing lightning, yielding fire, Balthazar had been engulfed by flames like a sapling in a forest fire.

“The magician Sorcha may disagree with you.”

“The Windmasters will not yield her vengeance. What does she hope to find?”

“Nothing,” Armada said to hear her own voice shatter the silence of the mountains as she looked from treetop to field and from glacier’s spire to rock and brush.

The world was silent and clear as if the mountains had been emptied of all manner of thing that flew or walked or crawled. From the moment she had touched one toe to the mountains, her only company had been the quiet whisper of the trees as they called one to another. There was not even the faintest trace of darkness beneath the light as if all the hosts of the shadow king had been loosed against them on that one night. Perhaps it was the shadow’s turn to shy and cower in fear before the might of the Windmasters as the mockery of trees had fallen before them. The Windmasters had argued, dividing themselves between the mountains and Highwall and between those who would act and those who would wait. Latching on to rippling echoes of Windmaster’s fire, twisted forms pulled

from nightmare had grown beneath the light. The mountains were empty as if the Windmasters had cloaked themselves in silence so that the darkness would have no eddies or currents to ride into the world.

At the edge of a mountain's peak, she looked into the heart of the sun, wondering how she had found this moment among all the others in the snow enraptured mountains. Searching without searching and tracing the magician Sorcha without a path to follow, she found herself at the root of the home of the Preserver Skysailor. She remembered standing before Skysailor's mountain home with Tahrl and her father wondering if the Windmasters circling above their heads would join them. They had always remained little more than a mystery just beyond her reach until the three of them had ventured into the mountains with the Kianan howling for Windmaster's blood.

"Be not afraid," had been the first words that any Windmaster had spoken to her.

With a steady heart beneath the twilight warmth of the sun, Armada let her breath flow out around her, seeping into the mountain and rising for the stars. Reaching for an echo or the beat of another heart, she stretched, listening for a footfall or the twist of wind from a Windmaster taking to the sky. Touching the roof of the world where the Windmasters made their home, she felt an answer with an embrace to match her own, linking fingers, and a flush of warm air to swirl around her. The curtain was feather and silk beneath her fingers as she was lifted from her perch and swept through the wind for the stars and the sky.

She found herself before the root of the home of the Preserver Skysailor, blinking tears from her eyes, and found herself half-fallen, half-seated in the snow. The sun was a memory, leaving the sky a deep, rich, blue where stars would soon grow, and she looked to where a solitary Windmaster slowly glided beneath that canopy. She climbed awkwardly to her feet, brushing at the snow and the damp, shivering at the cold with eyes that were for the Windmaster alone. Cloudbreaker had hovered above Balthazar's head in defiance of earth and wind and sun, and Graywing had fallen beneath a web of darkness that had grown in answer to the Winterbred's call. The Windmasters were divided, acting, waiting, roaring against the dark, and Armada's breath, cold as ice, caught in her throat as this one of the Winterbred settled to the ground before her.

“Moonlight,” she managed to say, almost choking on the name, picturing the apartments back at Highwall both empty and dark.

“She will not speak with you,” the Windmaster said.

“Really.” Armada felt the land grow heavy and stale with the clumps of damp hanging off of her like ice. Holding both wind and words within her heart, she felt the kindle wood, smoldering, catching flame as she watched Moonlight, stretching fingers of soft warmth and light for the mountain home of Skysailor. “Why is that, I wonder?” she said, tasting Moonlight on her tongue, feeling nothing but cold and dusty stone as if the Windmaster perched before her was little more than a statue. “No answer to that one? The lies will collapse under their own weight. You know that, don’t you?”

A shift in the wind, swirling dust as if a stone could breathe, echoed as soft as a feather past her ear.

“You want to tell me, don’t you. I won’t insult you by asking if you are hiding ignorance. Let me tell you something. You are the bravest and most caring of the Windmasters that I have ever met.” She looked to the snowfields and the slopes of the mountains to spare the Windmaster trying to be a statue under her gaze. “Was it near here? Where we first met? Such a long time ago. I don’t think we were nearly so close to Skysailor’s home when you found us. Remember what you said? You were chosen to greet us because you spoke Kianan.”

She turned back to Moonlight, reaching, feeling the wind trickling warmth over her fingers while snow and ice crystals swirled, tugging at her hair.

“You weren’t chosen. Since that time, you have done a lousy job of hiding the fact that every Windmaster speaks Kianan. You volunteered to greet us. Among all your brothers and sisters, you were brave enough to risk the future. Willing to risk exposing your shame if that’s what it took.”

“Stop!”

She staggered, almost falling with the echo of Moonlight’s cry ringing forever in her ears.

“Then leave,” she said, trying to dislodge echoes and focus on the Windmaster surrounded by day old snow before her. “I cannot stop you. Leave and I will be no wiser than I was yesterday.” She froze, waiting for wings to unfold and for both wind and snow to bite at her. “A lifetime ago. Not so long as it seems, really. You said some-

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thing for my ears alone. I didn't think much of it at the time. I was somewhat distracted."

"I remember."

"I have had time to ponder much of what you said. What else could I do? You have remained forever silent."

"Yes."

"It hasn't been remembering for three hundred years, has it? That's just a number you pulled out of the wind because you knew we would associate it with my father. The stalemate has held for almost a thousand years, you said. They want him dead." She let the words drift to the cold and sink into the snow while watching the statue of a Windmaster that was Moonlight. "The balance cannot hold, Moonlight. Dreams fly apart. The Dryn remember."

"No."

"The Montmorin and Kianan can forget. They remember only what is written in books. The Dryn. You could not make us forget so you sundered us. Divided us. Made my mothers and great grandmothers slaves to the Kianan. You're not denying it."

Moonlight had her head bowed to the ground as if she would bury the tip of her nose in the snow, casting all of frozen life to the dark.

"Why would we do such a thing?"

"So that we would forget. So that none would remember what it meant for the mountains to weep blood and the stars to fall like rain. I saw Balthazar's execution. I watched one of those things murder my sister, and I begin to understand."

It crept in around the edges like a softly flowing wave over touch and taste and sight and sound with the turn of a breath. She felt the thump of her heart like a blow to her chest sending ripples and currents to swirl beneath her skin to all corners of her body. Hands held wrapped to her shoulders over a numb breath as if she would vomit forth her life to tumble, faltering, falling into the snow. Beating at the edges of darkness with a stick of fire and lightning, she stood tall, digging roots into the snow, finding earth and yielding rock.

"I expected better from you!" Her shout cracked the sky, sending the cold and the dark fluttering like broken branches in a firestorm to fall through the wind.

"If I wanted you to forget, you would know nothing."

"You're ashamed!" Pulling at her tunic. Exposing flesh. "Rape me

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if you dare!” The wind flew about her in a rush of frightful cold as if she would be frozen to the side of the mountain. “Eight hundred years ago, the darkness woke. The struggle between Windmaster and shadow threatened to tear the world asunder. In desperation, the children of the DiKena, Dryn, Montmorin, and Kianan rose against both sides. In shame, you divided us. In horror, you tried to make us forget. In turning upon you, you turned upon us, killing those you had only sought to protect. That is why you are impotent, doing nothing about the dark. Why the Windmasters are divided.”

The cold and damp lifted like dandelion seed tossed into the wind, leaving the early evening fresh and clear, and Moonlight looked to her, raising her head as if the chains had turned to leaves around her neck. Feeling the shackles lift, Armada reached, stretching fingers, touching the breeze as it slipped from between her fingers.

“So close,” Moonlight said. “So close; but, you do not understand.”

“The Windmasters are divided! Remembering the past, you do not know how to stop the darkness. In your confusion and panic, you risk turning upon each other!”

“I love you, Armada, more than words can say. I am truly sorry for what I almost did to you.”

“Fire and blood! You cannot leave me here!” she said, watching Moonlight pull herself from the snow and shake the frost from her wings. “They wanted my father dead because they feared him! What he would discover! As the Windmasters had survived the war so had the darkness!”

“Goodbye, Armada.”

“Where is the magician Sorcha!”

Moonlight paused with her wings extended and her fingers spread wide like a cloak to disguise the night.

“Tracing Cloudbreaker. That one of the Winterbred is no longer welcome here. We turned her south for the home of the Preserver Stormsdream.”



*There was no sunrise only the unveiling of silver and gray clouds cast across the sky like cotton or rumpled sheets that were all that remained of a sleepless night. Beneath this gray haven was a land without shadows bathed in a diffused glow over snow like powdered light. The breeze was still and as cold as the dark past midnight*

against Armada's skin, and she reached, stretching fingers, feeling the land beneath her touch as smooth and untroubled as a river polished stone. Beyond her shoulder like an anchor in the sky was the home of the Preserver Skysailor. The mountain spire was as smooth and untouchable as the edge of a sword, and her touch glanced off of it like a stone sent skipping over ice. It froze her arms to her sides and chilled her heart to find such a hole in the mountains, and she shivered for the first time since setting foot to the hills from the unnatural cold. Beyond the spire of Skysailor's home, the muffling stillness was spread like a cloak to envelop the mountains all about her to the north and the south.

The faintest of flickers like a mirror of polished brass half-buried in snow catching the sun for three heart-beats grasped her, sending her spinning, flying over the snow. Sliding to a stop, crashing through snow, she reached, searching for the wisps of an echo with her heart racing and her breath flooding through her like fire. She rose to her knees, spitting flakes of frost like sand or dust, wiping at her face, and brushed a hand over the damp and ice that clung to her like iron crystal piercing her skin. On her feet, she stretched long fingers like branches, searching for the reflection with each step she took dropping her hip deep into snow. There were marks in the serenity of the mountains as if someone had trailed a muddy finger through cream. She paused for being able to trace the marks in the snow and took a lingering moment to fight with her breath, feeling the wind swirl and burn in her chest. The track was too small to have been left by a Montmorin magician or even by a troglodyte lost and wandering far from its tunnels and holes. She crawled, climbing from the furrow she had left in the snow, and standing, she skittered over the ocean of flakes and crystal powder. The path, sighting it, was nothing more than what remained of the journey of a featherhare. She laughed with the roar of a whoop that shook the silence from the mountains and shattered the cold enshrouding the peaks.

Stretching, she breathed out in a wave to flow over the land in soft ripples, engulfing the featherhare's tracks at her feet. Far beyond the tiny imperfections left in the snow, her thoughts raced from mountain spire to deepest valley, finding trees and brush rustling in sympathy to the wind and finding a copperwood hawk settling into the shelter of twigs and leaves against the cold of the day. Turning, spinning, almost tripping over her own feet, she turned

## **The Magic Flute**

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to the home of Skysailor and the mountains of the north, feeling her thoughts race around her, swishing, swirling to embrace those peaks and passes. Finding nothing but a hole in the sky as if the land had been scooped out of the world, she stood, daring not even to breathe for fear that the sound would drown any echo or twist of wind from the far mountains before her. There was void where not even the wisps of the breeze could grow, and she looked, half-turning, over her shoulder to the marks at her feet tempting her south. A magician born of the Montmorin traced through those mountains, chasing Cloudbreaker, and being drawn to the home of the Preserver Stormsdream. Armada looked back into the darkness where nothing else grew and took a step away from the promise of magician and Windmaster.

“You’re doing what?” Teresa had said to her while climbing from the lake at the heart of Greenhaven, brushing her fingers through the white as mountain snow stubble that was her hair.

Armada had turned, looking from her mother to her sister, watching Ede at the edge with her feet still resting, curled in the water. Her sister would not look to her with eyes that would not waver from the tree, which grew from the center of the lake like an explosion of amber branches and gold leaves. In that moment, the forest had been as quiet as the snow enshrouded mountains that she would find herself wandering through, and her mother and Ede had exchanged words without speaking with the only sound being the wisps of feather and spider’s silk that had been whispered between the two of them on the breeze.

“Sorcha believes Cloudbreaker murdered Balthazar,” Armada had said.

“You cannot know that.”

The Windmaster had hovered over the magician Balthazar like a cloud or a kite holding still in a drifting wind without the snap or beat of a wing as if it were perfectly natural to float effortlessly above the ground. Flickering red and gold from the light of the thing writhing in the dirt before him, Balthazar had raised an arm toward Cloudbreaker with fingers turned as if shielding his eyes from the sun. A spark like lightning lacking thunder and as fierce as a midnight storm had struck the magician, turning him into a candle.

“She is not here.”

“She could be at Highwall,” Ede had said with a gaze that did not linger from the lake or the tree as if they held her captive. “What?”

Do you expect to catch her? Chase her? Where? There is half a moon between you.”

“Where the Windmasters are.” She looked over her shoulder to the home of the Preserver Skysailor and looked farther south to where the breeze still flowed and echoes played. Tracks tempted her to the warmth and hospitality of Stormsdream’s home and away from the cold to the north where light and shadow twisted together leaving everything gray. “That is where she shall be.” One foot was placed in front of another, leaving no sound, and making no mark in the surface of the snow.

“We need you here.”

“I will not sit by and wait for darkness to hunt the forest.” Silent as the wind, a flicker of motion caught her eye, and she saw one of the Winterbred like a speck flying beneath the clouds. “I would search for Sorcha.” With each breath of her wings, the Winterbred’s fingertips brushed the surface of the clouds, casting long ripples and waves in the gray cotton like a stone skipped across the lake at the heart of Greenhaven. “I would confront the dark.”

“That is what we intend,” Teresa had said, holding aloft one fist as if she were lifting a great weight with ease, “but from a position of strength.”

“The mountains are dangerous,” Ede had said. “Uncontrollable.”

“I cannot hide here! I would seek Sorcha before she confronts the Windmasters! Knowing not what she is doing! Knowing only that they have killed!”

“You would confront the Windmasters.”

Armada froze, watching the dot that was the Winterbred disappear from sight, letting it fly away. With toes touching snow, she stood in the depths of the Redstained mountains, chasing Windmasters, searching for a Montmorin magician, and all around her there was nothing except for the unnatural silence and the half-darkness of twilight. In the darkness long past forgotten midnight, the Windmasters had struck with lightning yielding fire, and where they had struck, darkness and chaos had bloomed.

“If I have to,” she said.

*Chapter Nine*  
**The Redstained Cathedral**

*“Are we your prisoners, Clearlake?”*

“Certainly not, my child,” the dragon said. “I am only curious where you and the Lord of Highwall could be going at such a time of night as this.”

“That is none of your concern.”

“Is it not?”

Little more than a charcoal outline against the dark, the dragon seemed to tower over them, swirling all about them and blocking out the stars. Tahrl could feel the creature’s shadow brushing against him, dragging at his bones, and freezing the hairs against his skin. In the apartments at the very pinnacle of Highwall, the dragon had been a shadow pacing the wall and had deferred to Sundancer in all things even in echo of silence. It had pulled at his mind to watch and feel the dragon moving in the dark beyond Sundancer and listening to all that was said.

“The Greater Darkness is loose upon the land, grasping at the Ivory Tower, sniffing at the cathedrals, and attacking the homes of the Kianan. It strikes without warning. Without reason. In the hour past moon fall. As a guardian of the children of the DiKena, I have only your best interests at heart.”

“Then let us pass.”

“No.”

Sorcha stood as still and silent as the night, trying to stand as tall as a dragon and failing to block his view of the creature.

“No,” she said in a pale echo that died at the dragon’s feet.

“Who are you little magician?” Clearlake said, turning as if he would pace around her, but she moved with him, keeping her back to Tahrl.

“I am Sorcha Vedoman ap Earlinstien. Daughter of Jax and Guinevere Vedoman. All that we are, I am.”

“Child of the Montmorin. Playing with Kianan magic. What are you?”

“If you have to ask,” she said with a voice sounding as next to a whisper beneath the dragon, “you would not understand.”

“Magician,” Clearlake said and then seemed to grow, looking over Sorcha’s head. Tahrl caught at his breath, pulling it ragged and burning into his lungs as the dragon looked to him, and he found himself almost stumbling backward. “Tell me, Tahrl, did you know a magician once made a poison to ruin the Windmasters?”

“What?” The word escaped him before he could think. Sorcha reached a hand backward as if to hold him still, and he thought of a map of the Redstained mountains that had been defaced and scarred.

“I suspected as much,” Sorcha said.

“You speak so well of your brethren, child. What would Balthazar say if Cloudbreaker had not murdered him?”

“He was misguided.”

“Guided he may have been but not astray. Balthazar visited us many times before that one broke his spirit.”

Holding his breath tight to his chest, trying not to think, trying not to let his voice escape with his thoughts, Tahrl watched the dragon. A mansion had been built beneath the foot of the Redstained mountains where a magician had labored oblivious to anything and everything in the world around him to breed graths. Standing with Balthazar before the pens, discussing fate, the magician’s eyes had been gray as crumbled stone and fallen empires where the moon would reign forever.

“He hated the Wraiths,” Clearlake said.

“Wraiths?” Tahrl said, feeling the word slip from him as if his chest would burst.

“Oh, yes, we are nothing but Wraths and Wraiths. Half-forgotten echoes that do not realize they have long since faded from the stars.”

The magician had been quiet, standing before the pens, listening to Tahrl’s voice, and his eyes had been shields of glass reflecting nothing more than Tahrl’s own face.

“Balthazar understood,” the dragon said with words that seemed to slip past his ears and seep beneath his skin. “He hated them. Feared the Wraiths. Because we had taught him the future. And you, Tahrl, would you know what tomorrow will bring?”

“No!” Sorcha said, sweeping her arms to the sky; the sleeves of her robe falling and tumbling against her shoulders. Tahrl stumbled as if he had been struck, almost falling into the magician.

“He would not be the first Lord of Highwall to have the lies lifted from his eyes.”

“Or cloud his mind!”

“Have you not wondered, Tahrl? Why Hector and Oberon lead your people against the Windmasters so long ago?”

“Yes,” he said, feeling the memory of Sundancer’s words beneath his skin.

“No, Tahrl!” Sorcha moved as if she would turn to look to him but did nothing so that she could continue to face the dragon. “Beware the words that a Windmaster might speak!”

“For they are a fire that burns.” Clearlake drew closer so that his nose was just before Sorcha’s face. “Little magician. How will you stop me?”

“I don’t have to.”

“Why not?” The dragon’s breath rolled around Sorcha, enveloping her, and Tahrl felt his legs give at the touch of that warm and musty weight.

“Because she is here.”

The dragon pulled away from them with a motion that dragged the wind from their eyes, and Clearlake looked, turning, twisting this way and that to the sky.

“It is too late to run,” Sorcha said. “You cannot hold us. She will sacrifice us to stop you. She told me as much herself.”

With the briefest of flutters and stretch of wind, Clearlake was gone; the wind swirling all about them and rushing to fill the hole that the dragon had left. The chill night air bit at him, dragging him toward the gap, but Sorcha had her hand on his shoulder, gripping to crush bone, pulling him in another direction.

“This way.”

Tahrl stumbled, almost falling with feet that clung to the earth like roots that had dug deep into the stone before finding life.

“Fire and blood, Tahrl, we must go!”

As if being pulled without sound from a sickly, sucking mud, they began to move, half-running away from Highwall. They raced along the beginnings of streets of the town growing around the castle. Off in the darkness to one side were fields of peanuts and winter wheat,

and on the other side, they passed a butchery that had just opened sometime in the past two seasons.

A flicker of light traced his mind, pulling him from Sorcha's grasp, and he looked, seeing cracks in the night dark sky like lightning lacking only thunder. Images like strands of silver thread smeared across the sky burned into his memory even as they slipped from the spaces between the stars. Another flash streaked the sky, turning him around, as he looked to a night that was more crowded with clouds than stars. In the void beneath the dark, he glimpsed a shape moving like a great bird fluttering wings to shape the wind beneath her fingers.

"Move." Sorcha had him by the arm, spinning him, pulling him through the night dark town with only the flash and flicker of light like lightning dancing between the clouds to guide them on their way.

The splinters and fragments of light seeping through the sky pulled at him, and he tripped, stumbling, losing Sorcha, and resting his hands to his knees. Shaking his head to dislodge icicles, he found other Kianan at windows and doorways as if they had been summoned soundlessly from dream to watch the spectacle that cracked and arced beneath the sky. Sorcha reached for him, falling just shy of touching as if his skin burned, and she turned, looking to the sky. Glanced for less than an instant at a time, Tahrl could see shapes swirling and spinning between the stars, and the shadows of great birds seemed to dance, revolving around one of their own, touching it with cracks and splinters of light. The harried shape faltered as if losing its grip on the sky and began to fall, trailing a mist of white fire.

"No," Tahrl whispered; the word was little more than a breath of wind that faltered and fell as Clearlake slipped from the sky.

Like a solitary teardrop or falling star leaving a faded streak of white lightning behind it, the dragon fell, disappearing from view. Tahrl took half a step toward the shadowed echo of light, feeling all his weight sink over the one foot, and he watched the other dragons turning this way and that and disappearing from view. The touch on his shoulder made his heart shiver as if it would burst and sent waves of bubbles trailing warmth to prick and tear at the skin behind his nose and beneath his eyes. He followed the hand and the robe enshrouded arm to Sorcha's face as she watched the sky beyond him where the dragons had vanished.

“It’s not over,” she said.

Without words or a voice to speak with, he held still as the night before Clearlake had appeared, feeling the hollow grow in his chest like a balloon pushing at his skin, and he found the memory of lightning lacking only thunder in Sorcha’s eyes.

“What?” The word was half a breath falling like a stone through the evening mist.

“Clearlake was nothing. An annoyance. There must be a reckoning.”

The Winterbred had danced through the air around their brother Clearlake, gracing him with fragments of light that had turned the world to fire. Driving him from the sky, they had followed him down, guiding him with lightning until the earth had broken his fall. Tahrl turned, looking for Highwall and for the shape of dragons in the dark swirling and turning above the apartments where Sundancer had taken residence and Moonlight had once called home.

“No,” Sorcha said; her fingers digging hard into his shoulder and holding him still. “Stormsdream is here.”

Like whispers in the dark that had traveled the depths of time, they heard a rumbling roar that was the voice of a dragon. Above the peaks of Highwall, shapes had gathered, fluttering wings, and circling the castle. At windows and doors where people had been pulled by the fragments of lightning, candles burned, and Kianan fell from their homes, gathering around Tahrl. Lights grew from candles and torches at the windows of Highwall as those within tried to see the voices surrounding them. One rumbling voice rose above all the others, sounding as next to distant thunder and the roaring of the wind, and it drowned the whispers of the Kianan from the sky. One shape dwarfed all the others with wings that seemed to engulf the castle, stretching from horizon to horizon, and circled almost leisurely above the pinnacle of Highwall.

From the stones of the castle, there came an answer that shook the walls until dust flowed, and the sound wrapped around the people, rattling bones and driving fists to ears. The roar pushed at the Winterbred as if a wind had taken hold of them, and they swirled and tumbled, beating wings and holding above Highwall. In the midst of Sundancer’s answer, one dragon held the sky as if sailing with a gentle breeze, and Stormsdream turned over the edge of the castle, touching without touching the peaks of Highwall. Her voice was a soft rumble that drowned Sundancer’s shout and striped the

echoes from the stars and the clouds, leaving only silence and the breath of a wing in her wake.

Tahlr let his hands slip from his ears, watching Stormsdream, and catching the fragrance of her voice carried on the wisps of the wind. If a voice was raised to match her own sounding of deep caverns and distant thunder, he could not hear it, and he looked to Highwall where the people had gathered watching, cowering, unable to turn away from the great dragon. They must have been pulled from their beds, tumbling from sleep at the first touch of a dragon's voice, and they would have wandered blindly, rubbing sleep from their eyes, wondering why a dragon's voice filled the halls. Sounding more to the rush of a waterfall or the roar of the wind, Tahlr searched for meaning where he could not even find the patterns and rhythms of words.

A flicker and flash of light like lightning lacking only thunder leapt from Stormsdream, cracking the air like glass, and where the light touched to the walls and towers of Highwall, fire grew. Stone melted beneath a flame as white as the stars, and Tahlr screamed, feeling the breath rush from his heart as if his soul were being pulled out through his teeth. Sorcha held him, pinning him to the ground even before he realized he had tried to run for the castle where the screams of the Kianan mingled with the roars of the dragons and the flowing of liquid light. A rainbow arc of red, yellow, and blue, spiraling and twisting one about the other, lashed out of the glowing spire of the peaks of Highwall. The dragons roared and shouted, calling to each other, swimming through orange and green ink, and they vomited liquid light like silver and crystal lightning to strike into the castle. Tahlr attempted to pull his hands from his head as each dragon's call and roar was a hammer of wind to the ears that tried to smash his mind and sent ripples like earthquakes down his back. Curling on to his side, pushing against the ground and against Sorcha, he listened to the voices of the Dryn and Kianan sounding as next to a dull ache against the violent sky. The dirt and gravel path between the houses and homes before Highwall was empty of all except for Sorcha and himself; the others having run at the first flash and spark of fire to touch the castle. They had turned, screaming, without direction other than away from Highwall as if a dragon lashing the land with lightning had triggered a fear older than time.

An explosion of shattered rock and fractured light ruptured the heights and spires of Highwall, tossing stone and wood at the

scrambling dragons. Riding the wave, a shape flew from the castle's peak, spreading wings and slipping past the circling Winterbred. They turned, shrugging through walls of wind and sound, and twisting past shards of stone and wood to chase Sundancer. The wind was a roar of fragments and screams, smelling of sulfur and midnight, and raining wisps and specks of lightning like fallen stars that burned at the touch like fire. Sundancer disappeared into the night amid a crackle and flurry of liquid light and lightning as the dragons lead by Stormsdream followed her into the night. The sky was bright with wild fire to blacken the stars, and all that could be seen were silhouettes like shadows that had been cast to the ground. Breathing through his teeth and shrugging off the ground, Tahrl stood with Sorcha's hand a weight on his shoulder in a flurry and swirl of ash like fragments of flame or snow, watching the dance of lights and color that was the dark night sky. From the play of lightning, Sundancer fell, trailing wisps of fire like smoke twisted and shaped by the wind. The others followed her down, lashing the sky with fire until the one was a flame so bright that it hurt the eye to look at it. The land took her, dousing her flame in the soft earth and wild grass beyond the fields that surrounded Highwall, and the dragons remained above that one spot, breathing light like liquid fire and lightning to spread over Sundancer's grave.

In the moment between one breath and the next, the world grew dark. The calls and voices of Stormsdream and her Winterbred were gone as if someone had closed the lid on a music box shutting off the sound. Tahrl pulled at the air in his lungs as if the wind was a fire that burned into the soul, and he felt the earth once more beneath his knees. Lowering one hand, placing the palm flat against the land, he felt the coarse belly of the road beneath his fingers and the earth that had been packed hard by the steady march of so many feet. Looking back to the sky, he found the gray and faded stars that lived in the long dark before morning looking down on him. A speck of light like a lonely snowflake drifted from the sky to touch at his hair, and he raised a hand as if to grasp the spark, which danced and slipped between his fingers. The wind was filled with fire like fireflies floating as thick as dust to turn and play on the breeze.

"The castle!" Tahrl stood; the land swaying, staggering beneath his feet, and he fell into Sorcha. He pulled at her, trying to free himself from her grip.

“Tahrl, no,” she said; her fingers were hooks digging into his skin. “It’s not safe.”

“Away with your hands! Who am I if I cannot protect them!”

“You are still the Lord of Highwall! And I promised Stormsdream that I would protect you!”

“Fire and blood, Sorcha! Are they not family?”

She lifted her hands from his arm as if a wind would toss her into the sky, and she looked beyond him to where the molten and still burning rock glowed red as blood at the heart of Highwall. Nodding her head once as if the weight of the world would cast her to the ground, they ran together through the streets that surrounded Highwall while the sky still drifted with bits of ash and glowing dust. They were stopped by the people, Kianan and Dryn, before the gates of the castle, wandering as if the life had been taken from them and they did not know where to begin. Looking from windows and doors, watching the dragons circling the castle, reason would have left the people at the first lash of fire, pushing and shoving to be free of the walls. Working through the now silent wall, Tahrl and Sorcha crossed into Highwall, and the court beyond was scattered with sleepers all half-dressed and tattered and torn. They had been abandoned to the court by the crush of people smothering them while all around the sky had screamed and burned. By the flicker and wash of torchlight, some did move among the sleepers, checking for warmth and breath. Tahrl looked to the inner wall of the court where it rose into the halls and apartments of Highwall while the faded screams and cries of horses touched at the edge of his ear. From the stones, he could hear the cries of the people, and from the stone, he could hear their screams and the shouts of the people within the stone trying to find them. What had once been the entrance to Fallingdown North had become a warped and twisted shape of stone that had melted and settled like the wax from a candle left too long to burn.

Abandoning that path, he stepped among people graced by torchlight and others still falling into the court, pushing past the flood of voices. He crossed under the arch into the second court lit by the bright fire of the stable’s burning roof, and for a moment with the horses’ terror in his ears and his fingers aching from the flames, he watched Kianan and Dryn carrying buckets and anything from the well to the fire. Turning, raising his hand against the light, he made for the entrance to Fallingdown West and found a gathering

that would only grow as the first moments finally faded and things became organized. Every cushion was taken as if people had simply stopped, stumbling, falling where they stood, and Tahrl found he was looking over those who could not even reach the central court in their flight. He recognized Adalanta and Raechelle of the Dryn and Marcus and Cyprus of the household staff seeing to the people gathered in the hall, and he thought he had seen Juliana out with the horses and flickering shadows and light. Master Latham was there, kneeling over a sleeper, touching a hand gently to the man's face. Crossing the room, Tahrl stood before the magician who did not seem to notice or recognize him until he was finished with the man sprawled on the cushion.

"Where are the others?" Tahrl said after Master Latham had stood and had a moment of quiet amid the echoes of the hall.

"I don't know. In the great hall with Hector and that one; Iola," the magician said and then seemed to notice Sorcha standing at Tahrl's side. "Master Hamarthon is dead."

"I am sorry."

"How many?" Tahrl said.

"Too many. Most who can be helped are already here."

"So quickly?"

"It was as if the Dryn knew what was going to happen." As Latham spoke, his gaze shifted to Sorcha, holding upon the Montmorin magician as if his was the key to unlocking all the secrets of her soul.

"There was no warning," she said. "It would have given Sundancer more time to prepare."

"Why?"

"She had to be stopped."

"Just like that? She could not be allowed to break ranks? Teach us how to fight the Greater Darkness? They would kill us to silence her?"

"Yes."

"Truly the Windmasters are mad. With Sundancer gone, we are lost to chance and destruction. The Ivory Tower will fall."

Sorcha struck him across the face, spinning Latham about like a top that had lost its balance and hold on the world.

"Get her voice out of your head! She's trying to divide us!"

Latham found his pace, looking down at Sorcha as one might look at a disobedient child, saying nothing as if he could burn her from the earth.

## **The Magic Flute**

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“What?” Tahrl said, struggling past the word for breath, and neither magician turned at the sound. “What is to be gained by dividing us?”

“It is the Windmasters who are divided,” Latham said. “Would they aid the darkness or destroy it?”

“You are not the first magician I’ve heard say such things,” Sorcha said.

“Would they silence me, too?”

“Wait!” Tahrl said, and they both turned, looking to him. “The dragons would turn us one upon the other?”

“The Windmasters are divided, Tahrl,” Sorcha said. “They are not of one mind on how to stop the Greater Darkness. Terrified that all they can do is feed it. And so they will act. They will not act. In confusion. In desperation, they turn upon each other.”

“Blood has been shed, Tahrl. The division festered for more than a thousands years. With the darkness falling upon us, the Windmasters can do nothing but destroy each other.”

“It will be over soon. Stormsdream has chosen to stand with Cloudbreaker. The others will follow.”

“Or be burned from the sky.”

“Wait! Where did you learn-” Tahrl looked from magician to magician, hearing the whispers and echoes out of the dark of the apartments at the pinnacle of Highwall, and seeing the mountains still white with snow that had been shaped and sculpted by the wind. “Why you?”

“Because we are magicians,” Latham said. “Shapers of worlds. Directly descended from the DiKena. Did our ancient grandfathers fight with iron and bone? No. Theirs was the playground of the mind.”

“So Sundancer would divide even the Kianan,” Sorcha said. “Fire and stone against each other in the blind hope that the Greater Darkness would find no purchase.”

“Raise an arm bound in leather and chain against a dark nightmare. How long do you keep it? Hold a sword with bloody fingers to slice shadow and fire and wind. How many soldiers died with Master Balthazar?”

“We act because the magicians do nothing,” Tahrl said.

“Nothing? You have lived with these mountains too long, Tahrl. Do you think the sun and moon revolve around your high walls? I

have been at the Ivory Tower! Watching it fade! Watching it falter! I will not see it fall.”

“The tower will not fall at your feet.” He watched Latham as if the magician would speak as if the magician would turn and leave them to the ruin of fire and stone that was Highwall. “And so we are divided.”

He turned, leaving the magician without knowing if Sorcha followed him, and he abandoned Fallingdown West, following passages and pathways crowded with people, looking for the great hall. Dragons had done this, turning one upon the other, sending fire and lightning to play among the stones of the castle. Burning stone and swirling lightning had scarred and etched the walls with the shadows of lost figures twisting and writhing into the stone. The dragons had cast down their semblance and illusion of order with the roar and crash of thunder that was their voices while all around them the world had been filled with the screams of the Kianan. He did not look or wonder at the magician he had left standing in Fallingdown West, pushing at darkened halls flickering by candle and torchlight. The echoes called, pulling at him from the shadows and the stones where the voices of the dragons would remain forever in the memory of his home. The people were everywhere as if they had not tumbled from the halls to stand before the gates of Highwall as if they were following him through the castle to crowd the halls with their voices and drown the light.

He stumbled into the great hall through a half-formed door of twisted stone, seeing Iola at the center of a storm as if she had been born to the turning of voices and the flow of people. The tide turned, ebbing and swirling as he pushed into the hall while the Kianan abandoned one rock to cling to another. Iola was the first to reach him with her arms around him and her fingers clinging to his back and her lips holding tight to his own, and the rush of her breath filled him while her heart seemed to beat beneath his skin. The people faded back into the shadow and the stone as if they had been sated or had never moved from their dreams before the gates of Highwall.

“We feared you were dead,” Iola said. “The apartments are gone. None could find you. We feared you were lost. Melted in stone.”

“Not lost,” he whispered, brushing against her cheek, feeling her head turn to cup his face. “Never lost. Someone thought I was important enough to rescue.”

“Someone was right.”

“All around me the world burns. Do we know anything, yet?”

Tahrl looked from shadow to flickering torchlight over what remained of the great hall and those who had not faded completely into the stone. Hector was near at hand, looking as if he had lost more years than he had lived, and Sorcha was there, having left Master Latham far behind her. There was Thomathy in the shadows helping Agatha to a cushion, and Tahrl remembered that she had been with the household staff for more than half her life serving him breakfast for a dozen seasons. Aaron was there, walking out of the memory of Edgewood, and passing through torchlight laced with gold and faded orange.

“No,” Tahrl said, feeling Iola’s fingers slip from his shoulder as he fell away from her. “What are you doing here?”

“What?” Iola said with a voice that sounded full of sleep, and he realized that she had been speaking of the harm to Highwall. “He enlisted after Edgewood was destroyed.”

“Tahrl, I had to do something.” Holding still, Aaron raised a hand as if he would reach for him.

“No,” Tahrl said, falling back, feeling the blood dry on his skin.

“What?”

“Tahrl.”

“It’s Aaron.”

Turning, pulling away, Tahrl watched the flicker and dance of dusty gold and burnt orange torchlight as it played across the walls of the great hall, feeling the fire pull at his breath leaving his chest to burn.

“He has every right to be here.”

“No.” Breathing fire over cold stone and ash, he looked the length of the hall and over the stragglers and faces lost and dreaming in the distance with the voices of dragons still echoing in their heads. Few here were soldiers, and most of those trying to understand the hall were household staff. The staff had been gathered from the small settlements that dotted the land for the days and shades of the moon around Highwall. With the exception of Hector, all the chiefs and whips had been gathered from the Ivory Tower and Mithrandea when he had taken the governing of Highwall. None from Edgewood had ever traveled so far around the mountains to join the ranks of his soldiers.

“The least you can do is speak to him!”

“No,” Aaron said from somewhere behind him and out of the depths of time with his voice reaching Tahlr’s ears as little more than a memory. “If he doesn’t want to say anything.”

The echo and breath of wind faded as if it had fallen through a hole in the sky, leaving the world empty, and Tahlr turned, finding Iola, Sorcha, and Hector watching a figure fade through shadow and torchlight in the depths of the great hall. Aaron stopped, turning once at the edge of the hall, looking back to where they were gathered, and then he was gone, following a flickering torch as if it would lead him to graves of stone. The others, turning with their eyes to the ground as if they could not see him, looked back to Tahlr with his own gaze still locked on what was left of the door where Aaron had gone. The passage had been twisted and warped by the shifting of half-molten and burning stone when the dragons had forced Sundancer from the pinnacle of Highwall. He turned, looking to Sorcha to Iola, catching the Dryn’s gaze as if she had been caught searching through his journals and research.

“The apartments were destroyed?”

She did not answer but only nodded her head once as if she were struggling to find the breath to make her voice work.

“This must end,” he said. “Waiting. Always waiting! For dragons. For magicians. For spring! No more! Stormsdream must answer for what has happened here! With the morning, we ride!”

“What!”

“You cannot mean!”

“Highwall has been savaged!”

“You cannot go!”

“I will not sit here and wait for the next hammer to fall! If Sorcha can gain an audience with Stormsdream, then so can I! The dragons must stop fighting amongst themselves!”

“It will be over soon,” Sorcha said.

“What?”

“The last of Sundancer’s children have fallen back to the Redstained cathedral. Or so I have been told.”

“Redstained cathedral?”

“Yes, there is a cathedral in these mountains. They never mentioned it because Sundancer had always held sway there.”

“Secrets! I am standing in a ruin because of dragon secrets and pride. With the morning light, we shall follow Stormsdream into the mountains and strip the lies from her soul.”



*The horses screamed and cried with the fear and confusion of burning stone in the dark still fresh beneath the morning's light. There was almost nowhere to turn with a crowd of soldiers all around them; even though, the horses had been kept beyond the boundary of Highwall because of the stable fire. Tahrl had sent the provisions out through side passages and misshapen tunnels while most of the soldiers and staff were still searching the ruin for their brothers and sisters. Hector had found them with the sun still stretching clumsy fingers of warmth across the land, and he had brought the mix of Dryn and Kianan soldiers to surround the dozen horses and eight riders. Sorcha stood in her stirrups, towering over the back of her horse, looking out over the crowd, and without a word being spoken, the soldiers fell back as if they had broken against a mountain. Iola and Sorcha parted the crowd between them and lead the way among Kianan and Dryn, soldiers, staff, and townsfolk. Keeping Tahrl close at hand, the wizard and the magician guided the riders away from the gates and boundaries of Highwall. He did not look, but Tahrl knew that Hector had been among the crowd and that Master Latham had been watching from the wall of the castle. For all of that first day as they drove the horses much harder than they should have for what their mounts had been through in the night, no one followed them. They did not talk with the castle still so close behind them and the snow enshrouded mountains filling half the sky.*

It was another day before they reached the first of the low hills to be touched by snow, slowing their progress and confusing the horses. They camped in crystal air still warm from the sun, setting tents and windbreaks of hard cloth for the horses, and Sorcha created a fire, pulling sparks from the sky. As the days began to pass with the mountains growing all around them, the wind played against their skin, biting with cold despite the hard light of the sun. Losing time with the sun and moon trading places at their ease, Tahrl could find no trace of the dragons beneath the sky as if knowing they were sought they had taken to the farthest peaks and highest mountains. Snow, covering the land and blinding beneath the sun, made the mountains alien as the mists of time, and Tahrl remembered what Chrystal and Lyncia had said about the mood of the far lands. Watching the snow from horseback and by the flickering of

campfires for signs of troglodytes, he wondered at the life and shape of the mountains and the cathedral that had remained hidden for so long.

“Stop!”

The cry brought them up short, holding their horses still beneath the sun with the echoes of the roar flowing all around and through them. As if watching a dream unfold through sun and bright snow, a dragon floated out of the crystal sky to circle the horses, breathing clouds of fine mist to entwine with her wings as she descended to the mountainside.

“I would speak with Stormsdream,” Tahrl said, pushing his horse to stand before Riverstone of the Winterbred and child to that Pre-server.

“No.”

The only sound was that of his horse’s breath as the wind took it and colored it with ice crystals and mist. Riverstone rested on the surface of the snow without leaving so much as a mark as if she were nothing more than a feather.

“Why?”

She folded her wings, curling the fingers together and resting on her arms, and watched him with eyes that seemed to cycle and shimmer like light cast through a prism.

“Go home, Tahrl. There is nothing for you here.”

“My home lies in ruins! There is nothing for me to go home to! I will have answers!”

“I have none to give you.”

“Yes, you do, or you would have left us for the winter to claim! Would you hide your quarrel?” He choked on his voice, feeling the twist of words become lost in his throat, looking to the sky, and feeling his breath burn in his chest. “I know that the Windmasters rage against each other. How long did you think you would be able to hold that secret?”

“Long enough,” she said, looking to the sky. “The affairs of the Windmasters are not your concern.”

“Not my concern? Highwall has been shaken to its foundations. Not my concern? Many I have known are now dead. The affairs of the Windmasters are my concern!”

“We never wanted this to happen! Sundancer. Sundancer was the best and wisest of us, and I had a part in her death.”

“Sundancer was not the enemy.”

“No. No, she was not.”

Tahlr felt the cold against his skin as the damp and dark of the apartments at the pinnacle of Highwall had felt seeping into his bones with the dragon’s voice, lacking form, swirling all around him.

“We must remember that which we have forgotten. I would speak with Stormsdream.”

“She will not answer you.”

“She gave me answer,” Sorcha said. “Will she deny me now?”

Riverstone turned with her nose bent almost to the ground as if she would draw a line in the snow and lifted her eyes to the Montmorin magician, gracing Sorcha with the touch.

“I cannot protect you.” The dragon slipped away; her gaze falling from Sorcha and drifting off into the sky.

“We accept the danger.”

“No, you do not understand.”

“Is a fire not beautiful?” Tahlr said. “Is it not as next to magic? Not knowing it shall burn, we reach for it. Until we reach for it, not knowing when to stop, how can we comprehend the flame?”

“Stormsdream will not answer you. The others have been driven to the cathedral. The last of Sundancer’s children have taken refuge there.”

“So there is a cathedral.”

“Stormsdream is there. And Cloudbreaker. Watching. Waiting for the end.” Riverstone would not look to him. “You will find Armada at the cathedral.”

He could feel the wind as it played around him, touching him with hints of snow, and he wondered, looking into the sky what Armada saw with the mountains and high peaks all around her. The dragons would be in the air and around the one peak dwarfing all the others that was the Redstained cathedral. He felt her raise an arm against the sun as she studied the sky as he watched for traces of the dragons.

“How will it end?”

Riverstone looked to him with the many layers of her eyes slowly shifting into focus upon him. The sun was reflected in her gaze with fire and lightning in the winter sky traced with ice and snow.

“When there is nothing left, Tahlr. When there is nothing left.”

He could feel the wind in his eyes burning with cold and tracing his face with damp crystals of warmth to touch his nose and play in

his hair. Fighting for words, he felt the breath rushing in his chest and found no purchase or relief from the cold.

“I would see the cathedral with my own eyes before then.”



*The world was as white as a faded dream made entirely of star shine and moonstones.* Tahrl stood on Vixen’s back with the morning forever lost behind him and watched for the spark that was Riverstone’s shadow as it might fall from the crystal sky. The dragon had escorted them, keeping always to the sky, beneath the sun and beyond the moon through ancient and unknowable land. Never before had he traveled the mountains with the heart of winter all around him, and he thought that he had known every peak and every valley of the range. Where he stood watching for Riverstone, he did not recognize from any map or drawing, and he wondered how far they had traveled into the depths of the Northern mountains. The only sounds were those of the wind as faint and faded as an echo and the beatings of their own half-frozen hearts, and it had been too many days to bother counting since he had seen any marks in the snow save their own track. The troglodytes tunneled through the winter snow but even such creatures as them ventured to the surface on occasion. It was as if the mountains had swallowed them whole, leaving nothing to walk, tunnel, or fly aside from the dragon Riverstone.

She did not appear so Tahrl pushed his horse on following the memory of a trail that she had marked in the sky some two days before. He kept his eyes forever to the sky, looking for any trace or mark of the dragons, and he thought of them lashing each other with storm and lightning as if brother and sister were born of shadow out of the darkness. Riverstone could have been lost among the stones, crawling over snow, smearing it dark with her blood, and he saw her in his mind trying to unfold wings to the sky yielding only fragments and tattered strands that still clung to her fingers. Finding nothing in the sky or on the land to match his waking dreams, he pushed on, leading the others without direction save for the memory of her flight over the snow.

Sometime lost to the white noise between the sun and the waking moon as they crested a ridge, turned a corner, or simply past the blink of an eye, they first saw the one mountain among all the others. It dwarfed its neighbors as if all life and light were drawn to

it alone. A fantasy that should not exist and the dragons had always denied was draped with snow that probably never faded or melted even at the height of summer. Tahrl realized that he had been staring with the reins draped loose across his horse's neck, and he rubbed at his face, looking to the others and looking for any sign of Riverstone or her sisters. The others, Iola, Chrystal, Sorcha, and Lyncia were all studying the mountain as if whenever more they would think of paradise they would see the Redstained cathedral.

"Where are the others?" Tahrl said, startling his companions and drawing them out of the mountain. "The cathedral is under siege, is it not?"

They rode on, following a trail that only Tahrl could see toward the mountain, and they saw nothing of dragons or any other kind of thing beneath the sun. Finding a lake before the cathedral that was more ice and snow than water, they made for a small grove of trees powdered in snow, and Tahrl realized that there was a figure standing among the trees who looked as if she had not moved in days. Loosing his horse and standing before her, he could not find a voice to speak with and only looked to Armada standing as next to a statue beneath the shadow of the cathedral. Her clothes were tattered and threadbare, having lost even her cloak somewhere along the path, and there was no sign of her pack or food, her sword, or even a stick to use in her own defense.

"It looks smaller than the Earlinstien cathedral, don't you think?" she said, surprising the wind.

"Armada," Tahrl said, swallowing words and feeling them burn in his throat.

"Yes?" She looked to him as if the future traveled on forever, and she let her gaze play over his face.

"What? I don't- are you well?" He studied the curve of her face and the color in her eyes, looking for sign of a desert where thirst reigned and plants withered and died.

"Very well," she said with an arch to the corner of her lip, and she raised a hand, touching fingers to his cheek. "As can be expected given the circumstances." Her gaze drifted from him, and he followed her eyes, knowing without turning his head that she looked to the cathedral. "I know about Highwall, and I am sorry. The Windmasters are lost to fear and confusion."

"They must answer for what they have done. They must remember that which they have forgotten."

“They don’t want to listen. Look,” she said, turning from him and facing the cathedral. “You cannot see them, but they are there. Waiting for the end. Darkness forgotten. All they can remember is hatred for each other. It is as if it’s what the Greater Darkness wanted.”

“They must listen.”

“They will not.”

“They are not all lost,” Sorcha said. “I have spoken with Cloudbreaker. With Stormsdream. They would rail against the shadows in the light.”

“Look at what they have yielded,” Armada said. “Brother against sister. Mother against son. Even Cloudbreaker tires of blood. They want only for it to end. In fire or darkness.”

“Many of them simply wait for the end. I sensed this. At Highwall. At Stormsdream’s home. It’s as if they have lost all life. All light. All hope.”

“The song has been broken,” Tahrl said. “I have heard those words so often.”

“They gave all their dreams to my father. Such a weight for one man to bear. It crushed him. It crushed them.”

“They have not lost all their dreams,” Sorcha said. “Some will stand. We can reach them.”

“They do not stand for the future,” Armada said. “They stand for the end. They are ashamed of the blood. For what they failed to do so long ago.”

“They will listen. They respect you, Tahrl. Stormsdream wanted you safe from Highwall. They will listen to you. They would listen to Alexander.”

“They stopped listening when Alexander died,” Tahrl said. “The song is broken. All is silence.”

“Do you remember, Tahrl, when Moonlight first spoke to us?” Armada said, and he looked to her, watching the dragon descend behind his eyes. “What had made that morning different from the one before that and the one before that?”

“Alexander,” Tahrl said, and he heard the faintest traces of an echo like the rustling of distant wind or the turning of ancient thunder in the corner of his mind. “What are you thinking?”

“Without the song of the earthsheart, they never would have trusted us. We must make the song anew.”

“How?”

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“There may be a way. The Windmasters deferred to my father in all things. Maybe. Just maybe. They will respect his token.”

“Grandfather’s flute,” Iola whispered. “You would re-forge grandfather’s flute.”

“Could you play it?” Tahrl said, and the echo was as next to distant laughter that turned and played like a twist of far off song behind his ear.

“He taught me a long time ago.”

“How would you remake it?” Iola said.

“Here.”

“You’re mad.”

“I have been studying the cathedral for many days now.”

“No,” Sorcha said. “It could be done. I grew with the Earlinstien cathedral. I will show you.”

“You will need the fragments of Alexander’s flute.”

“Teresa will not part with them.”

The echo of long forgotten music filled him from the tips of his toes to each and every hair on the top of his head, and he looked to Armada with the song in his ears as she studied the great mountain that was the Redstained cathedral.

“Yes, she will,” Armada said.

## Chapter Ten

# A Candle in the Wind

*The forest was before them; a swirling cacophony of branches and leaves that was just beyond the edge of the mountains. From her vantage point still high above the woods and still many days from home, Armada watched how even the afternoon sun played with the wind among the branches and trees. The reach and shimmer of light over swirling branches was enough to make one believe that there would always be another morning. It was reason to return from the deep mountains all scarred and battle worn from patrols with troglodyte blood still dripping from her fingers. The forest was the music of wind and birds rustling in the trees, and it was laughter and song after a long hunt. It was also the screams and cries of the children playing in the peace and safety of the forest. Cries of delight echoing and reechoing from the farthest branches and sounding as distant as the empty moon until the quiet of the mountains called to her once more. Even from the edge of the day and through the depths of winter, the forest called to her with promises for the morning and with laughter and friends and even with the songs of the children. The music called to her even where she stood in the mountains while they rested the horses, and she could hear her mother's voice raised in silent song above the sun and the wind and the trees. From the moment they would touch the forest still several days ahead of them, Teresa would know, and she would reach for them, embracing them through every leaf and branch and through every twist of wind. Taking her daughter into her heart, she would know why Armada had returned to Morningsglory, and she might pull away from them, wanting to protect the shards as she had been unable to protect Delan.*

“I have as much right to my father's flute as you,” Armada would say, standing before Teresa. “More. We must let go our grief unless we want it to destroy us. The Windmasters need something to believe in.”

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The Windmasters had torn and ripped and scarred the mountains, turning upon each other, and Armada and the others had seen it while still in the deep mountains with the cathedral no more than a day behind them. Windmaster against Windmaster against Windmaster, tumbling through the sky and lashing the morning with sparks of lightning that flickered and shook like cracks of fire sunk deep into ice. They had watched the distant Windmasters with the cold air burning into their skin and the echoes of thunderous cries drifting around them until the snow had melted beneath slender wings to flow in waves of sludge that twisted the land into odd shapes.

“Where will it end?” Tahrl had whispered after the last survivor of the ruptured earth had taken to delicate wing and disappeared from view.

“In fire and blood,” Armada had said with her eyes lingering to where the last Windmaster had slipped through the sky. “Fire and blood.” Her gaze had drifted to the distant scar of land where the snow had been boiled away. “Ash and stone where the wind no longer grows.”

They had stood in the blowing cold with none wanting to be the first to break the quiet while looking to the twisted and violated land that the Windmasters had left behind. Armada looked to the flow and sweep of the forest spread beneath them, and she remembered the flash and spark of Windmasters and things cast from shadow at the very edge of the trees.

“No troglodytes. No cavern trolls. No monsters drawn from nightmare,” Tahrl had said with the Redstained cathedral towering over them. “Where is the Greater Darkness?”

“The Windmasters fall upon each other not caring how it might end. The rift that drives them may be as old as time,” Armada had said.

“The Windmasters have always stood together. They exist to protect us.”

“They could not save the DiKena,” she had said with the others gathered about her as if every word she spoke were new. “How did that affect them? Can you imagine it? We should have done this. We could have done that.”

“In confusion? Fear and desperation? They fall upon the old divide?”

“Shame at the loss of the DiKena. Fear for losing their children.

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The darkness thrived on the pooled magic. The untapped anger and sorrow.”

“The dragons’ rage.”

“That which had fed the Greater Darkness has been spent by the Windmasters on each other. The darkness doesn’t need to be here anymore.”

She looked to Tahrl standing with an arm touching his horse as he looked to the far sight of Morningsglory forest. Iola was near at hand without being next to him and was keeping an eye to him as if she did not want to draw any notice to that attention. Having seen the Windmasters savage the land as they tore at each other, Tahrl looked as if he would stumble if he stepped away from his horse. Faltering on his feet, he would reach for Iola even if he did not realize that he would as she reached to support him. Armada turned away before they might chance to notice her watching them and tried to hide a smile despite the cold of the snow that seldom if ever bothered her anymore.

Touching a hand to her horse and feeling him breathe quietly beneath her fingers, Armada looked to Chrystal, nodding once, and then to Iola, catching her eye so that they would continue riding for the forest they had glimpsed still many days below them. The forest would grow as they had glimpses of it as they traveled snow-covered hills and passes and valleys. The farther they traveled from the cathedral in the depths of the Northern mountains the more Armada heard and noticed the life of the mountains in winter as if they were slowly reentering the world. She was even remembering to eat, tasting the dry and flaky texture of liarscake between her teeth and tongue, without first noticing how the others would watch her as they must wonder how she seemed to do so well without food or a wrap against the snow-chilled breeze.

They reached the edge of the forest still crunching snow beneath their horses’ hooves. Armada breathed deep of the wood and snow flavored air, taking it into her lungs, and feeling the forest reach for her embracing her. She could feel the one at the heart of the forest pulsing with all the life of the wood, and her mother stretched long fingers to surround her with all the warmth of her heart. She closed her eyes, feeling Teresa and the life of the forest flowing through her as if she were suspended in a river. Touching the echo of faint memory that had been distilled into a brand of white fire, the swirl and ebb of the forest paused as if it had brushed against a pebble in a

sheet of silk. The wood could feel her reaching for the shards of lost music that Teresa kept next to her heart, and Armada could feel her mother's touch pull ever so slightly away as she felt how the shards could be taken into the depths of the mountains to be consumed by the cathedral's flame.

Armada clung to her mother's touch, feeling Teresa try to pull away from her, and felt the touch brush against her memory of the mountains where she had needed neither food nor sleep. The flute was what bound them to their memories of Delan, and it was the symbol that Armada reached toward, feeling her mother clutch the shards of memory to her breast. She had held the flute as she had learned the ways of wizardry long ago in the far mountains and forests, touching the warm metal to her lip, listening to the music spreading all around her while her father had sat near at hand without the need to give her direction. Armada reached for that memory, feeling her fingers brush against Teresa's hold on the flute. Teresa had tried to play it, touching the flute, breathing through it, and they had heard the rattle of wind through the pipe. They had all laughed at the sound that was perchance a very different kind of music all together, and Teresa had returned the flute to Delan, laughing to catch her breath.

"You must forgive me," Armada said with the others looking to her as she slid from her horse. She did not watch them as she left the others behind, moving faster than any that might hope to catch her, and the echo of Tahlr's voice with its note of surprise was lost to the wind.

The music of the flute was something that they were all drawn to, trusting the one who played it with all the wisdom of the ages. Even the Windmasters had respected the music, and they had been drawn from the depths of the mountains, remembering the children of the DiKena by one simple song. Delan had been the one that the Windmasters had trusted, and the forest reached for her with the memory of Teresa and Delan standing together for the first time. A hand brushing ever so gently against a shoulder with only the fingers touching and the warmth of the heart rushing more quickly than the wind could ever dream beneath the skin. Cheek brushing against cheek and chin with the breath burning in their lungs, and fingers rustled with the fabric of a shirt. Tasting morning dew as if neither one of them had ever touched another before. Teresa clung to the fragments of song and echo of memory, and Armada shook

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free of her mother's remembrances of Delan before the flute had ever been made to run on through the dark. She would take even that memory from her mother if it meant that the Windmasters might stop and take notice of the world beyond their own blood soaked mountains once more.

Somewhere in the deep forest lost between here and there, she found Teresa waiting for her. They reached for each other, embracing as if they had been separated for more years than either one of them could ever remember. Letting the wind drain from them and the memory of Delan, father to one and lover to the other, seep out through their toes into the soft earth, they stood together, saying nothing and listening to the forest breathe all around them. They turned as one without a word or thought passing between them and began to run through the forest between half-light and shadow, noticing neither the day or the night. Greenhaven found them without having altered their pace until they were between its trees. They did not stop, shedding clothes as they made for the lake at the heart of the town. Diving into water that was far colder than ice, they swam, matching stroke for stroke until they reached the tree at the center of the lake. They climbed into branches that rose haphazardly from the water and were draped with gold and amber leaves, which made it look as if the sun was rising from the lake.

Watching each other, feeling the water slip from them as they rested among the branches of the tree, they listened for echoes of silver music, yielding memories of laughter. A sound made dark and muffled as if by a great distance by the all encompassing night. Windmasters, turning in the dark, were made visible through flashes and sparks of lightning that they hurled at each other. They ignored the dark as if it was not there or as if they did not use their eyes to see and only wanted to fill the sky with fire and lightning.

"Where is the Greater Darkness?" Tahrl had said while resting in the shadow of the Redstained cathedral, and Teresa, sitting with Armada in the tree at the center of Greenhaven, said nothing.

"The Windmasters fall upon each other not caring how it might end," Armada had said. "The darkness doesn't need to be here anymore."

"No, it doesn't. Lack of fuel. Enemies defeated. It feasts on the puddles- the whatever- of the Ivory Tower."

"Ivory Tower?"

"We had a visit from the magicians. Finally. They have all gath-

ered to the Ivory Tower. They hadn't even noticed us. It would seem that strange things are haunting the tower."

"The Ivory Tower?"

"Strange things roam the streets at night," he had said, "or so I was told. The magicians gather there. The mood is of a siege with no enemy that can be faced."

"This is most troubling," Teresa said.

"Pools of magic," Tahrl had said. "You said something of magic gathering in unknown pools. You were not even the first I have heard say such things. Master Latham was most fond of the theory. The Greater Darkness caused ripples causing the Greater Darkness or something like."

"Something like that," Armada had said.

"It doesn't follow. Monsters at the Earlinstien cathedral. Monsters in these mountains. Monsters at the Ivory Tower. All appearing more or less at the same time. The Earlinstien cathedral is gone; I understand that. Why are there none left in these mountains? The dragons must cause ripples. Why surrender the mountains? I know you said there's nothing to feed them. Does that mean the pools have dried-up? The dragons are throwing magic around as if there will never be another sunrise. Well? Isn't there runoff or whatever?"

Teresa said nothing, looking to the dark branches and golden leaves that were all around them. Armada had seen creatures ripped from midnight in the mountains before she had found the cathedral. Strange shapes born of twisted night and warped shadow like the creatures that had fallen upon Balthazar's home. The Windmasters had faced them, but it was impossible to tell if they had pulled the fragments of the Greater Darkness into the world or if the darkness had summoned the Windmasters. The battle had raged as if the Windmasters were resisting each other even with a common enemy, and when it appeared that the darkness had been defeated, the Windmasters had turned their wrath upon each other. Among the branches and dark leaves, Teresa could do nothing but watch in disgust and horror until the land where the Windmasters had raged was a ruin of scarred and bloody earth where nothing grew.

In the mountains, the Windmasters had listened to the music of Delan's flute. It had drawn them from their high peaks and homes, and they had spoken to the children of the DiKena for the first time in all the memory of the children since memory had drifted into leg-

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end. The Windmasters had traveled all the way to the Ivory Tower to speak with the Kianan king because Delan had asked them.

“Are you prepared to take up the brand, Armada?” Teresa said, breaking the silence like a teardrop striking the lake beneath their feet. “The flute will mark you forever. Such is the symbol of power you would take upon yourself.” In the forest, Teresa had found her with the smoldering ruin that had been Balthazar’s home more than a day behind her. The magician Sorcha had vanished. She had not seen Chrystal or Iola since they had last stood at the edge of the forest, and most of the Dryn who had followed her to the mansion were dead. Standing in the forest with Teresa reaching for her, she had still cradled her sister Rohana in her arms. “I would not lose another daughter.”

“It is my birthright.”



*The others arrived, trailing by a day and a night and a day, saying little and wondering what Armada had said for Teresa to surrender the fragments of the flute. The Dryn had known when she had finally taken-up the pouch that Hath Malor had given Teresa to carry the shards back to Greenhaven. They had felt the touch of Armada’s fingers upon the soft leather in that moment when both mother and daughter had been holding all that remained of Delan. Tahrl and Sorcha had known without quite understanding how they knew from watching Iola and the others. What she knew the others could not feel was the weight with which the pouch pulled at her as if the broken fragments of the flute were heavier than they had ever been while they had still been whole. To let the others rest from a journey that had begun on the other side of the mountains and to let her mother become comfortable with giving up the flute, Armada waited even though it was only for one day before they would return to the Redstained cathedral.*

That one evening while everyone rested before they would start the long trip back into the mountains, Armada found Tahrl and Iola looking to the horses. Listening as she searched for them, Armada had not heard Tahrl and Iola exchange more than an idle word or two as if speech was still a burden that weighed between them. He had a hand to his horse, brushing to the point that the horse wasn’t enjoying it anymore, and stopped when he saw her, holding his hand still. Iola did not bother to turn or look as she had felt Armada

approach, and they had both felt Tahr's heart quicken even if he did not notice himself. Knowing that she wanted to speak with him, Armada could feel Iola not wanting to move as if she might stand up to an aunt who was only ten years her senior as if she might look Armada in the eye and lay claim to Tahr. Armada stood her ground, saying nothing, and Iola let her breath slip from her, turning from Tahr without once having looked at Armada. He watched her leave, turning to follow her with the hand still resting on his horse as if he would fall should he let go.

"I know you would want to return to the Redstained cathedral," she finally said when Iola's step had drifted into the night.

"What?" Tahr's voice was more of a whisper of breath than a word, and then the hand came free of the horse. "Not you. You would deny me now? After everything I did to get this far!"

"You're not one of us. You're more important than that."

"How can you say that? I've earned this! The dragons lied to me! I will see this through!"

"Can't you see past that? There are Kianan in Greenhaven because of you. A Montmorin magician, too. The Windmasters sent Sorcha to protect you."

"This is insane! How dare you! Of all people! Everywhere I turn someone is telling me what I can and cannot do. After everything that has happened, you should have figured out I will not sit by and let this happen. Of all people! You!"

"There is a time when you must trust to others."

"That has nothing to do with anything! Why are you doing this? Why now? Why?"

She reached for him, saying nothing, feeling the breath rush like fire beneath his skin. Trying to hold herself still as Tahr pulled away from her, she put her arms around him, feeling his weight like a cold stone pressed against her heart.

"When was the last time we talked?" she said, feeling the words fall away from her in a single breath. "Really talked?"

"I don't know."

"Neither do I." She tried to laugh, sounding as next to tears, and tightened her grip, trying to find the warmth in his heart. "I miss you."

"I'm right here."

"No. No, you're not." Loosening her fingers, she pulled away from him, looking, hunting for his eyes. "Maybe you never were."

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“Do you? Do you ever wonder what if things were different? What if?”

“Don’t ask me that. What if?” She stepped back, letting her hands slide away from him, feeling her stomach turn cold and hard as a stone long forgotten in the ice and the snow. “Fire and blood, Tahrl, a day does not pass that I don’t ask myself that. What if. How can you know so much and understand so little!”

“I could ask the same of you.”

“We are both distortions then. Misfits. What if we were other than what we are? No. I may never have children.” The laugh exploded from her as if it would rip out her heart, scarring her forever with fire, and she placed a hand over her teeth as if she would stop the blood from gushing forth staining her clothes. “You? Iola would bear you many children if you would let her.”

“She threatened not to give me a choice.”

“There, you see? You should stay in Greenhaven. You and Iola. Let me do what I must knowing that you are safe.”

“Have you seen Highwall recently? Nowhere is safe!”

“Humor me.”

“No.”

“Do you have the faintest idea what I’m going to be attempting? What it means? These are not pieces of a puzzle to be fit back together. I am the glue. I am. I- Fuck me, Tahrl, you don’t understand.”

“I would do many things for you but not this. I will not sit by while things crumble all around me. I’m sorry.”

“No,” she said, pulling away, feeling nothing of Tahrl’s heart between her fingers. “No, you’re not.”



*The mountains called to her with the echoes of a melody that she had never heard before as if the wisps of song had been pulled from the depths of time to haunt her alone. Even to the heart of the forest, she could feel the traces of music reaching for her caressing her like a gentle breeze in the mist. Passing through the wood with each step of a horse’s hoof carrying her that much closer to the mountains, Armada could feel the music floating through her, sounding as no more than the distant rustle of the leaves in the trees. It was the wind brushing her into the sky even as the fragments of her father’s flute pulled at her with a weight she had never known and anchored her in the snow. Her arm was forever around the pouch that*

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was home to the shards of music, feeling the fire and counterpoint that echoed from its depths in harmony to the call of the cathedral.

Standing before her, Teresa had held the leather pouch out to her with dangling fingers as if the pouch had held all the memories of her lost love. With their fingers entwining with the strap, Armada had expected the weight of her father's memory. As her fingers had lifted the pouch from her mother's grip, the fragments and shards of silver had flared with a touch that burned her, and she had almost dropped the pieces of the flute. Teresa had looked to her with the burden of memory still appearing to weigh heavily behind her eyes. Her fingers had been free from scars and burns as if the fragments had not touched her or reverberated with traces of song and melody. The shards and splinters of the flute had seemed to have waited for one who had drawn the music from the silver metal before pulsing with the memory of what it had once been.

Through the long days in the forest leading back to the mountains, the cathedral called to her like the slow ache of a breath that had been held forever or the promise of a kiss from a long forgotten love. Armada felt the forest reach around her, listening to the faint traces of song as if every branch and leaf of every tree would lift her into the mountains. Snow in the hills revealed the half-hidden paths of Featherhare in winter as well as other traces of the still thriving dwellers of the mountains. It was as if the Windmasters had never stilled the sound and life of the mountains to quell the Greater Darkness and to hide the violence that the Winterbred had turned upon each other. If the others noticed the tracks in the mountains, they said nothing to her, watching Armada cautiously since she had taken the shards and fragments from her mother. They spoke little if at all as if the long journey that had begun in the ruin of Highwall had drained the voices from them.

Surrounded by clouds and snow and a sky that danced between sunlight and shadow, they returned to the Redstained cathedral, resting among the trees before the frozen lake where Tahrl and the others had found her with the one mountain before them reaching forever for the sky. The fragments of her father's flute were a cacophony of song and drum that beat against her heart and pulled at her as if there was no breath to be found at the foot of the cathedral. A swirl of melodies and patchwork music surrounded her as if they would find focus and be a whole work once more in the heart of the cathedral. The fire pulsed and burned beneath her skin and beneath

the stone and rock of the halls and chambers that rested before her. Standing with the horses, looking forever to the one mountain, she had a hand to her mount's side and an arm held tight to the pouch, and she realized that the magician Sorcha was standing at her side.

"Can you feel it?"

Sorcha said nothing, looking only to the mountain as if she did not need eyes to watch Armada, and she turned, leaving the quivering Dryn to the horses.

"We're too close to rest now," Sorcha said to the others.

They returned to the horses and rode slowly, crunching deep snow beneath hooves on the face of the cathedral. Looking over the slope of the mountain as if the entrance to the cathedral would present itself to them, Armada listened to the shreds and fragments of song and chant that resounded over the mountain and through her skin as if they might lead her to the door. Her horse stopped in its tracks, ignoring her touch, and Armada looked from the rock and snow to find Stormsdream resting before her as if the Windmaster had always been there and they had come seeking her. With one hand entangled in her horse's reins and the other held tight to the firebrand cloaked in leather that she held to her chest, she could do nothing but look to the Preserver of the Windmasters who had brought fire to Highwall.

"Do not do this, Armada."

Stormsdream's voice rumbled through her like the roar of a distant avalanche or a storm that could rip the branches from the trees and the roots from the earth. Her voice pushed at the rush of song and fragments of thunder that played in Armada's head, and she tried to pull herself past the ache and the call of the cathedral to find the Windmaster's words.

"What?" she managed to say through a voice that did not want to do other than sing.

"You can't even focus," Stormsdream said. "The song will consume you."

"No." Armada forced her breath out in a rush of fire that left her gasping for air, and she clung more tightly to the pouch so that the world would be still. "I know what I am doing."

"Do you? I felt you before the cathedral. Watched you there between the trees. When did you first think to mend the song?"

"While a guest of Hath Malor ap Earlinstien." Rising on her elbows while entangled in the covers and blankets of a bed in the

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Montmorin's home, she had demanded to see the fragments and shards that Teresa had held wrapped in the tattered remains of a dress. Even with Chrystal's arm around her, she had barely been able to sit with every part of her body shaking with the effort to face her mother. "I didn't know how to proceed." Straining to look with the room spinning and awash with dark shadows all around her, she had seen the fragments of her father's flute looking both dull and old in Teresa's hands. "Here. Searching for you. In the shadow of the cathedral, I knew it could be mended."

"If you had known how then? What would you have done?"

With the bitter shards of cold and smothering darkness, she had felt the world splinter and crack as her father's heart had been torn asunder. Standing on the cold stones of Highwall with the Dryn surrounding her, she had not cared if the flute was broken. Seeing the fragments pale and drained of all life and blood, she had struggled for snippets and echoes of song that her father had made.

"Continue his legacy," she whispered, feeling Stormsdream looking down at her with the shifting and swirling pieces of the Red-stained cathedral's song dancing all around her.

"What would she have done?" Tahrl said. "She would have mended the song of the earthsheart. You would have stood together instead of all of this."

"No," Stormsdream said.

"Because you do nothing! You force us through despair and into the land beyond. What would we do? We would have you speak, and you are here."

"Even a child will get her parents attention by putting her own tree to the torch."

"You're the one who left the hearth fire unattended," Armada said. "Why?"

"This fire burns cold until it has already scarred you. The torch that would take the forest in flames is nothing other than your own hand."

"This fire has already consumed me. I am a blade lifted from the flames."

"Who shall shape you?"

"Would the others stand with us if we did not do this?" Tahrl said.

Stormsdream said nothing as if her voice had been drained from

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the sky and she could do nothing but search for words in the fragments of song echoing from out of the cathedral.

“Why do you do nothing?” Armada said. “Is it easier to kill each other than to oppose the dark?”

“The Greater Darkness cannot be defeated,” Stormsdream said. “We remember that from before.”

“Not defeated. Only survived? It can be driven back. Stopped.”

“No. Standing against the darkness only draws its attention.”

“Then why are we here? How are we here? Did the Greater Darkness win so long ago?”

“Yes.”

The world was quiet as the echo of Stormsdream’s voice faded from Armada’s ear, and in that moment, the cathedral did not sing to her. The pieces of her father’s flute did not burn her skin, and the leather pouch seemed almost as cold as the snow of the mountains beneath her touch.

“How can you say that?” she whispered.

“The DiKena are gone. Splintered shards and broken fragments are all that remain.”

“You are the Greater Darkness,” Sorcha said.

Stormsdream laughed with a roar to shatter the world and cause the avalanche to rain snow from the far mountains. Armada lifted her hands slowly from her ears with the roar still burning as bright as a forest fire in her mind. Near to her side, the magician Sorcha had fallen to her knees, and Armada turned, reaching for the magician and helping her to her feet.

“The DiKena made you,” Sorcha said to a Windmaster who appeared as unmovable as the mountains that surrounded them. “Sustained you with their blood. You squandered them. Realizing almost too late that in destroying them you destroyed you. Guardians of the children of the DiKena? You seek only to protect the scraps that remain. That feed you.”

Stormsdream was in her face, and the rush of the Windmaster’s breath almost knocked Sorcha to the ground. Her horse was frozen to the spot; unable to move beneath the Windmaster’s gaze.

“Never say that again,” Stormsdream said. Around her, the world was still as if all had been locked in stone by the weight of her gaze, and they would never know what it was to be warm again.

“We know nothing other than what you tell us,” Armada said, teetering on the edge of Stormsdream’s eye, trying not to fall.

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“Convince me it is not true,” Sorcha said. “You told me you stood with Cloudbreaker against the dark. Why then do you stand against us?”

“You know not what you do.” The eyes turned to Armada alone with the many layers and folds slowly rotating into focus upon her. “She is not ready. The door would be open with none to guard it.”

“I am my father’s daughter. I have tasted the music when the flute was once whole. I listen to the fragments and know how to bind them.”

“Within the cathedral are the last of those who wished the flute had never been forged. How will you bind the music to your will while those within seek to stop you?”

“Would you strike me down as you did Sundancer?”

Stormsdream fell back into herself as if she had been marked with fire, and Armada breathed with the wind, taking it into her lungs. Stretching, she felt the cathedral beneath her toes and felt the faint echo and drift of music that haunted the chambers and halls. From the dark and empty caverns, she took fragments of song and slivers of a Windmaster’s breath, wrapping them like thread between her fingers. Into the pouch, she drew forth a piece of her father’s flute so that Stormsdream might see it glitter and shine beneath the sun.

“The song of the earthsheart is not broken,” she said to the Windmaster standing before her. “Merely interrupted.” Stormsdream shied away from her as if she held the immortal heart of a star plucked from the night dark sky between her fingers. “You want to believe.”

Stormsdream sniffed at the air as if the fragment of dreams she held in her hand carried a scent that only one as ancient and timeless as a Windmaster could smell.

“Only you,” Stormsdream said, and Armada could almost laugh as she returned the shard to the pouch.

“No.”

She turned, seeing Tahrl with Iola keeping a hand to his shoulder. Trying to shrug the touch from him, he took half a step in the snow, looking to her and the pouch she held at her side. His senses were blunted, being a mere shadow of sight and taste and smell, and he could not hear the music as it drifted through the ground all around them. Beneath the earth, he would be worse than blind and deaf and dumb. Remembering the touch of his hand against the

horse that last night in Greenhaven, Armada knew there were no words to open his ear and no voice to bring sight to his eye.

“Show me,” she said, turning back to the Preserver, and Stormsdream lead her to doors of stone untouched by snow that were taller than any Windmaster.

Before the entrance to the Redstained cathedral, Stormsdream did nothing but turn and look to her as if she would remain standing before the gateway forever. Standing before them, Armada imagined the doors of the Earlinstien cathedral must have looked the same with their silk and crystal dreams of fire, storm and wind at play among the stars. She raised a hand to touch without touching, stretching fingertips so that they might almost grace the door, and the traces of ancient song and forgotten melody could be felt just beyond the shaped stone.

“I am home.”

With the breath of a sigh that had been held since before the beginning of time, the doors slipped away, yielding light and distant shadows to swirl around her and vanish into the twilight sky. With the passage of but one step, she crossed from the heart of winter and into spring, finding herself within a hall that could contain every stone of Highwall. The spires and walls were crystal and stone, silver and gold, and the air was musty with light as if a million fireflies too small to ever be seen surrounded her. There was no sound or creak or groan as the doors came together, but she knew if she turned and looked that she would not see the others watching her from before the gateway. She pushed farther into the hall, tasting sweet willow and rosebuds on the warm breeze, and listened to the faded echoes of a thousand jumbled songs as they drifted around her. Breathing out, she filled the hall, touching every corner and every wall, and embracing every exit and every entrance somewhere else. She brushed against shapes in the far halls and passageways cowering against the cold stone. Scarred by Windmaster claw and Winterbred flame and prisoners within the farthest halls of the cathedral, the last of Sundancer’s children could not rise against the cloak of song and melody that she wore around her shoulders. Following the thread of one song among all the others that she had woven into her hair, she passed farther into the cathedral, traveling from halls of stone laced with gold to chambers draped with iron thread billowing like spider’s silk, and found one room at the very

heart and root of the cathedral where the music flowed as free as star shine.

Clutching the pouch to her chest, feeling the shards of music swirl and the fire burn, she touched the stone, tasting the light flow like warm maple. The light bubbled and boiled from out of the rock with a fire that almost burned the skin from her bones. The wind roared past her as if the death of all storms was chasing it, and she could not find her breath among fire and ice and storm. The dream of every song that had never been sung and every story that had never been told roared around and through her as if they would shatter her bones. A hand raised to her throat found the necklace that Sorcha's cousin Elanor had given to her so long ago. She shaped the light as it flowed from the earth to swirl and bubble in a great cauldron of stone before her. One turn of her wrist and the clasps snapped free of her neck. Another turn and the necklace of earth-heart stones was claimed by the river of fire. The wind shrieked and roared, pushing at every crevice and far passage of the hall, and the songs and stories ripped at her, clawing at the leather thread that sealed the pouch.

Raising her arm, feeling the wind swirl around her, she lifted the strap from her shoulder and held the pouch before the fire. With the flick of her fingers, she loosed the pouch that had been given to her mother by Hath Malor, sacrificing all that remained of her father to the heart of the Redstained cathedral. In a swirl of burning light, the wind ripped at the air, tearing at the dark and the light, and Armada clung to the fragments of music, feeling them slip between her fingers. Pulling at the threads and fragments, she gathered the songs above the cauldron of boiling light, stretching and working them with bloody fingers. At the heart of the fire and swirling light, she began to feel a shape take root and form. A rod of light and lightning and of fire and wind and storm could be felt within the river of flames.

“Stop!”

Blinking past tears, she found the great hall at the very heart of the cathedral was no longer hers alone for gathered all around her were some half-dozen Winterbred and children to the Preserver Sundancer.

“You would surrender us all to chaos and destruction!”

“I would end the madness!” Armada said with a voice that had been burned by fire and storm.

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“The door you open you cannot close!”

“I would rip that door from its hinges!”

“No!”

They fell upon her, and she pushed them back with fire and the whirlwind, scattering them to the far corners of the hall. Reaching for the flute, she felt the half-formed shape slip between her fingers. Darkness pierced the hall like the blade of a sword, and where the shadow fell, midnight creatures of stone and forest and twisted nightmare grew. The Windmasters screamed as the shades and shadows turned upon them. They lashed out, filling the hall with brilliant fire and lightning to mix with smoke and darkness.

Armada crawled to the edge of the cauldron, feeling the stone grow slick beneath her touch while all around her was chaos and despair. The world was a swirling cacophony of flickering darkness and trembling light even as she looked into the depths of the river of fire. She could feel the fabric of song and lightning and fire and storm that she had gathered slowly unravel while all around her was nightmare and death. With a scream that would scar her soul forever, she stretched a hand into the river of fire, fumbling for the stone she had created. Brushing against a slender form, feeling it take shape even as she wrapped her fingers around it, she clung to the branch of earthsheart stone, binding the assembled songs and melodies to it, and wrapped them around the rod like a cloth.

She swung her arm in a great arc, pulling the flute free of the river of fire, feeling it burn into her skin. Even as she crawled to her feet, she could see nothing but swirling shadows and darkness and faint traces of light like lightning. The dark was as cold as ancient stone that had been shattered by a long dead tree. The only light was the glow of the flute, shining like a newborn star as she held it above her head while shadow, storm, and darkness swirled all around her.

## *Chapter Eleven*

# **The Power That Heals**

*There was no morning only the continuation of the night as if the sun had set for the last time and there would never be another sunrise. The sky was dark and void of any trace of star or moon or cloud as if a sheet of darkness beyond the blackest night had been wrapped around the world. The wind as it drifted around Tahrl was as cold as ice and snow. He had watched the stone entrance to the Redstained cathedral for all the long night, feeling the passage into day the way any that had lived with the Montmorin beneath their mountains can measure dark from light without ever once stepping outside. Looking to the sky, knowing there should be morning light, he found nothing as if he had blinked his eyes and the night with all of its stars had been taken away. It was as if the spirits that had danced and burned through the night had been drained from the sky and perhaps buried on top of Armada in the deepest reaches of the cathedral crushing her with their weight and burning her with the fire of their light. He could not breath, having lost all air to the cold of the wind, tasting it burn from within the heart of his chest. Stormsdream was there before the entrance to the cathedral as if she had not moved from the moment the doors had blocked her view of Armada standing within the first hall. With the absence of sun or moon or stars, Tahrl noticed that she was shimmering gently with a soft and silver light as if placed in the sky she would look to be a faint and distant star. He could not tell or guess if she had always had such a glow or if she were echoing in sympathy to the dark expanse above them. He looked beyond her, noticing the faint shimmer and spark of other Windmasters that had gathered to the door of the cathedral, and then he realized that they were all before him. Every last Windmaster who still walked and breathed the air of the Redstained mountains was before the cathedral, having gathered slowly in groups and clusters until they were all there. He*

looked to Stormsdream, trying to speak and finding only the frozen wind to burn his throat as he attempted to breathe.

“So it ends,” she said with a voice that felt as next to the touch of fate turning a page in his soul.

Beyond the edge and echo of her words there was an empty stillness to the world as if it could never again be touched by sound until after the fall of time. Into that moment, Tahrl could feel the shift of the breeze as if someone had brushed a feather across the edge of the wind. The others were gathering all around him; Windmasters and Dryn and Sorcha of the Montmorin were at his side. As faint and elusive as the morning’s light, Tahrl could feel far more than he heard the traces of a melody from the rock and from the stone and whispered on the breeze. The entrance to the cathedral was split by a light to rival the sun as the doors began to open, and Tahrl was caught in the embrace of a song as it flowed from within that gate. In the passage of an instant, the air that he had been tasting and that had been flavored by the heart of snow and ice was washed away in a river of song and melody that warmed Tahrl and all those gathered about the door to the heart of their bones. Armada stepped from the depths of the cathedral, crunching snow with each step, and she held the flute to her lips, gracing the dark with a song filled with the morning. From every side, Tahrl felt the Windmasters breathe with a gentle sigh as if they had not touched the air from the moment Armada had first entered the cathedral. Tahrl watched her as she stood before Stormsdream lost to the music that flowed from between her fingers while the flute shimmered gold and yellow and orange as the sun. The entrance to the cathedral began to slide closed without the slightest trace of sound as if it was nothing more than the binding of a book while she continued to play, and the song slowly drifted to a close. She stood before Stormsdream a moment longer while still holding the flute to her lips as if once it was silenced it would never sing as sweetly ever again, and she listened to the echoes of the song drift into the darkness.

“Can you feel it?” she said, holding her gaze to Stormsdream while all around her the assembled Windmasters kept their heads down and their eyes to the snow at her feet. “The door is open; and the Ivory Tower calls. We must answer. You.” Turning the flute like an amber stick, she pointed to Moonlight who had found a spot near to Stormsdream. “We shall need all the host of Highwall before this is finished. Hector will listen to you. Bring them.”

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The flute like a blade forged of gold cut through the dark, and Moonlight was away, drawing her wings through the air and flowing to a dot like a solitary star against the empty sky. Turning back to Armada, Tahrl watched how she held the flute and how quickly it drew Stormsdream's eye.

"Do you understand?" she asked of Stormsdream, holding the flute to her chin as she spoke. "Do you?"

"Yes," the Windmaster said in a slow reply that was little more than the turn of the breeze in the high mountains, and she was joined in her answer by Skysailor and Snowswhisker and Mossflower and Whisperswind.

Armada turned from the Windmasters, walking slowly for where Tahrl and Iola, Chrystal, and Sorcha stood watching her. The flute was held to her chest as if it glowed with a warmth that made the snow beneath her feet nothing more than an old memory, and the Windmasters followed her with bowed heads and downcast eyes. Chrystal stepped from among the others, standing before Armada and reaching for her without quite touching as if the flute would shock or burn. Any words that passed between them were for the two of them alone as they leaned their heads together all but resting cheek to cheek with the flute suspended between them. As if they had been lost to the moment, they seemed to notice for the first time the Windmasters and Kianan, Montmorin and Dryn who stood around and behind them. Turning, stepping toward the others with Chrystal at her side, Armada looked to Tahrl, holding the flute tight with her hands and slowly turning it beneath her fingers.

"It would seem that all things have their price," she said, turning an eye to the dark and sunless sky. "The Windmasters no longer fight among themselves. I have their complete and undivided attention. The problem is that I have also focused the darkness, which had been as divided and lost as the Windmasters."

"The cathedral?"

"No, the cathedral is too small and inconsequential. It is mine." She looked past him to the mountains and the darkness to the south. "Where is the Ivory Tower?"

He turned with the air burning and ripping at his skin and with a question suddenly lost on his lips. Even from the heart of the mountains, the Ivory Tower could be seen as a silver thread reaching forever for the sky. Standing any closer and the tower was a spire of stone, crystal, and white iron that dominated the city surrounding

it and stretched farther than the eye could follow into the sky. Looking to the horizon, he could see nothing of sun, moon or stars, and there was no trace of a thread to reflect the light of the day or night. He glanced back to Armada, trying to find his voice, and noticed Iola, Sorcha, and the others searching the distance as if they were looking for where the tower had fallen to the ground.

“The Greater Darkness has claimed it,” Armada said. “Unfocused. Disorientated. The dark had reached for the tower, feeling it slip through its grasp. Now? The darkness has its focus. The way is clear, and shades and shadows pour into our world.”

Choking on a thought before it burned away at his mind, Tahrl turned to the sky, looking for shapes and shadows with great wings like the Windmasters only forged of the dark and empty air.

“Because of the flute?” he said. “Where is the morning! Shall it be night forever more?”

“No,” Stormsdream said with her voice rumbling all around him and seeping into his skin. “Listen; do you not hear it?”

“He is not a Windmaster,” Armada said.

“Nor are you,” Tahrl said.

She looked as though she might try to smile and held the flute as if to show it to him while still clutching it close to her heart.

“I don’t know how to explain,” she said. “Give me a thousand years. Ask again. I would still not be able to put it into words.”

“It’s the gentle magic,” Iola said, and Tahrl whispered the name to himself even as she gave voice to it. “The song of the earthsheart, isn’t it? The voice in the wilderness. A flame without a candle. The power that heals but cannot be taught. Armada, you’ve touched the heart of the Windmasters.”

“Such whimsical and foolish words. You know not what you say, and we do not have a thousand years. We must fly to the Ivory Tower.”

“What?”

“Yes,” a whisper from the Windmasters.

Armada spun about, looking to Stormsdream, pointing the flute at her.

“Do you remember who you are?” she said to the Preserver of the Windmasters. “It is not enough to end this. There must be a morning and spring must grow from the heart of winter.”

Stormsdream was a statue carved from snow as if any turn or gust of wind would shatter her and carry the pieces to the far ends

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of the earth. Tahrl watched how the Windmaster followed the tip of the flute with her eyes as if should Armada twist the flute one way Stormsdream would follow and turned the other she would continue to follow it. By the faint glow of her own form and the burnt orange light of the flute, the shadow of the Windmaster seemed almost to smother Stormsdream as if the only answer to the casting of shadows that she wanted was to douse her own light. Tahrl shivered with the cold as if someone had traced the tip of an icicle down his back, and he looked to the Windmasters, finding them all locked to the flute as if they had bound their hopes and dreams in the young metal and as if they would do anything Armada might ask without question.

“How?” he whispered; surprised at hearing his own voice. “With your father’s symbol? How do we stop the Greater Darkness?”

“If we stand against the dark, it will stand against us,” Armada said. “We must do other than simply try to deny it.”

“Is this a secret? Why have you waited till now?”

“It is not a secret,” she said, holding the edge of the flute to her lips as if it contained all the wisdom of the world. “Some of it is in the lesson of the DiKena. Some is all around us. The rest? I learned in the cathedral as the last of Sundancer’s children died.”

“The DiKena destroyed themselves. The.” He fell silent, feeling the bite of frozen air burn at the roof of his mouth, and he turned, taking in the dark sky where the sun should have held sway, and watching the Windmasters shimmering as if they were the stars that had fallen from the sky. “Racing. Searching here and looking there. Striving for answers. Waiting; that one is worst. You disappear. Now, you have answers?”

“Yes.”

“Just like that? When were you going to tell us?”

“Not just like that,” she said, holding the flute close to her face, brushing it against her chin. “Searching. Striving. Even waiting, have you not been thinking on all that you know?”

“My world has been full of the movements of troglodytes as they fought against their bonds. Did you know that should we ever drive the troks from the mountains that the Windmasters would starve?”

“No,” she said, looking to Stormsdream as if expecting reason or denial. “I had not considered it.”

“It is as much about rebellion as it is about terror and despair.”

“The Greater Darkness is a force of chaos and destruction,”

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Stormsdream said, drawing Tahrl's attention as if a crack had opened in the sky to let through shards of the sun. "It acts without reason, caring nothing for life or death."

"It feeds upon hopes and dreams and fears," Armada said. "But it does not mirror or reflect them. The question we have not asked is whose fears?"

Tahrl looked to the great dragon before them, as if expecting her to answer while all around them was night for day and midnight snow. She stood as if the words would simply flow off of her like water leaving no mark or stain on her wing.

"All of this from the flute?" Tahrl said.

"The flute is how Delan bound his power," Armada said. "Not all at once. In dreams and fragments of melody as the years wandered past. Answer to his denial. I do not think he truly understood what he had done."

"Wait- Delan- the?" Sorcha said and then was silent as if words were as rare and precious as the stars that had vanished from the morning sky. She took a ragged breath, searching for words in the dark as if the ice and cold of the wind burned at her lungs. "Avatar."

"Yes, he was the Avatar of Magincia. What the Windmasters would name him, too," Armada said. "With the guidance of Kianan wizards, he learned how to shape the world to his very thoughts. He became DiKena."

"The legends."

"He thought nothing of legends. Did not even realize that he was DiKena. Knowing only that the world was being reshaped at his slightest thought. He cast it out. Binding his power so that he could never hurt another. Or create monsters. The flute? He did not take it up for more than a hundred years after he had parted with the wizards of Magincia. I never heard him speak of why he made the flute. It was never intended as a token of power. It simply became that with the years."

"The gentle magic," Stormsdream said; her voice was the soft rumble and faded echo of thunder among the far mountains. "In setting aside ritual and knowledge, he became attuned to that which cannot be understood. That which is. The power that heals and cannot be taught."

"My birthright."

"Memories are short," Tahrl said. "Would you bind the world to your will?"

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Armada looked to him as if pigs, ducks, and chickens had just exploded out of his mouth only to die in the cold and the snow, and she held the flute to her chest as if it was the only light and fire to be found in all of the world.

“That is the path of the harsh magic,” she said. “The trails of magicians and wizards. The gentle magic; it’s like waking one morning and realizing that you no longer need to breathe to breathe.”

“The power that heals?” He looked to the void of the sky as if at any moment the veil would shatter and the world would be smothered in shards and fragments of darkness. Feeling the breath flow beneath his chest, he choked on an explosion of laughter, gagging fire, and felt his eyes burn with the touch of ice. “Did the Ivory Tower need to fall for you to realize this?”

“What is the Greater Darkness, Tahrl? That which is left over from the Age of Chaos? The manifestation of unrecognized fear, pain, and shame? It is that which is denied made manifest in dark form and twisted nightmare. We do not understand it because we do not understand ourselves.”

“Yet we must stand against it.”

“Because we do not understand. In denying the darkness, we only hurt ourselves. We must embrace it.”

“You’re mad.”

“It is nothing other than what we are.”

“Manifestations of nightmare and dread?” Stormsdream said with a voice that was as void and empty as the spaces between the stars. “The DiKena were fractured and broken. Could no longer feed the darkness’ hunger. Shades and shadows have only waited, slumbering for the feast to grow. You would embrace such as this?”

“We stand against a forest fire by wielding a brand of our own,” Armada said. “What seems greatest in the hour past moon-fall and before sunrise? We must see through the dark night.”

“We are the morning and the last flicker of twilight. It is mid-night. Do not forget day from night.”

“What is the past other than what we remember it to be? We remember the DiKena fell. We remember the dark. Must we forget the light? It hurts does it not?” She held the flute loosely between her fingers as if she would touch it to her lips and surround Stormsdream with the scent of music as if answers would flow through her upraised hands to sprinkle moonlight throughout the dark. “It rips

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at your soul that you could not protect the DiKena. Perchance it was necessary.”

“Necessary!”

Towering over them with her fingers extended and the folds of her wings spread wide to the sky, Stormsdream moved as if she would strike Armada with a motion that would be a blur to the eye. She held still while the echo of her shout faded from the world but would never drift from Tahlr’s heart or mind. The roar had struck like a wall of fire that he did not know how he had survived and that had dropped him to the snow. All around him the dragons moaned with a sound that made his heart want to burst. Looking, he found Armada with her eyes locked to Stormsdream while lowering herself to one knee and brushing the surface of the snow with her fingers to search for the flute.

“We could not save them,” Stormsdream said with words that could push Armada into the ground if the dragon should so choose. “Their blood is on our souls. All that we are. All that we could ever be. We betrayed them.”

“It burns,” Armada said, rising to her feet with the flute once more in her hands. “Wondering. If you still have a heart. Or a soul.”

“How could it have been necessary?”

“What would have happened if you had saved them? How could you have saved them? Shadows from out of the dark places in the soul. The DiKena were the monsters. The darkness and the light.”

Tahlr could not stand, watching Stormsdream, watching the guardians of the DiKena, and he felt the tears frozen on his face and burning his eyes. He looked, finding Chrystal and Sorcha and Iola bowed to the snow like himself as if none of them could stand beneath the burden of the shadow and the light. Looking back to Stormsdream, he wondered not for the first time how the Windmasters had been created. Born at the heart of a cathedral with the DiKena who had forged them standing there to instruct them as to what they were and what they must do. They could have drifted out of the wind, knowing all that they would ever need for having been shaped from the hopes and desires of the DiKena much as the monstrous shards of nightmare were also created. Existing to protect the DiKena, they did not fade back into the nothing when those who had made them died.

“Not one,” Armada said, “and not the other. They were the morning and the hour past midnight. In creating monsters, they

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destroyed themselves. In creating you, they sundered the world. Split the darkness from the light. The DiKena were gone before you opened your eyes for the very first time. They just didn't know it yet and neither did you."

The dragon folded in upon herself, drawing her wings together and fading to the earth and the snow.

"All that we are," Stormsdream said with a voice that was nothing more than a whisper of words to float above the surface of the mountain.

"Listen," Armada said, pointing with the flute. "Not with my ears. Lose yourself in the song."

"For so long," Stormsdream finally said with words that drifted out of the darkness like the brush of a moth's wing. "What could we do? Save you? Wait for what had been sundered and undone to be made whole once more?"

"Even if it meant the return of the Age of Chaos?"

"The future is not something we could know. Blinded by history, many believed that the past and the future were one." Turning her face to the sky, Stormsdream seemed to search the vast dark for a glimpse of sun or moon or stars. "We were all blind."

"Beware the words that a Windmaster might speak for they are a fire that burns. Don't let your own flame consume you. Devouring all that you are. Close your eyes," Armada said. "I know you can feel it. Listen to the song made whole."

She grew silent, raising the flute slowly to her lips as if she would give voice to the music of her heart. Tahrl listened, climbing to his feet in the silence of the dark, and he thought that he heard the briefest of melodies carried by the silver voice of a flute as faint and faded as the music Armada had played before the cathedral had opened. The brush of silver music faded from his ears as if Armada had simply breathed across the flute rather than play it or as if the melody had been nothing more than the trick of memory's ear. They stood before him, seeming to be enraptured by the turn of a song that only they could hear. He felt the cold pull at him as he tried to hear music that he imagined flowing all around him like the warm and gentle current of a forgotten breeze. With the cold and the wind burning at his heart, he felt as one who has never known food listening to those standing before him try to explain that honey tasted like honey.

"No," Armada whispered as if in answer to an unspoken question

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from Stormsdream. “Too soon. I want my grandchildren to see the sunrise. We must away to the Ivory Tower.” She turned, letting her eyes drift over Stormsdream, and looked to those standing around her as if they had all been hidden by the dark. Raising a hand toward Chrystal as if she needed to steady herself, she looked past them as if she could not focus her eyes, and her gaze slipped off of them. Chrystal touched her hand, and they became as two trees supporting each other with branches and leaves intermingling until you could not tell one from the other. “Break camp.”

“What?”

“I know; it is a lot to take in. So much that I do not-” She held the flute to her chest. “So much to understand. I must breathe. The Ivory Tower calls to me. We must go.”

Tahrl watched the others turn, making for the horses and the tents, working quickly in spite of the cold and the dark as if they must race to find the forgotten morning. Armada had not moved, clutching the flute as if she did not know another way of touching it, and she seemed to notice Tahrl standing so close yet so far away.

“So it ends,” she whispered.

He pulled the wind from his lungs, searching for words among the far places in his heart.

“This is not what I expected,” he finally said.

“Nor I. Faith carries me like a feather in a storm.” She was silent for a moment, watching the others work as if to help them would only be to get underfoot. “I am sorry I was never more than what I am.”

Tahrl felt as if the land might fling him from his feet, pushing him into the snow. Her eyes did not stray from the others as they worked, and Tahrl felt the cold even through all the layers he pulled close to his skin while Armada stood unaffected even without the simplest of cloaks to ward off the chill.

“I do not know when I might chance to say such things again. We ride into fire and darkness.”

“Don’t,” he managed to say and then words failed him, fleeing like leaves before a winter storm.

“Do not think unkindly of me whatever the future might bring.”

“Never.”

“That one would love you if you gave her the chance; enough, I see all is made ready,” she whispered as the others brought the horses forward. “I must temper the fire once more.” She turned

back to face Stormsdream, raising the flute, sweeping it in a wide arc to take in all the assembled dragons. “Now is the winter upon us. We must see to the morning and make ready for spring.” Glowing like stars that had fallen from the dark blind sky to lodge in the earth, the dragons followed her every word as they would listen to secrets whispered to the end of time. “Our fathers and grandmothers have fallen, passing into dust. Could we not save them? We remember. We need not pass with them. Did they surrender to the night? Did they not create us? Ensuring our survival, did they not save themselves? Would we shame them? Do we think so little of our own children? They died so we might live. If we do not live, they died in vain. Unworthy sacrifice. Ungrateful children that we are. We must stand. Not to end time. But to begin it. We fly into darkness and despair. Not to surrender and not to resist; though, we must fight before this night is done. We must overcome our own fear and pain before we can accept it or else it will consume us. Remembering that it is our dark. Remembering we are its light.” She raised the flute like a banner for all to see, and it glowed with a fire of amber and gold to rival the absent stars. For the briefest of moments through the shadows and the stillness and the dark, Tahlr thought that he could see the sun. “We fly! We stand! Away to me, all of you!”

The dragons rose as one with seventy pairs of wings spread to the sky and then brought down. Leaping, they flowed into the air like a cloud rising for the dark void of the sky as if they were fallen stars returning at last to their homes far above. Tahlr could do nothing but watch the shimmering glow of their flight as the breath of their wings swirled and brushed all around him. They filled the sky, turning and spiraling in their climb to outdistance the reach of the mountains that surrounded them. As if the wind had brushed against them, they began to turn for the south and for where the Ivory Tower had always graced the horizon like a silver thread stretched forever into the sky.

“Now, it is our turn,” Armada said, drawing him from the silk of a dragon’s wing, and Tahlr looked from her to the others. They stood with the last stages of the folding of the camp lost in their hands while their hearts were flowing with the graceful sweep of the dragons far overhead. “We must away,” she said, turning for where Chrystal and Sorcha stood with the horses, and her words finally seemed to snap the others out of the sky.

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She looked to the flute that she still held in her hands as if noticing the naked metal for the first time and as if she might have need to carry it in such a way that would leave her free to grip the reins of a horse. She looked about herself as if she might rip the cloth from her shoulder to wrap the flute and looked to the others as if they might know something among all the parts of the camp that would make a proper sling for it. Finding nothing, she swept her free hand through the air, gripping the wind with her fingers, and pulled a wrap and leather sling for the flute out of the sky trailing fire and stardust.

“Armada!” Tahrl said, watching the sparks and shimmering motes of light settle and disappear in the snow.

“What?”

“What?” He tried to laugh, searching for his voice, searching for traces of gold and fire on the mountains and valleys of the snow. She seemed to follow his eyes and found the silk and leather wrap for the flute in her hand.

“Really, Tahrl, you do have so very much to learn,” she said and began to wrap the flute as if she had simply taken the cover from among her belongings and not weaved it from the wind like shards and shadows of monsters.

He moved slowly even as he watched her turn and reach for the horses with the flute slung over her shoulder and secure to her back. From the darkness beyond time and the frozen wind, monsters and shards of nightmare waited for one who could shape the world between finger and thumb. He looked, finding nothing, but he imagined eyes that only waited for Armada to grow thirsty or summon a cloak from places where none had ever existed before.

“Tahrl.”

The world jumped, and he shivered with the cold of it as it burned into his skin. With eyes that stung of wind and ice, he looked to the one who had emerged from the Redstained cathedral wearing Armada’s skin and riding her horse. Revealing nothing of fire and darkness, she watched him with eyes that reflected only the softwood that flourished in the deep mountains where they had once believed that nothing could grow. When the time had demanded it, he had seen both fire and lightning flow from her fingers to consume troglodytes leaving her exhausted. He had seen her glow with a warmth that could close wounds and knit bone, and she could move things from across the room even drawing them into her hands. Objects

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might appear that had been carefully hidden in another room, but the wrap that bound the flute had not existed before she had held it in her hand.

Reaching his horse, he was the last to be ready to leave the cathedral behind them. Armada looked to each rider in turn and then began to follow the flight of dragons that would always be visible far overhead. They could not ride fast or hard for the light of the dragons as they flowed through the sky was only as great as a star filled night. Even with torches held in the riders' hands, the snow was still dark and gray with shadows to trap a hastily placed hoof and throw a rider. Looking to the sky, the dragons were a river of stars that stretched to the horizon, and he could only notice how there always seemed to be enough overhead to light their way even though one of them could fly much faster than a horse could cross snow in the mountains. To the south where the land touched the sky, he looked, following the river of light to where the Ivory Tower had always stood.

It could not have toppled from the sky; they would have heard a crash to silence thunder as it struck the ground. The ruin of white and silver stone would stretch halfway across the world; there would have been no place to escape from the sound of it. The Ivory Tower was the end of the Age of Chaos and the monument to the sundering of the DiKena's soul; or so the legends told. They had smashed it into the earth like a spear thrust through a raging beast to pin it to the land and like a lightning rod to draw both magic and chaos out of the world. Legends were passed from mother to child and from father to son when the boy had grown older, and Tahrl had heard the stories all over again, sitting at Hath Malor's table while the fire raged and the people roared. With Hath's voice swirling echoes between his ears, he had needed nothing more than to finally view the Ivory Tower to know that all legends were true. Having stood at the very foot of the tower, he had known that the ages of darkness and chaos that had consumed the DiKena could never return.

He never saw the ruins of Edgewood or stood by the one road through town after the dark had claimed it. He had only to remember Chetwin's eyes to imagine the forest trolls leaching out of the wood like obsidian trees. They would have sunk roots into walls and doors while the people slept, and that thing of shadow and dark nightmare had ripped itself out of the wood to consume the town. Finding walls cracked and ceilings tumbling, the people would have

been pulled, screaming from sleep only to die in a forest troll's embrace with branches and leaves wrapping tight around throats and roots burrowing beneath fragile skin. Things of burnt wood and dried blood would have peeled themselves from the surface of the Ivory Tower like shapes of mud and red clay slowly dripping from the face of a cliff. They would have pulled, cracking, splintering the stones of the castle until the wall crumbled beneath its own weight. Guards and soldiers would have come running and never understood the shards of dark nightmare that they faced. Magicians would have gone numb, clutching fingers to their foreheads, digging fingernails into skin yielding blood. Monstrosities of form and chaos would have grown out of the plains beyond the city, attacking homes of wood and stone. The screams of despair and dark ruin would have spread from the outskirts of the city where the streets were still gravel and dirt, and the cries would have radiated out from the Ivory Tower, suffocating the great homes and mansions that were between them. His parents would have looked much as Chetwin must have looked as dark and blood thin creatures devoured the city around them. Soldiers would have called to each other, wielding torches, looking as dancing sparks of flame in the dark, and his parents, clutching to each other, would have seen the motes drowned beneath a flood of shadow and bitter night.

The Ivory Tower had become nothing more than a pillar of mid-night that had fallen from the light, casting the whole of the world into shadow, and Armada had known what had happened even before she had stepped from the door of the Redstained cathedral. She had to have felt the Ivory Tower fall as it happened. It was almost as if she had known that the Greater Darkness would take it even before she had entered the cathedral to forge a new flute.

The others had stopped; Tahrl looked up from the back of his horse to find a sky that was streaked with blood, fire, and gold. It was the glow of twilight and of a sunset without a sun or ocean blue sky. He looked to the horizon beyond the mountains where the sun would rest for a sunset and found nothing of a sphere of light in the sky. There were only the colors of twilight as if the painter had simply forgotten in his haste that there should also be a disk of yellow and orange to represent the sun. The stars began to fall, and he realized that the dragons had begun to settle to the mountainside all around them and that they must have begun to touch the ground even before the others had stopped their horses.

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“Camp,” Armada said. “We shall start early tomorrow.”

The sky was laced with ribbons of crimson and burnt gold shadow as if reflecting a lake of blood from somewhere beyond the horizon. There was no sun, no moon or stars; there was only the void of the sky filled with the memory of sunsets. He turned with a snap of his head that pulled him from the sky. Armada was next to him. He pulled wind through lungs that burned with ice and smoke.

“Who are you?” he whispered

Armada closed her eyes, turning her face to the sunset lacking only the sun as if she did not need such things to see. The wind dragged past Tahrl as slow as the fading light with shades of orange and gold tracing patterns in the sky to drift like spider silk slipping into the night.

“You never knew me.” Opening her eyes, she looked to the dark and the snow beneath her horse’s feet. “Much is happening; you may have noticed. We need the Windmasters. They are acting as if all of this is their fault. Punishment. For wrongs against us. The DiKena. For failing them. The Windmasters must see past their own mistakes. Have you noticed?”

“I don’t know what to believe.”

“That is Sundancer’s voice in your head. Think, Tahrl. Everything you know. Everything. The truth. The lies. The stories and legends. Think. It’s all muddled-up in there, wearing a pretty face to make the speaker look good. Why do I need to tell you this?”

Thoughts drifted through unknown flame to mix with the sky and the wind and the snow. In the dark at the pinnacle of Highwall, voices had rumbled, echoing all around him and seeping into his skin. Words had been spoken through storm and through darkness, and voices had been shattered by lightning lacking only thunder while the castle had melted like wax. The Redstained cathedral had been the last home and refuge of Windmasters and the last hope for reason out of the dark.

“It was interesting. What Sorcha said standing before the cathedral.”

“Yes, it was. There may be hope for you. We cannot talk. Storms-dream is listening. They all are. And I need them strong.”

“Was this necessary?” he said, looking to the phantom sky.

“I wish you would remember your own voice standing before the cathedral.”

Light like lightning lacking only thunder had cracked the night

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above the gates of Highwall and had shattered the illusions that the dragons had spun. The fire and lightning had divided the dragons, and the depth of the rift between them had destroyed the walls of Highwall. The cathedral had called to him, whispering promises of silence and reason from out of the chaos. Everything had its beginning and its end from out of the ancient and forgotten homes of the DiKena.

“Did you know this would happen?”

“No,” Armada said. “I was expecting something much like this if we did nothing. Balthazar predicted it. That the Ivory Tower would fall. Sundancer feared it. Cloudbreaker welcomes it. An end to fear and hatred. The end of pain. War against the dark. Waiting for so long that they can remember nothing else.”

A flicker in the fading light of Armada holding the shards and broken fragments of the flute for Stormsdream to see before the Redstained cathedral.

“They feared something would happen if you re-forged the flute.”

“Yes. Yes, they did,” she whispered, dragging her horse closer, pulling her face to Tahrl’s ear. “I thought I held the truth in my hand. Confronted Moonlight with it. That Windmaster and Kianan clashed because of the Greater Darkness.”

“What?”

“You were not at Balthazar’s mansion when he died. If you had. If the Greater Darkness had first risen a thousand years long gone, you would believe the Kianan could turn upon the Windmasters in desperation.”

The walls had melted, and the people had screamed, fleeing from the dragons at the first flicker of lightning as if it had tapped into fear hidden to the very heart of their souls.

“Time and confusion and pain could shape memory. But. The records-“ He choked on words that burned in his throat and suffocated him with the memory of a voice from out of the apartment at the pinnacle of Highwall. “The records.” Eyes had watched him from out of the dark, and he could not find the dragon who had accompanied Sundancer to his home. “Memory tells me that the time of slaughter one-thousand years ago was between dragon and Kianan alone. The Greater Darkness could not be erased so completely from our minds.”

“I know. I realize now that we must look much farther than one thousand years. Much farther.” She looked over her shoulder,

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watching dragons watching her, and she held her fingers to Tahlr's lips. "In battle, they are devastating. We have both seen that. Do not answer. Only think of what I say. In trying to stop monsters, you run the risk of becoming the very thing you are fighting against." She drew herself even closer so that he could feel the touch of her lips and the kiss of her breath against his ear. "They had believed something would happen if I re-forged the flute."

The people had fled before lightning. They had run from fire as it consumed stone, which had stood for more than five hundred years. Highwall had been stained with blood while a Windmaster who had believed the Greater Darkness would return for all of her long life was consumed by the hand of her brothers and sisters. The Greater Darkness had returned. Sorcha's voice echoed in the dark passages from out of the corners of his soul. Words spoken before the Redstained cathedral. The Greater Darkness had returned.



*The morning was dark without the slightest hint of light or sunrise to trace the faded echoes of gold and amber music in the night. Armada had played her flute while the others had tended to a small fire, and the flames and sparks had seemed to dance and leap in bright music and warmth. The sparkle and flash of music had seemed to twirl and spin all around them and had been enough to make Tahlr believe in a fire in the sky that could light the day in the circle of its warmth. With the dark morning and faded echoes, Tahlr looked to the sky with all the knowledge and hope of someone who has lived with the Montmorin and knows without needing to look where the sun should be when day has begun. The dragons climbed into the sky, spreading a light of their own design as if they might hope to imitate the sun or the stars. It was light enough to see horses as if by the moon or the stars, and they rode beneath a river of dragons for the Ivory Tower. The dark was cold, and the dark was quiet. The only sound to break the morning was the crunching of old snow beneath their horses' hooves and the rush of their breathing. It was as if none would disturb the dark and as if none wanted to displace the memory of a flute in the night. The music held them in silence; even though, it had been the long night and dark morning since Armada had let the music be in trade for sleep. There was no glow of twilight or any sign of a sunset like there had been the previous day; even though, Tahlr looked for it, knowing exactly where it should have*

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been. They made camp by fading dragon light, saying nothing and hoping for the morning. Without a word being spoken, they wanted the light, needing it, and wondering if they had seen the last sunrise and final sunset of the earth. Listening to a flute by firelight, they found something of hope in the song, feeding on it like nectar and honey.

They traveled in darkness, keeping their voices to themselves, and Tahrl found himself wondering what the morning had looked like at all. When they rested, Armada filled the world with music. It filled them with a warmth that no fire could match and filled them with a nourishment that no food could provide. They lived for the flute of gold and amber, forgetting snow and cold and even the dark as if the music had always been their light. Through faded light and dark design, Tahrl looked to the sky, believing that the light of day would crack the void of the sky and if not this day then some morning he would open his eyes and it would be there. He looked to the dragons as they too drank of the gold and amber flute, and he knew that they were beginning to believe in the morning as well.

A dragon in rage could twist the land with fire and lightning to make stone weep and mountains bleed. The Greater Darkness was a reflection and an echo that answered with the same violence and force with which it was treated. Alexander had feared as much before he had died. Teresa had believed it with stories of the uninvited guest who remains silent until noticed. Armada had confirmed it, speaking of the disaster and devastation that had fallen around Balthazar's home. The dragons had ravaged to protect, and they had slaughtered to defend. In battle against troglodytes and twisted shards of darkness before Balthazar's home, the Dryn had fallen because of the dragons as much as because of the nightmares and shadows. Others must have fallen victim during other battles between dragons and shards of nightmare. The DiKena would have been the first to be consumed by fire and lightning lacking only thunder, and their cries of confused betrayal would have died unheard in the chaos of dragons struggling against the Greater Darkness.

Tahrl looked to the sky, watching the flow of Windmasters like a river of life against the dark. They were the guardians of the DiKena and all of their children, and the very act of trying to protect their creators had always ended in chaos and death. It had shattered them. The dragons had known that the Greater Darkness would

return someday, and they had feared that any action they took to protect the children of the DiKena would end in chaos and blood. They would act. They would not act. It had divided them. It had driven them mad.

Through the storm of the Windmasters' own chaos and confusion, they had been drawn to Alexander, and the music that he played had filled them with hope. They recognized in him a power as old as the DiKena that did not yield monsters. The possibility that the dragons might learn from him the power to protect the children of the DiKena and heal the ancient wounds without sundering the world must have filled the dragons with a hope they had never felt before. Hope was their downfall and Alexander's death. Fear that the Age of Chaos would return was as old as the dragons themselves. Fear of a Greater Darkness and hope that learning from Alexander would prevent such a dark from returning had summoned the shadows and shards of nightmare. The unnoticed and uninvited guest had been noticed, and Alexander had died. Hope had been shattered. The song had been broken. The dragons turned one upon the other until the mountains had run with blood.

From out of the chaos, shattered hopes, and fractured dreams, Armada had remade the flute. The dragons had only sought to learn from Alexander all that he could give of the gentle magic and the music that shaped it. With the flute in her hands, the dragons would follow her to the edge of the world and to the end of time. Re-forging the flute had flung wide the door for the Greater Darkness. The dragons had warned them. They said the darkness was deadly, and it killed. They said it was monstrous, and it was an abomination. They said it would take the Ivory Tower, and it claimed it. The Greater Darkness did everything the Windmasters told it to do. It was their old fear and ancient shame made manifest to punish them because they could not forgive themselves for being unable to save the DiKena.

Blinking through darkness and night for day, Tahrl looked to the sky, finding the dragons like so many stars filtered through a canopy of trees. They had left the high mountains and the deep snow behind them lost somewhere in the dark, and they had found where the forest greeted the low hills. Tahrl searched the thickening canopy of trees frosted in white, looking for sign of the Windmasters, wondering where they would settle for the night, and then he noticed that the others were silent as if they were listening to the whis-

pers of the trees. He remembered what Armada had told him of how the Dryn could communicate from one edge of the forest to the other. It was as if the trees were constantly gossiping one to another, and it was simply a matter of knowing what to listen for and what to say. In spite of the snow-covered brush and trees, they seemed to make better time through the forest than they ever did in the mountains. Through the dark and the silence, he could still tell that Armada was leading them away from Greenhaven, and it seemed almost as if they were pacing the mountains, keeping them forever beyond the wood over their right shoulder.

They came free of the forest almost as if they had found a great clearing in the wood with the mountains beyond them as dark as night and as cold as snow. The dragons were there, resting at the edge of the forest, waiting for them to arrive, and before them were assembled all the host of Dryn out of Greenhaven. They were little more than shadows in the dark and dragon light, but it looked to Tahrl as if every last Dryn who could walk and hold a weapon was before him. There must have been as next to three hundred Dryn assembled as if Tahrl could ever hope to count them all, and at the head of the host stood Teresa as she watched Tahrl and his small group emerge from the wood. They held their horses still at the edge of the forest, watching Teresa, and Tahrl felt the wood at his back was as cold and empty as the dark, wondering who had stayed behind at Greenhaven. Looking to Armada, Chrystal and the others, he thought that they must have known Teresa would be waiting for them and must have planned for the meeting place, but they did nothing other than watch the governess of Greenhaven as if she was a tree growing from the cracks in desolate rock. Teresa approached them slowly as if she was unsteady on her feet or expected the world to gape wide before her losing her to the abyss. With all eyes still focused on the governess of Greenhaven, Tahrl almost did not notice Armada slip from her horse and close the distance between mother and daughter. She held out the flute, which seemed somehow to shimmer and glow with the light of the sun despite the dark surrounding them, and Teresa reached for the gold and amber flute with fingers that wavered and almost failed her.

Teresa and Alexander had been lovers for many more years than Tahrl had been alive, and they had found in each other a soul full of life very much like the other. They had drunk so much of each other's life and heart that they were long past caring where one

spark ended and the other began. It never mattered how much of the world might lie between them on any given morning with Alexander in the mountains or at the pinnacle of Highwall looking to the forest and Teresa at the very heart of Greenhaven looking to the mountains; they were one. In her hands, Teresa held all that had remained of the best half of her soul, and all that remained had been claimed by her daughter. In Alexander's grasp, the flute had always reflected a silver and crystal light while the flute that Teresa held for her daughter to take back shone even in the dark with the gold and amber light of the sun. Their fingers lingered on it, drifting slowly over the length of the flute as if touch alone would be enough to yield music, and Teresa slipped free of the flute so that Armada held it alone once more. As if the world had passed away in the dark and been replaced with something wholly new, Tahrl and the others who had accompanied Armada to the Redstained cathedral came free of the forest and joined the others surrounding Teresa and her daughter.

Surrounding him were more Dryn than Tahrl could ever remember gathered in one place at one time. He thought of striking through the wood with the storm in his hair and the rain in his eyes, reaching Greenhaven, having felt only that Teresa had disappeared, and the Dryn had flowed around him. It had been a river of faces as Iola had helped him from his horse, and he had never thought to count their number. Gathered before the forest and the dark of the mountains were more Dryn than had watched Armada, Iola, Chrystal, and him leave Greenhaven in search of their forgotten governess. Tahrl looked beyond to the dragons gathered all around, looking from resting form to shimmering outline in the dark. There were no more dragons beyond those who had gathered before him, and they flickered and danced with a shimmering of light like a flurry of candles caught by the storm in the breath before they were snuffed out. From the dragons, he looked back to the Dryn and the faces in the dark, and he saw Greenhaven as quiet as the mountains because too many of Teresa's children were gathered on the road to the Ivory Tower. He looked to the governess of Greenhaven as she moved among her Dryn, returning to her campfire with Armada at her side. He followed them while listening to the hushed voices of the assembled Dryn as they went about the needs of such a great camp. Fires had to be cared for. Food prepared. Tents readied against the cold and the night. He stood at the edge of the campfire

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even as he watched Teresa and Armada sit before the flames with only the stray voice to float through the night.

“Why are you here?” he said, wondering if his own voice traveled over the laughter of the flames.

“To finish what was begun.”

The fire danced over her skin in a reflection of shadow and light that smeared her with burnt orange and dry red shades, and her eyes flickered with the life of the flames. From Teresa, he looked to the Dryn gathered at their various campfires and tasks all around them, and he looked, imagining Greenhaven empty and quiet save for the rustle of the wind in the trees.

“What will happen should we fall?” He looked to the dark beyond mountains and dragons and fire where the Ivory Tower had always stood like a thread of knowledge and hope. “Greenhaven. Is there anyone? Would it fail?”

“Would it fall? Tahrl. Should we fail, there will be nowhere for Greenhaven to thrive or fall.”

He watched the blood of fire and reflection of light consume her with the glow and flicker of flame flowing over her. It dug into her skin and played over the snow of her hair, and he folded in upon himself, sinking to the ground before the fire. The music drifted around him, growing from a whisper until it filled the world, and he looked over the fire to Armada with the flute in her hands and her fingers flowing over the keys. The turn of Dryn voices from the camp and fires all around him faded to whispers and then to attentive silence as the music spread from fire to fire and from ear to ear. It took them with a voice that had not been heard since Alexander had left Greenhaven for the last time. It began in silence; a single voice raised in answer to the flow of song and melody. There were no words; only a voice raised in counterpoint and melody to the threads woven by the flute. Another voice joined the first out of the dark and the flames, and then another voice and another joined the song. It grew from voice to voice and from flicker of light to shimmer of flame until the music surrounded and filled him, and all of the Dryn and assembled Windmasters left the mountains behind them.



*Between the mountains and the forest, the days seemed to pass almost without notice as they traveled south for the Ivory Tower.*

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When they would stop, trading unknown day for forsaken dark, the Dryn would sing in clumps and gatherings, and Armada would fill the world with the voice of the flute. It was never the same as that first night when the Dryn had sung with a single voice to tear at Tahrl's heart, and he had found Sorcha near enough at hand with the song in her eyes and the tears flowing down her cheeks. They sang the next night and the next and the next in flurries of small groups with many starts and stops as if they were afraid to find that purity of moment once again. He could never find it in his heart and voice to know if the song was a call to the future or a cry to the past.

One morning mistaken for night with the deep mountains and the heart of the forest many days behind them, they found all the soldiers and Dryn from out of Highwall waiting for them. More than a thousand men and Dryn had followed the long road to the west of the mountains, resting at the southern tip where the paths diverged at the foot of giants. The lights from their campfires were like stars sprinkled across the earth or the echo of dragon light, and Tahrl had frozen in his tracks, seeing that light for the first time. Looking to Armada, he found nothing of surprise and remembered how Moonlight had turned wings to the sky at the brush of the flute in Armada's hands. Among wagons and carts and too many horses, he found Hector as if gathering enough food and supplies to support all the host out of Highwall had been the work of no effort at all.

"Tahrl," Hector said, seeing him for the first time, and then his gaze drifted to the sky. "Where? What is this?"

"Hope," Tahrl said, letting his eyes wander to the blank slate and void that had become the sky since time out of mind. "And despair. All mingled together until you cannot tell one from the other."

"Where are we going?"

"Did Moonlight not tell you?"

"The Ivory Tower. I did not want to believe. Tahrl, even with the forces you bring from Greenhaven, there are fewer than fifteen hundred souls. What?"

Tahrl looked among wagons and carts and Kianan and Dryn to the dark and the dragons. He looked to the hole in the world where the sky had been and the stars and planets had held court, and he looked to the dragons who tried on occasion to paint the sky and risk falling into the void.

"To finish what was begun," he said, and Hector gave no answer, tilting his head and groping for a ledge of wood that was one of the

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wagons. Tahrl looked through darkness and the cackle of firelight to the great camp spread around them, and the voices surrounding him that must have left the ruin of Highwall as silent and empty as Greenhaven. “We are not going simply to spend ourselves against the tower. Armada has.” His voice faded to the memory of a whisper under Hector’s gaze, and he saw in those eyes the flicker and spark of burning stone where the dragons had touched light like lightning to the foundation of Highwall. “Armada has re-forged the flute. The dragons are listening to her. She has a plan.”

“Then why are we here?”

“Why?” Trying to laugh, he faded, listening to the distant voices of Kianan and Dryn. They were voices that would be forever silenced if they were lost beneath the shadow of the Ivory Tower. “Because it is necessary. Kianan, Dryn, and even Montmorin must stand together. Yes, even Master Sorcha Vedoman ap Earlinstien is here.”

“Tahrl, a lifetime ago I was taught that darkness and chaos would claim the land if there was peace with the dragons. I came to believe that my mind had been filled with deceit, half-truth, and lies. I learned to trust you.”

“I know.”

“The thing of it is, Tahrl, that the Ivory Tower has fallen. For all we know, the king is dead. All of this because we chose to let the dragons live.”

“Sundancer said something about that.”

“What?” When Tahrl did not answer, Hector raised a hand as if he might brush the question from the sky. “I hope you know what you are doing, Tahrl. I hope Armada does, too.”

Hector turned from him, finding voices among the wagons and work that needed to be done, and he left Tahrl between horses and carts in the dark. Tahrl looked over campfires, hearing voices around fires where he expected none beneath the oppressive dark, and he felt the night burn at his skin. He imagined the fires snuffed out one by one and the voices silenced in a flood of darkness to suffocate the soul. With the flames gone and the voices drowned, there would be no more life and light in the world; there would be only the darkness that exists in the nightmare past sun-fall where nothing else ever grows. Wrapping his arms to his chest, he found himself wandering among people and campfires without recognizing anyone as if they had already been reduced to faceless shadows. Racing against the Ivory Tower, they would face shades and shad-

ows of monsters so numerous that they would seem a solid wall, and his mere one thousand would be dashed against such a wall, scattered in shards and fragments. Highwall would remain a hollow and empty ruin until the creatures grew tired of it, and Greenhaven would be silent save for the cries of the children who had been left behind.

Tahrl could not move, looking from fire to fire and from indistinct face to face, and the voices washed over him, sounding almost as if they did not know the light dark sky had once been crowded with stars. From out of the voices, he caught the whispered edge of a song, and he followed the melody to one campfire out of all the others where Armada sat with the flute touched to her lips. He moved no closer as if he did not want to be bathed in the red and orange glow of the fire's light and listened to the music as it played over him like the warmth of a fire much greater than the campfire before him. One face from among all gathered around the fire looked, noticing him, and only one figure rose from among all the others, stepping toward him. Tahrl tried to turn only to have Iola reach him and stretch fingers to entwine with his hands, and they stood together, letting the music flow around and through them. He reached for her as if he would embrace her, letting his hand touch her arm and his fingers brush ever so gently against her side. Moving together, standing toe to toe, he could feel her breath caress his face and her lips brush against his cheek, and his hands turned around her, resting at the small of her back.

Iola pulled at him, and then they were walking wrapped together with their arms entwined around each other and their fingers clasped. They found several wagons huddled together and alone in the dark with all the provisions for the night having been distributed to the camp. Rummaging through what had been left behind, Iola found a blanket, wrapping it around them, pulling them tight to each other. Their lips came together until Tahrl's chest burned with the need for air, and he gasped, pulling breath into his lungs, feeling it rush through him, and feeling the touch of her teeth against his skin. His hands moved beneath the blanket, turning against the edge of her shirt, pulling at her clothes, and her arm held the curtain around them while her free hand fumbled for clasps at his waist. Standing among dark and empty wagons away from the campfires, they moved, stumbling to be free of clothes, stepping on a pant leg so that it would slide away, and they almost fell, colliding with one

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of the wagons. Holding the blanket around them, Iola turned, bending forward, gripping the wagon's seat with her fingers, letting her feet slide ever so slightly farther apart, and he brushed against her, wrapping his arms around her waist, pressing his face to her back as if he would smother his breathing. Leaning against the wagon, swaying together, they were as silent as the dark that shrouded them from the campfires. If anyone had found them locked together, they would not have noticed. If any had discovered them, they would not have cared.



*The mountains and snow were behind them, and the Ivory Tower* was before them shrouded in darkness that had seeped from the farthest corners of dreams. Looking to the horizon and searching for a glimpse of silver thread reaching through the sky, Tahrl knew that they were still almost a full turning of the moon from their goal. Looking to the void of the sky, he could not find any trace of sun or moon, and the only stars were the glow of the dragons as they glided through the dark far overhead. Without a sun or moon, there was no time; there was no way to tell day from night or even the number of days they had lost to the void. He had only the feeling that all children who have lived with the Montmorin learn of the travels of the sun and the moon.

One morning with the mountains having drifted far behind them and the Ivory Tower that much closer, Tahrl woke, feeling Iola sit up and the blankets pushed away. She sat for a moment with her head to one side, listening to the dark, and then she was to the door of the tent, pushing through the entrance. Tahrl was after her, crossing from out of the night, and stood in the dawn. There was no sun climbing slowly to be free of the horizon; there was only the diffuse light of the morning that always accompanied the day bright star. He remembered the first day of darkness when Armada had stepped from the mouth of the Redstained cathedral with the flute in her hands, and he remembered the sunset on that first day as it had grown out of the dark only to yield to the night without any trace of the sun to be seen. The sky had been orange and yellow, gold and red, that evening, and he saw those colors again this morning growing out of the dark. Filled with streaks of blood and amber as if someone had painted the heavens, the sky turned, fading from black to the deepest of blues, without a trace or spark of the sun.

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He could see the camp spread out all around him, and everywhere he looked, the people were standing and looking only to the sky as if they had forgotten what it was. He turned, looking to the south, searching for any trace of silver thread stretched against the sky, and he found it.

The Ivory Tower was half as thick as his finger against the horizon and reaching forever into the sky, but it was not silver and white and crystal. He had lived at the foot of the Ivory Tower for more than a third of his life, and looking up, he had never seen the top of it. The Ivory Tower could be seen from all the corners of the world, and he had never met a single soul who had not at least heard of the strand of silver thread reaching forever into the sky. The Kian-an had built their castle and greatest library around the foot of it. The Ivory Tower was as black as the darkness past midnight. Tahrl felt his legs give, and he sank without a word to the cold, uncaring, ground. Iola glanced to him as he fell, stretching fingers, and then turned, following his gaze into the sky. Finding the midnight tower, she said nothing, and turned, moving to his side to place an arm around him. The morning began to fade as if without the sun the dawn could not hold off the dark like night. It faded as slowly as it had grown, slipping from the richest blue to the deepest dark of the abyss until there was no light save for the dying and neglected embers of the campfires. Somewhere he could hear crying.

Tahrl looked, trying to see the tents and people and forgotten fires once more through the eternal dark, and the gray shapes and midnight outlines of those people he could see were still turned toward the morning as if they would not admit that the light was gone. From among all of the others, he found Armada looking to where the sun would have been if it had still existed, and her gaze drifted as if she could see to the end of the world and would comfort the survivors until the edge cracked. For the briefest of moments, their eyes held together, and Tahrl could see the dark opening a path all the way to the Ivory Tower. The night was breathing with a pulse that shook his bones, and he could feel it pulling at him as if each thread of dark light and shadow was a hook sunk into his flesh. Echoing back to the heart of the storm where threads of shadow and light were entwined with the Ivory Tower, the dark sighed, feeling their approach. He could feel the dragons thirsting for the night and wanting to lose themselves in the twist of fire and dark surrounding the tower with only a whisper of melody holding them. He blinked,

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feeling his eyes burn, feeling them melt, and Armada turned, vanishing into the dark between the tents. Looking to Iola, he saw that she was also turned to where Armada had been standing, and as if she could feel his gaze, she turned, reaching for his hand, linking fingers.

“What is happening?” he whispered, turning eyes to the sky, looking for anything in the void of the dark.

Iola raised a hand, touching fingers to his lips before any more words could spill forth, and then letting her silence drift from his face, she half-lead and half-followed him back to the tent so they could prepare for the morning. Everyone seemed to be moving as if in a daze while they readied the camp for another day of marching for the Ivory Tower. The people moved as if the sight of morning light lacking only the sun had drained the life and even the hope of life from them, and the failed morning had been nothing more than the last of the light being drained out of the world. The dragons as they drifted overhead, trying to stay at the same pace as the wagons and soldiers, seemed somehow to be dimmer or in imitation of far more distant stars. In that moment locked with Armada, he had felt them burning far brighter than any star as if they might spend themselves long before reaching the tower. Looking to the horizon, looking to the sky, he felt the night dark day pass as they crossed the great plains that separated the Redstained mountains and the Ivory Tower. As the day began to fade and the twilight would have grown if there had been a sun in the sky, Tahrl looked for any trace of light to mark the sunset. There was only the darkness that marked the forever night, and there were only the dragons glowing in imitation of stars as they descended from the sky. The tents were raised as if they grew out of the land, and the campfires sprouted in red and orange flame, casting their light to the sky.

The man appeared before the one campfire out of all the others cast in dirty white robes as if he had spent much hard time in them, and he appeared, having crossed from the edge of the great camp all but unnoticed. Tahrl looked past the magician to where the Dryn having shadowed him since he had entered the camp stood watching at the edge of sight. The magician’s gaze wavered as if he did not know who had called him to the fire, and he looked from Armada with the flute in her hands to Teresa sitting at her daughter’s side. The flute was a whispered voice that was almost hidden by the crack and laughter of the fire, and the light danced over them in splinters

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and tricks of flame that made the magician look to be smeared in blood.

“Councilor,” Tahrl said, drawing the magician Latham’s eye, and he remembered his last glimpse of the magician standing on the desecrated edge of Highwall.

The magician looked to him much as he had on that morning so very long ago when there had still been a sun to shine through the clouds, and his gaze drifted, brushing past Iola and Sorcha. Master Latham seemed to focus once more on Armada with the flute in her hands touched ever so gently to her lips.

“What are your intentions?” he said, and the whispered music of the flute stopped as she lowered her hands.

“To assail the Ivory Tower,” she said. “We must focus the dark if we are to end this.”

“There is a difference between ending something and stopping it. You realize this, of course?”

Armada had her face turned to the fire as if she might look for words and a voice to speak with among the flames, and an answer of whispered sounds and crackling laughter came even to Tahrl’s ears.

“Of course,” she said.

“Do they?” the magician said, turning, looking to the dark as if the fallen stars that were the dragons were gathered around only the one campfire.

“Some more than others. They live on hope. They breathe it. Drink it. Thrive on it. That the long night will end. That there will be another sunrise.”

“And so to end the long night, you have focused the darkness. There are those who warned against the ascension of the Greater Dark. Those who said if steps were not taken that the Ivory Tower would fail.”

“Those voices are gone,” Sorcha said.

“I wanted only for the Windmasters to find their way once more.” Armada turned the flute over and around in her hands, raising one end so that it brushed against her chin. “As long as they fought one against the other, there was no hope for any of us.”

“And so the Windmasters are no longer divided,” Master Latham said, looking to the sky as if looking for sun or moon or stars. “The king is dead.”

“No,” Tahrl said with a voice that was little more than a whisper

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and weighted with the knowledge that he had already known it to be true.

“I suspected as much.” Armada held her gaze to the fire, seeming to let the flames wash over her.

“For more than a full turning of the season, strange creatures of shadow and nightmare had lain siege to the Ivory Tower. Terrorizing the people. No reason. Only chaos.” Master Latham was a tower of reflected blood and dark earth as the light of the campfire played and danced over his robes. “From out of the darkness, they came, taking shape around the Ivory Tower. So many that they devoured the light. The castle fell before anyone could figure out what had happened. The tower is the heart of the castle. How do you defend against your own heart?”

The echoes of screams and half-voiced cries scraped against Tahrl’s skin as he looked to the magician with the flames seeming to flow around him staining his robes with blood. Maximilian, the Kanan king, his friend of more than a dozen years, would have been pulled from sleep among shouted voices and screaming nightmare.

“They spread out from the castle, flowing over the city,” Master Latham said. “More than we could ever hope to stop. We saved who we could. Far too many of the great families are now gone. Tahrl, your family, I am sorry.”

He could feel them looking to him from all around the fire expecting him to say something or feel something, but he did nothing more than listen to the rush and roar of the flames as they danced and flickered before him. Where fingers and tongues of fire touched wood and stone, they cast long shadows to play over all who were drawn to the flame’s light and warmth, and Tahrl watched the flow of shadows, imagining much greater shards of darkness flicker around houses and mansions of wood and stone.

“Who will be king?” he finally said.

“I do not know. With everything that has happened, I haven’t given it any thought. When I see the sun rise once more, then I shall consider it. Without another sunrise, it doesn’t really matter, does it?”

“The sun will rise once more. We shall need a king.”

“I do not know who it will be. The king is dead. The noble houses are gone. The great houses are all but gone. None remain who could claim the title. None remain who could offer it.”

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“They cannot all be gone. We shall find a survivor of the noble houses. I cannot be the only one left of the great houses. I cannot.”

“Given time and the sunrise, I am sure someone of the noble house will be found. Do we want that? The noble houses have chosen poorly. Perhaps it is time for better men to step forward. Time for the council of magicians to rule.”

“Really, Latham, you overstep yourself.”

“Nothing but idle speculation, I assure you. It does not matter in the long night.”

“The night will end,” Armada said.

“Yes, so you have said, but who are you?”

“Who am I? Who are you little magician?”

“I take you to be Teresa’s youngest daughter. What are you doing with your father’s flute?”

“My father is dead.”

Master Latham said nothing and only looked to the fire that was before him shedding blood and amber light.

“I am sorry.”

“You have to understand something. This is not an enemy.” Armada turned her hand, sweeping the flute in a wide arc to take in the dark where the Ivory Tower stood still several days before them. “The Greater Darkness cannot simply be knocked down. It will grow again just as new life will grow even from a tree-stump.”

“Is that why you are here? Sacrifice yourself in the hope of the future?”

“No, we must accept the dark. Embrace it. Take away its reason to be destructive. The dark is opposing us because we are opposing it.”

“Again, I must ask you. Is that why you are here?”

“At any moment, I expect you to start lecturing me on the nature of good and evil. How this is all emblematic of the struggle between darkness and light.”

“If you cannot recognize the difference, then you are already lost.”

“You don’t recognize when such distinctions do not apply. The Greater Darkness is an echo out of the age of the DiKena. They fought against themselves. They thought such things were monstrous. The dark became monsters. We must recognize the dark as something better than chaos and destruction.”

“How?”

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“The Ivory Tower. It has the tower. It has the sky. Why do you think it is not continuing to grow? Because we are going to it. We are keeping it focused. It’s not about conquest. It’s not even about chaos. It is simply trying to be what we want it to be. The problem is that we are divided. We are not of one mind on what it should be.”

“We want to die and so it kills? We are filled with dread and so it is frightening? We are confused so it spreads chaos? And so you would lecture me on good and evil?”

“So I would remind you of the DiKena legends. Yes. If you had spent any time in the mountains with them, you would understand.”

“And so you would blame the dragons for all of this. Perhaps you have spent too much time with Skysailor and Stormsdream.”

“While you have spoken only with one of the Preservers, I understand.”

The light flickered, burning and twisting in upon itself, and Master Latham let the shadows and storm play over his robes in a dance that could leave neither one victorious.

“The dark is what we make it?” Master Latham moved as if he would step through the fire to stand before her; flames and lightning dripping from his fingers and swirling around his robe. “What then would you wish the dark to be?”

“At peace.”

“I cannot support you.”

“What?” Sorcha said.

“I will not try to block you. Other magicians will join you before you reach the Ivory Tower. As many as a dozen, perhaps. Survivors of the fall of the Ivory Tower. I will not be among them.”

“And so Sundancer has her revenge,” the Montmorin magician said.

“Is that what Stormsdream told you? I disapprove of your methods,” he said, looking to Armada and the flute in her hands. “Someone should stand ready should you fail.”

“If that is what you wish.”

“It is.” With no more words to be said, he turned away from the fire much as how he had appeared and vanished into the dark and the night.



*The Ivory Tower was before them, having grown much closer with the last half a handful of days, and they had stopped their march*

after only half a day the night before. The camp had been quiet for all the long night as if they could feel the darkness towering over them even though it was as black as the sky. Looking, Tahrl had convinced himself that he could make out the shape of the Ivory Tower less than a sixteenth before them. In the distance, in the dark, he could see the outline of houses and homes that dotted the farthest outskirts of the city surrounding the castle surrounding the tower itself. If they were whole or if they were broken or if they were shattered ruins, he could not tell, and the few people they had found on the long trek to the tower had been even more soul ravaged than the survivors of Edgewood. As Master Latham had predicted, other magicians had joined them until more than a dozen white robes stood at Sorcha's side; Master Rufus, Master Vala, and Master Mariama were among those who had joined them. The Ivory Tower was their goal and their destination just as it had always been the hope and dream of so many who had traveled to it. A tower of silver and ivory that was so tall that none had ever seen the top of it. It could be seen from every corner of the world and had pulled at the imagination of the Kianan so much that they had built their castle and greatest library around its base. When one spoke of the Ivory Tower, one spoke of the city and the great houses, and one spoke of the castle, the library, and the university. To name the Ivory Tower was to name the king and all of his court. To view the Ivory Tower was to view the greatest monument of the DiKena and the lightning rod through which they had banished the chaos and dark even as it had stripped them of their own power. It called to him as it had always called to him with its promise of knowledge and understanding even through the cold and the dark enshrouding it. Around him, he could feel the others gathering with the tents, wagons, and needs of the camp left unattended as if they might never need them again. Soldiers and Dryn and too few horses were gathered around him and faced the Ivory Tower, and Tahrl could feel the dark over everything like a great weight smothering the life out of the world. They moved toward the city as if they had all the time in the world, walking, or riding with Tahrl, Armada and Teresa.

Somewhere in the dark like night that had replaced the day, he could feel the Windmasters climb into the sky. He did not need to turn and watch them slip through the dark to know that they were there, and then he could see them passing overhead as if they were the last remaining stars as they approached the Ivory Tower. He

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could feel the darkness turning slowly like clouds before the storm and swirling like tar or molasses to trap the Windmasters forever in the sky. They glowed much brighter than stars as if they might wake the day even as shadows and the darkness of night tried to smother them. Light like lightning lacking only thunder ripped the sky, glistening off the Windmasters, striking the ground, and where the light touched, fire bloomed.

“Now!” Armada shouted, raising her sword to the sky; a brand of crystal starlight reflecting swirls of orange and gold fire where shadow touched light at the edge of the city before them.

A shout grew all around him, roaring with the wind and the storm, echoing with the voice of every Kianan and Dryn standing at his back. It grew in a wave that knew no end and grew with a force to smash rock and shatter things of nightmare and stone. They surged forward, rushing to join the Windmasters and splinter the dark. Horses pulling ahead of soldiers and Dryn; Tahrl looked to the sky, seeing sunrise over the city. Windmasters pushed into the mire and shadow where the first houses stood. Fire and lightning flowed from them like wind and rain. Darkness rose like a thing alive between fountains of flame, striking at them, and where the two touched, Windmasters fell from the sky. The darkness was before them as much a wall as shapes of strange beasts and forgotten monsters. The dark was cracked and ripped with dragon fire. Sword in hand, Tahrl breached the dark; his horse lashing out. Armada wielding a brand of fire-wind at his side. Dark shapes turned, swirling, falling beneath fire and storm and bright blade. Bone thin forms of burnt wood and dried blood clawed at them. The wall held, pushing against them; his horse stumbling. Tahrl’s sword swept the air with a scream. The roar of soldiers rose behind him, meeting the dark, crushing the wall. Cries and screams filled his ears. The dark crumbled in upon itself; monsters falling. Armada jumped the gap where a Windmaster had blazed lightning moments before.

They pressed into the low city; more farms and fields than houses. There was no wall of wood or stone so far from the Ivory Tower. They rode over open fields between burning houses and farms, following the path of dragon light. The first wall was before them; a firestorm of wood and old trees. It was passage into the city where the streets were still dirt and dust. The magicians were before Tahrl, standing with Armada. The gate of wood and iron that had stood for more than one thousand years burst. Shards flew wrapped in

flame and dark shadow. The people had lived here; shop-owners and tradesmen had called the streets home. Behind him, soldiers pushed at the blazing wall with lance and pike. Creatures rose between splinters of shadow and light, ripping at Kianan and Dryn. Tahrl rode on, chasing Armada, seeing Sorcha and Teresa at her side. Buildings and homes of wood rose around them, shadowing apparitions that could only grow in nightmare. Windmasters sheltered the riders, turning the streets to day, and then before him, it made him pause. It made him stop and almost tumble from his horse. Among broken wood and burning homes was Skysailor. Splinters and long spikes of wood had ripped at her, dripping with a Windmaster's blood. Fire ravaged and tore at her body the same as it did to the houses and homes as if it did not care what it consumed. Skysailor had been the first Preserver of the Windmasters to speak with the Kianan. She had sent Moonlight to greet them so long ago in the mountains.

“Don't stop!” Iola screamed, pulling at his horse's reins, pulling him away from Skysailor's funeral pyre.

The wall to the upper city was before them where the streets were paved with stone. Looking, the soldiers were behind him lost somewhere to the lower city and darkness and flame. Kianan magicians and Dryn wizards were all around him, turning their horses this way and that, looking to shadow and lightning. The gateway to the upper city was bound and guarded by things that had never thrived by the light of day. They lashed out with hook and claw whenever a horse strayed too close to them, matching swirl of fire and flame with echo of darkness and shred of nightmare. It was Master Rufus or Master Vala who took the gate; doors of iron and stone rupturing. Horses fell screaming. Tahrl was up, feeling his leg burn even as lightning danced and swirled all around him. He ran, stumbling for the passage, and Iola found him, pulling him to the back of her horse. They chased Armada across wide avenues of cobbled stone and followed her between great mansions that had been home to both great and noble houses alike. Merchants and aristocrats living side by side before the castle at the foot of the Ivory Tower had fallen.

Above them, Windmasters turned great houses and mansions to rivers of liquid stone. Around them, wizards and magicians kept a blaze of swirling light to hold the dark at the edge of sight. Before them was the castle. Tahrl had lived there, studying, learning to be

a scholar. He had advised the king. Armada rode her horse up the wide stone steps, and doors of stone and wood and iron melted, crumbling before her. She pushed into the main hall, clattering over splintered wood and broken stone. Tahrl could not remember the last time horses had been permitted within these halls. Somewhere between shadow and flickering light, the king had died. The walls clawed at them; light scarring them as they passed. Ducking low to their mounts, they traveled passageways and halls never intended for horses. In the dark, there was wreckage. In the dark, there was ruin. Bodies could be seen underfoot where the creatures and nightmares had left them. Jumping a crumbled wall, they found the Ivory Tower before them. Shadows against blackness; it was almost invisible. A pillar reaching forever into the sky surrounded by a great court of grass and stone and then the castle surrounded the tower.

Armada was off her horse, walking for the Ivory Tower; her sword forgotten somewhere among the ruin of rock and stone. The magicians and wizards moved to stand around and behind her, and somewhere far overhead, Windmasters brought fire to the city and castle around them. Armada turned, looking to all those gathered around her as if the world had stopped being a living thing and chaos ruled except for where she stood.

“We must all be there. Kianan. Montmorin. Dryn. DiKena,” she said and then took the flute from her shoulder. “Tahrl. Sorcha. Iola.” She watched the others as they fell back as if they had been dismissed.

“Where are you going?” someone said from among all the others.

“The Ivory Tower.” Armada pointed with the flute as if the tower were not such a great thing as if it called to them as if it would welcome them with open arms. “You must hold the gate.”

“We shall,” Teresa said, and Tahrl realized that she was holding a Troll Stick. He had seen one once; Armada had shown it to him, demonstrating how to hold it and how to fight with it. The sword had towered over her as if at any moment she would falter and fall from the great weight and bulk of the blade as she swung it around. In Teresa’s hand, it seemed the right size as if a sword of such grander had been designed for her; anyone else would have looked to be a child trying to hold a tree.

“Come,” Armada said, turning, walking for the Ivory Tower.

In times long forgotten when the sun had still graced the land and the sky, Tahrl had stood before the tower. Looking, he had hurt

his neck, stumbling, trying to find the top somewhere between the clouds. He had touched it, glistening silver and crystal ivory beneath his fingers, and the tower had been cool to the touch and smooth as polished glass. He had searched for an entrance, finding nothing many times, and it had always been a game and strange wish among the students to be the one to crack the secret of the Ivory Tower. He would speak the magic word that would open the tower and be the first to step inside. Tahrl did not want to touch this black thing or stand so close to it while somewhere he could hear screaming. He could hear crying and the clash of arms.

“I am here,” Armada said, raising the flute to her lips, and then she began to play. The first note brought tears to Tahrl’s eyes, and he almost stumbled to the grass beneath his feet. The music stopped with a hush of breath, and then all the world was silent. The Ivory Tower opened before them; the wall slipping away to the side as quiet as the whisper of the night. A hushed cry rose from the assembled magicians as if every one of them had lost their soul to the heights of the tower for bearing silent witness to such a thing as a doorway in that monument. Tahrl felt his legs finally give, and he tumbled to his knees, seeing such a chamber of silver and ivory and amber and bronze as was beyond the door. Holding the flute tight to her chin, Armada crossed the threshold, stepping into the Ivory Tower, and then she turned, looking to the others. Sorcha followed her, stepping slowly, while Iola helped Tahrl to his feet. Trembling, he did not know if his heart would survive the one step that would carry him into impossibility, and then he was standing next to Armada. The air was warm and tasted of roses and honeysuckle by the first light of morning. Turning, he watched the door slide closed as quietly as it had opened, and he could still see the others looking to where the door had been, and he could see the castle beyond them. He stretched out a hand almost as if he did not believe that the wall of the Ivory Tower stood between them.

They began to fall away, magicians, wizards and Teresa, and Tahrl jumped back from the edge as if he might fall. The land, the castle, the entire city was slipping away beneath them, and he looked to Armada who betrayed no surprise and only returned his look with a half-smile and the flute touched to her chin. There was neither sense of falling nor any feeling of flying. The land was simply dropping away beneath their feet, and he could see all of the

great city in flames. The fields and plains were beneath them, and he could see the Redstained mountains and Morningsglory forest.

“I can see the Earlinstien mountains,” Sorcha whispered for she had stepped to the very edge of the tower.

“Where are we going?” he said, turning to Armada and finding no answer so he looked to the sky, searching for any trace of sun or moon or star, finding nothing.

“The soul of the storm,” Armada said, and they all looked to her. “You are my witnesses.” She raised the flute to her lips and began to play so softly that it was more the whisper of her breath through the keys than any trace of music.

“Look,” Sorcha said with a wisp of breath that could not be heard with the ear but only tasted on the tongue.

All of the land was spread out beneath them as if someone had made a map of infinite detail to rival anything Tahrl could ever hope to accomplish with sticks and clay. He could see everywhere he had ever been and everywhere he had ever thought of going and everywhere that he had only heard of.

“It’s round,” he said, touching space, feeling it beneath his fingers. “You can tell by the way it sort of bends. The world is round.”

“Build your mountains small enough and you will think yourself a giant,” Iola whispered.

“What?”

“You said it to me. Or something.”

The tower shook. Sorcha fell. Darkness leapt at them from the walls. Iola screamed. Shadows tore and ripped at him, burning, swirling all around them. Shapes out of darkness danced. Shards out of nightmare clawed at his skin. Lashing out, he struck blind, gasping at smoke, choking, flooding his lungs. Swirling, shapes grew and shrank and drifted. Slender forms with long necks and great wings looked to him with eyes that slowly spiraled and folded into focus. A trace of music brushed through the night, and he could see great figures looking to the sky as nightmare and chaos descended, and there was nothing but to watch. It pulled at him, sucking the air from his lungs to know that such things turned freedom dark. Another trace of melody would not fade, and he reached, clinging to the threads as if they were his life.

Fires had burned, consuming the land, casting everything in flickering shadows and darkness and light. The dark had swirled, and the light had burned, driving the wind. Shapes had slipped

from the dark and the light, trying to preserve the source of the flame. Creatures with great wings for riding for controlling the winds and currents of light and shadow had gathered. They pushed at the chaos at the wind at the towers and fortresses in the sky. Light and dark crashed, swirling one around the other, making the world bleed. Masters of wind and lords of the storm found the candles. They found what spark tore at the world, causing dark and light to flicker and bleed, and they snuffed them out. What had made them they unmade. With the wind at their beck and call, they blew out the candles until there was nothing left to feed the raging flame.

Darkness pulled at Tahrl, ripping into his skin, and where shadow touched, the cold beyond ice followed. Turning this way and that, he was lost without the candle; lost without the light. There was nothing to preserve; he had destroyed it to save it.

“I know.”

Her voice filled the world with warmth and the gentle breeze beneath the summer sun. The song was the wind flowing all around him, seeping, growing into everything as if it would fill all life and all reason. Tahrl could see her standing at the very pinnacle of the Ivory Tower with the flute to her lips, and the whole world listening to the music, soaking it up like sunshine and rain. In that moment, there was no beginning and no end; only the one playing her flute. The world was her audience. Everything that had ever been and everything that never would be lived for that moment with her filling the world with music. She lowered the flute still playing it still holding it to her lips. Tahrl could see her clearly holding it to her chest and just as clearly still holding it to her lips while all around her the world was music.

“I forgive you,” she said.

The universe sighed as if it had been holding its breath, and the darkness began to slip away like fog before the sunrise. He could see Sorcha and Iola curled on the floor much as he was, and Armada was standing with them no longer playing the flute. Looking beyond her, he thought he could see stars, and climbing to his feet, he looked to the world beneath them, watching the shadows fade like dust. Iola touched her hand to his shoulder, and they watched the spread of daylight across the world. Turning, looking, he watched the sky around them change from the void of nothing to the deepest

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of blue, and then he saw the sun. It looked no closer for as far as they were above the ground it was still shining down on them, and by that light, Tahrl could feel the tears grow on his face.

*Chapter Twelve*  
**Children of the DiKena**

*Shadows were scarce and far in-between when looking to the houses and homes of the small town of Edgewood with the sun drifting somewhere far overhead in the late afternoon sky. The people had returned to the broken paths and empty homes of Edgewood, and they had begun to rebuild as they had always returned to the places of their birth to make new what was old. It was not the first time that the town had been remade out of ashes and dust, and it more than likely would not be the last. The people of Edgewood had lived and grown at the border of a forest that had been feared by the Kianan for many more years than it had been loved, but the people of Edgewood had always seen past the shadows and the dark. They had never forgotten the times when Kianan and Dryn had been friends and the Windmasters had not been ravaging monsters hunted to the edge of extinction. They would remake and rebuild the town. Grown men and women would weep. Children would wake, screaming from the nightmare of their beds at the echo and pinprick of memory. A creature of dark shadow and twisted limbs so very much like a tree would never be forgotten by the people of Edgewood. Fragments and shards of root and branch were sunk too deep to be forgotten, but the people would rebuild. Fire and storm were only fire and storm. The people would rebuild.*

Tahlr looked to the fresh wood of the new houses and rebuilt homes of Edgewood. He had lived among these people before he had been given the task of running Highwall by the king, and he had learned to love the people of Edgewood. He had been forever enamored of their resilience and generosity, and he had treasured their willingness to accept him in spite of his refusals to speak of why he had fled from both family and responsibility at the Ivory Tower. The small town of Edgewood was all around him with the people looking, watching, smiling, and the forest was behind him. Iola was at his side, watching, listening, looking to the path ahead of them. He

looked to the one house that had been Chetwin's home when he had been ambassador to the Dryn. The house had been made over again from the ground up, but Chetwin spoke as if he never would return to the place or ever again call it home.

"Tahrl!"

Elanor was on the step, waving to him as if she might not wait for the two of them to reach her, and she was a long way from her home in Earlinstien. Master Sorcha appeared behind her cousin, having been drawn by the commotion even as Tahrl and Iola crossed to them.

"I was not expecting this one," Tahrl said, sliding from his horse, and found Elanor's arms wrapped around him even before he could turn to her. "It's good to see you too, sister."

"This one said she would see the world even if she must chase after me to do so," Sorcha said. "I found letting her tag along would make it easier to keep an eye on her. Rather than constantly looking over my shoulder to keep an eye on her."

"To see the world?" he said, untangling himself from Elanor's embrace. "Is that all it is? It has only been your dream for as long as I can remember. Did Gran decide to send you in his stead?"

"Nothing of the kind. I simply did not want to be trampled in the rush to greet you. The young are excitable that way." Gran was standing in the doorway. "It has been too long since I last saw you, little brother," he said, stepping forward, getting his arm around Tahrl. "Not since the cathedral fell."

"Too long. Much too long."

"I must apologize for Urtha. She had so very much wanted to be here."

"But when one of you travels, the other must stay with the family. Nothing worthy of an apology. It only encourages me to travel once again to Earlinstien should I ever find the time."

"Should you ever find the time. These words I know all too well. So, I have brought my daughter in my wife's stead. Well, speak up, child! You haven't said three words since we arrived."

"That is because you use all the words and leave none for me," Elanor said. "I open my mouth, feeling my voice ache, but there are no words to slip from my tongue. I cannot even protest for you have used them all."

"Such a state shall not hinder you much longer, child. Tahrl, did I tell you that my little Elanor here is endeavoring to learn Kianan?"

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“No, you have not,” he said. “Well, don’t keep it to yourself. Say something. I want to hear how much you have learned.”

“No, really, I cannot,” Elanor said.

“That was Montmorin.”

“She really has been studying very hard,” Gran said. “Montmorin. Dryn. Kianan. What language do we all share? Kianan. With that one, you can speak to most anyone. Well, don’t keep us waiting. You’re the only one here who has not mastered the tongue.”

“Horse,” Elanor said in slow Kianan, waving a hand to take in the two animals. “There is a horse.” She crossed to Gran, slapping him on the chest with the back of her hand. “There is a horse.”

“I think she means that you are a horse,” Tahrl said, slipping into Kianan. “Your daughter just called you a horse. That’s wonderful, Elanor. Your accent is a little thick, but we can work on that.”

“Thank you.”

“At least she called me the entire horse. Not just the tail end of one.”

“That would take another ten years of study,” Sorcha said. “Still we must be more kind to Iola who looks as though she does not know one word of Montmorin.”

“You are most kind to think of me,” Iola said, “for that I thank you and would bear your children were you a man. No, I must content myself with Dryn, Kianan, and DiKena. Learning to read Kianan is devouring my time for such things.”

“Learning to read? Wizardry sounds as next to child’s play in comparison. I think I shall leave such things to Tahrl to assist you. The learning and the child bearing both. Yes, I think in this case Tahrl is a much better man than I.”

“What?” Elanor said.

“I see now what I did not consider when we left Earlinstien. At any given time, either Iola or Elanor will not understand what is being said.”

“You just called yourself a man.”

“Yes, I did.”

“DiKena, Kianan, and Montmorin are not that different,” Iola said. “I can follow most of what is said. Just don’t ask me to repeat it.”

“That just shows you’re not paying attention. Dreaming with your eyes open that is. For myself, I shall stick to Kianan. My cousin, I feel, could use the practice. But come! Why are we standing at

the door? The people of Edgewood have been most kind to make us feel welcome. Let us not squander their hospitality.”

“We would have been within fully half a moon ago if you had not stood so blocking the door,” Tahrl said. “Could not wait to greet us properly. The manners of some could offend even me.”

Sorcha paused, turning in the door and holding up a hand.

“I saw this gesture many times in my days at Magincia. As the only Montmorin at a Kianan school of magic, I figured it for a cultural thing. If you could tell me, Tahrl, what could it mean?”

“It is a reference to reproduction.”

“Really? I never would have guessed.” She rotated her hand, turning it this way and that. “And I thought they liked me. Anatomically impossible, is it not?”

“Speak for yourself,” Iola said, stepping forward, and raised a hand, touching Sorcha’s fingers so that the two seemed to slip together.

“Oh, that might work,” Sorcha said, and behind them, Elanor laughed.

Tahrl put an arm around both Sorcha and Iola, and the three of them entered the house. Finding themselves in a long hall, Tahrl and Iola left their cloaks and riding boots on hooks by the door, and then they crossed to a room with a long table holding an assortment of bread and cheese.

“What did I tell you,” Gran said, filling two mugs from a pitcher of dark cider, and taking them to Tahrl and Iola. “The generosity of the people of Edgewood knows no bounds. That one gentleman in particular has been most generous. Aaron? I wonder where he has disappeared to? It matters not.”

Gran returned to the table where Elanor was already preparing two plates taken from the food of the table, and these they carried to Tahrl and Iola who had both settled onto cushions before the fire.

“Now,” Gran said, finding a cushion of his own. “How does the last son of the house of Morgan fare?”

“As well as can be expected if not more so,” Tahrl said. “We are ahead of schedule on the reconstruction of Highwall. We have to be. More and more people are drawn to us each day.”

“It has become something of a necessity,” Iola said. “As you may have known, someone did not want to rebuild Highwall at all. A monument to the Windmasters, he said.”

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“There are so few of them left. We shall forget them altogether without such monuments.”

“Never.”

“Moonlight. Riverstone. Tigerwind. Dewshine. Snowflower,” he said, counting them on his fingers. “Have I missed anyone?”

“Firesong,” Sorcha said. “Spiderthistle.”

Tahlr looked to his hands, searching fingers for names that may have slipped through his grasp.

“That is all of them,” Iola said.

“It can’t be. So few.” He tapped out the names on his fingers, saying each one in a whisper that only he could hear.

“Their number will not grow. It still surprises me that so many survived the Ivory Tower. Did not lose themselves in that fire.”

“The Ivory Tower,” Gran said at the edge of his cushion as if he might not be able to sit still, and looking, Tahlr noticed that Elanor was at quiet attention as if even her breath would obscure the words too much to be understood. “The Ivory Tower,” Gran said again as if his words had disappeared into the wind and he must speak them again to make them whole. “I have never heard an adequate explanation. There may not be one, I know; but, the three of you together. You were there.” He looked in turn from Tahlr to Iola to Sorcha. “You three were there. Perhaps together you might explain what those alone cannot.”

A sliver of shadow like the echo of a forgotten memory touched the back of Tahlr’s mind, and he saw Armada for the briefest of moments standing amidst lightning and darkness and fire. He turned, looking to Iola, seeing the memory of shadow’s light in her eye, and he reached for her hand, feeling fingers link one with the other.

“I do not know if I could,” he said, looking to Sorcha who did nothing but return his gaze. “I do not think any of us.” His voice trailed off into the hush of a whisper, standing at the pinnacle of the Ivory Tower, and he opened his eyes, seeing the whole of the land spread out before him.

“The Greater Darkness was put to rest,” Sorcha said. “Allowed to stop.”

“Have you ever felt yourself angry, happy, sad, and suddenly not felt that way anymore? It was like that.” He remembered Armada at the peak of the Ivory Tower surrounded by darkness and chaos with the flute in her hands. “You’re angry, screaming, arguing.”

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Suddenly someone says something- does something. Or doesn't say something- does nothing."

"Suddenly you're not angry anymore," Iola said, "and you don't even know why."

The traces of a melody were locked forever in the deepest corners of his mind, and he remembered three words that had changed the world from the beginning until the end of time.

"Not much of an explanation, I know," Tahrl said. "You simply open your eyes, and it is a whole new world."

"Love," Iola said.

"Yes, like that; better than an argument. You see someone. Someone you've never met. Someone you've know forever. It matters not. Perchance she says something- does something. Suddenly she is the most beautiful, wonderful, person you have ever met. In that one breath, the whole of the world is made new again. I'm sorry we don't have a more coherent answer."

"Urtha and I have been married for something like thirty years," Gran said. "I understand more than you think. It is a good answer. I'm not sure it is the answer to my question."

Tahrl looked to the fresh wood of the floor, watching the play of shadow and light; the fire traced flickering patterns across the floor as it caressed the shavings and wood in the fireplace. Between darkness and light, shapes as faint as the daylight moon shimmered, flickering in their dance across the floor. Armada had stood among the dancers, leading them, claiming the song that drove them for her own, and they had welcomed her, slipping into day for night.

"Everything has its beginning and its end with the Windmasters," Iola said, pulling Tahrl from the storm, and he looked to her before turning his eyes to Sorcha, watching the magician nod her head ever so slightly in agreement. "Their hopes. Dreams. Everything they desire; everything they know."

"Every fire that drove them," Sorcha said. "Every fear that they fled."

"They could not forgive themselves," Tahrl said, remembering lords of wind and fire and storm at the pinnacle of the Ivory Tower, watching them breathe silence over the world. "For failing to save the DiKena, they could not ask us the one thing they needed. The one thing we did not know to give."

"I forgive you," Iola whispered, and the silence flowed in behind her words, filling every corner and every space in the room. It flowed

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around them, touching breath and caressing bone, and the dark had faded like mist beneath the morning sun, leaving only traces of the rainbow to remember it by.

“In that moment without time, the world was made new once more.” He let the breath go, feeling it slip from him like autumn leaves before the snow. “That is our answer. I hope someday that you find the question to quench it.”



*The morning was music drifting through the air like traces of sunlight cast in silver and gold, and the morning was music drifting like the breeze to touch the soul. The music was warmth to soften the lingering chill of the night, and the music was light to fade the shadows and dark of the night. The people of Edgewood gathered around the northern road with their morning tasks and chores forgotten as if the song called to them and named this morning a holiday. Tahrl and Iola stood on the porch, watching the people, watching the far ends of the road, and Sorcha stood with them with Elanor and Gran at her side. The one seemed almost to appear on the far road, on the north road, topping a rise and stepping into view, and her fingers seemed to shimmer and shine with a light of silver and gold and the crystal wind reflecting the sun. She did not hurry, letting the music flow around her and spread before her seeping into them, and the people of Edgewood stood as still as trees with the song of the flute growing all around them. With the flute in her hands and touched to her lips, she walked among them, crossing into Edgewood and approaching Tahrl and Iola. Standing before them, turning to face the people of Edgewood, Armada played her flute, letting the music fade and drift around them. When she at last lowered the flute, the music echoed and drifted for a long time among the people, lingering in their hearts and ears, and then the people wept and cheered for the song that they all had shared.*

“Iola,” Armada said, climbing the step, throwing her arm around her niece while still holding the flute with one hand. “Faring well, I trust? And you, Tahrl? The needs of Highwall are not too overwhelming?”

“No burden that Iola and I cannot bear together,” Tahrl said.

“That is good. It has been far too long since I was last among you,” she said and then turned to Sorcha, stretching fingers, locking

hands with the magician. “Much too long since I last laid eyes on you, Sorcha. How do you fare?”

“Very well indeed for I am among family,” Sorcha said.

“That is good.” Raising their twinning and interlocked fingers, she kissed the back of Sorcha’s hand. “Gran; Elanor,” she said, turning to them. “I come recently from Earlinstien only to learn that you were already on the road to Edgewood.”

“If I had but known you were bound for Earlinstien, we would have waited for you to travel together,” Gran said.

“It is better that you did not. I was at Earlinstien more recently than you might believe. You,” she said, turning on Elanor. “I understand that congratulations are in order. You are soon to be remarried.”

“Yes,” Elanor said. “To a worthy gentleman of the house of Sarbond ap Tycraig. I believe it was my cousin Sorcha who first introduced us many years ago.”

“We were ten, if memory serves,” Sorcha said. “I did not know what joy and happiness the meeting would one day bring.”

“Sister, a kiss for your trouble.”

“But come,” Armada said. “Let us inside. There must be a breakfast table here someplace.”

With an arm to Sorcha and another to Elanor, Armada pulled them into the house, trailing Tahrl, Gran and Iola. They found the long table waiting for them with a pot of thick porridge and stacks of flat stone fire cake.

“You must send word of any detail changes,” Tahrl said, claiming a still steaming bowl. “I want very much to attend this one.”

“Oh, Tahrl, if only you had a more conventional wife,” Elanor said. “Someone who would not insist on traveling with you. Stay home and see to the affairs of your house and family.”

“Iola and I,” Tahrl said. “There is nothing traditional about our union. A formal marriage would mean nothing to the Dryn.”

“And without a king on the Kianan throne,” Iola said, “there is none among the Kianan to recognize such a marriage. It matters not. We are content.”

“Without a king,” Gran said. “How much longer can this continue, Tahrl? No king on the Kianan throne. It is not good for the people.”

“I know; the Kianan are fracturing,” Tahrl said. “The noble houses are all but gone. Those that remain cannot agree on a successor.”

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“As long as the Ivory Tower lies abandoned and ruined, there shall be no unity,” Armada said. “The Kianan need the symbol. Memory of nightmare and chaos keeps them away.”

“On this, we have always been agreed. The Kianan must reclaim the Ivory Tower. The university and library must be rebuilt if we are to find ourselves again.”

“You may have allies there, Tahrl. I understand the magicians still plan to move the school of magic to the Ivory Tower.”

“That remains the goal,” Sorcha said. “It still remains many years in the future before such a plan could reach completion.”

“Do they still intend to rule?” Tahrl said.

“It has been some time since I was last permitted to know the thoughts of the council. I have become something of an outcast for dabbling with wizardry; but, yes, Fagan Nye and the council would rule.”

“This is most troubling.”

“The master magicians are far too willful and independent to be content with group rule,” Armada said. “Should they try to claim the Ivory Tower, the council will be broken by its own petty squabbles and bickering.”

“We are of one mind on this,” Sorcha said.

“I fear any king of the Kianan shall be born in blood,” Tahrl said. “If a king does not claim the throne, the Kianan may become a sun-dered people like the Dryn.”

“From which we are only now starting to recover.”

“The search continues?”

“The search goes well,” Armada said. “I have spread the dream of Greenhaven to a forest far to the north. In less than one-hundred years, we shall have a sister city.”

“So it is shown that there is hope for us all.”

“Always,” Armada said, touching a hand to her flute.



*The forest called to them with the silent echo and memory of silver music carried on the breeze, and they answered, entering the forest, traveling for a day and a night and a day before reaching Greenhaven. The community had grown, adding many more houses and dwellings to rest against the roots of the great trees. Greenhaven had grown to the point where the Dryn shared food and cropland beyond the forest with the people of Edgewood. They remained in*

Greenhaven for little more than a day before they pushed deeper into the forest, making for the Redstained mountains beyond. Ede traveled with them; even though, she was now the governess of Greenhaven. Among the trees and even in the low mountains, she could still touch the forest and know all that transpired within the canopy of trees. To the edge of the forest between the trees and the mountains, they reached the new mansion north of Balthazar's old home. It was the last resting point before the ascent into the mountains began, and into the mountains, they took their horses, climbing quickly, leaving the wood and the trees behind them. In the high lands, they found Teresa, sitting on a rock and looking out over the forest of Morningsglory spread like an ocean of green rippling in the wind far below them. The founder of Greenhaven watched them as they climbed from their horses, and saying nothing, she only smiled. Moonlight was there, resting next to Teresa and so was Riverstone, and the two Windmasters did nothing but watch as Armada sat on the rock next to her mother and looked out over the forest.

"Beautiful," Armada finally said, resting her chin on her knees without once turning her gaze from the forest far below.

"Yes," Teresa said. "It takes me back; this does. We lived in these mountains with Bevan, Mathew and Hamlin. I don't even know what they did. It wasn't like there were that many Kianan left in the mountains at that point. Just didn't know where to go when they stopped gold mining and just stayed in the same falling down ruin. Oh, there was Calantha and Elisabeth, my mother. They were never mean to us. Well, not that Calantha or Elisabeth would ever let me see, anyway. We weren't happy; I understood that much. It's just that's the way things were. I was never really sure what finally happened. Guess I just got too old. Was starting to show. Anyway, Hamlin tried to wrestle with me the way they did with Callie and Elisabeth. I didn't like that. It hurt. Next thing I know Elisabeth is standing over him, and he's just lying there. Not moving. Then Bevan and Mathew are there, and they just start hitting her. Hitting and hitting and hitting. They won't stop. Everybody is screaming. And Callie tells me to run. Run! And I just never look back."

"That is when Iona took you in if I recall the story correctly."

"Well, I was too young to be a rival, yes. Too young to fend for myself. I don't know how I managed to reach the forest to be found. She said I had a knack for the wood. It's why she let me stay longer

than most would have. It was when I started to get these ideas about uniting the Dryn. That scared her. Why she finally drove me away.”

“I remember Iona,” Ede said. “She was already quite old when I was very young. She learned to believe in the dream.”

“She learned to believe in the dream, yes. Never trusted me. Always questioning. Always. Kept me honest. She was right about Delan. He was dangerous. That arrogant, self-righteous, wizard. He could have pulled the wrath of the Kianan down around us with a word. Standing in his presence, he made it very clear that he was passing judgment on us. In his manner. The way he talked. He was afraid. His whole life had been chosen by others, and he didn’t even know it. To save Greenhaven, I showed him just a glimpse of this. It changed him forever. Who would have believed that soulless bastard would turn into such a wonderful, caring, Kianan. On the day we met him, if Iona had told me that he was the one I would love beyond all others for as long as I should live. I would have laughed in her face.”

“He had that effect on people,” Tahrl said. “You’ve all heard the story more times than I have told it. I was doing research on the Windmasters, trying to find proof that they weren’t evil. I had stumbled across one work in particular that hinted at them being much better than the Kianan had come to believe them to be. So I went to the reference stacks, and there is this storyteller. This minstrel. And he is asking after the book. What could he want with it? Probably looking for more tales of great heroes slaughtering evil monsters. I try to sneak past, but the researcher Alex is speaking with points me out. Says I’ve been working with the book and gives the general location of it. Alex and I just look at each other like we know the other is intent on destroying it. I start to run, and if you had ever seen the stacks, you would know what an absurd statement that is. There we are in this ridiculous chase through the maze. Finding the shelf. Reaching the book. And we both glare at each other. Oh, you want the work for gory stories. To show how monstrous they were. Kianan never remember the DiKena legends. Somewhere in all of that we started listening to what the other was saying. We started laughing. Then talking. And we never stopped.”

“He was full of surprises,” Sorcha said. “Alex; it’s what he wanted me to call him. He came to me at Magincia. Asked me questions about the Earlinstien cathedral. He was troubled. He wanted to speak with the council, but they did not want to listen. That last

time before he told them he had been the Avatar of Magincia, he looked as if his heart was breaking. Like the world was asking him to sacrifice everything that he was. And he would do it if it would save even just one life. He would do anything for us. Even give the life from his heart.”

“He loved the people more than anything else in the world,” Elanor said. “To sing and tell stories. I remember the first time I saw him at table with my grandfather, Hath, and grandmother, Eleanor who I was named for. They hung on his every word. His laugh would fill the hall, drowning out everything else. My father here takes me to him; introduces me. I remember he picked me up. Held me in the air. He was so bright. So full of life it was almost blinding.”

“Nothing could hurt you while he was there,” Iola said. “The campfire beneath the trees and the stars almost weren’t big enough to hold him. His heart was always with us, but he belonged to the world. He was away more often than he was with us. His return was always cause for celebration. For stories. For music. He would sit before the great bonfire. Embers spinning into the sky like stars. We hung on his words; nothing else mattered until the story was done or the song finished. Even surrounded by my sisters, mothers and aunts, I always knew the stories were told just for me.”

“He knew everyone by name,” Gran said. “Their family. Their history. He was at my wedding. Gathering of so many houses for one feast. So many people at table. Suddenly, the only sound was his voice. Telling the story of how Urtha and I met. Our courtship. Our choice. If I had told the tale, it would have been nothing. Of interest only to our parents. When he spoke of how we found each other, it was a great romance. A tale fit for every table of every house and family.”

“He belonged to the world because he cared about the world, and my mother above all,” Ede said, looking to Teresa. “He did not leave her side the whole time she was pregnant with Armada. We all feared she would not survive the birth. Except for him. He held her all through the labor. I remember. I was there. He held Armada as she was born. Holding my new sister. Presenting her to Teresa. He sang her first song to her while Teresa held her.”

“The song of the earthsheart,” Moonlight said. “I remember hearing it for the first time. In the mountains. Echoing with the wind. Filling us with hope. Sweeping away all doubt. I searched for the

## **The Magic Flute**

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one who could make such music. I found a Kianan with a star in his hands, and for the first time in my life, I saw the sunrise.”

“He was mine,” Teresa said, rising from the stone. “The world, I fear, seems hollow and empty without him in it. I have seen my last sunrise. Do not forget him. Do not let his dream fade.”

“Never,” Armada said.

“Together you are strong.” Teresa stepped among them, looking always to the forest far below. “Remember,” she said. “Remember who you are, and the world is made new once more.”

She stood still, looking out over the ocean of green, and then stretched her arms wide to the sky as if she might touch the sun. Her fingers spread, growing, stretching, yielding leaves, while her toes sunk deep into the soft earth beneath her feet, and where Teresa had once stood, there was only a tree to dwarf them all. They rested for a time in the shade of her branches, watching the sun drift lazily through the sky, but finally, they returned to their horses to begin the long trek back to Greenhaven. Tahrl looked back one last time, finding Moonlight and Riverstone far overhead returning to the deep mountains, and he saw Armada sitting with her back against the trunk of the one tree. She raised the flute of gold and amber sunshine to her lips, and then the music touched him, filling him with warmth even as he turned his thoughts back to home.

**Also by Keith D. Jones**

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*Tourist Hunter (2016)*

*Pyrrhic Kingdom (2013)*

*The Faire Folk of Gideon: Pin the  
Tail on the Donkey (2001)*

*The Etymology of Fire (2004)*