

KAREN FROST



DEATH'S
CHAMPION



CHAPTER 1

“Thus it was decreed the world of the gods and the world of the humans should no longer converge, and the gods above would not interfere in the affairs of humans below but for Vrithar, who sets the destinies of all.”

– The Salyar Book of the Dead

DEATH’S INSTRUCTIONS—AS RELAYED THROUGH HIS servant, the black-winged Lymon—had been clear: find the loci of Dark Magic, bring them to Lymon for destruction, and make the world safe from the Darkness. But I had failed, and rather than being securely removed from the mortal plane, the Dark Magic in the last locus had burst loose of its confinement. Now the Darkness, a malevolent, semiliving entity that was both a place and a thing, was pressing in on the mortal plane on all sides, intent on destroying it and every living thing in it. And I, a dead girl indentured to Death to act as his champion in the world of the living, was the only human who knew about the looming threat—and if I believed Lymon, the only person who could possibly stop it. That is, if stopping it was even achievable anymore. Even the gods didn’t know.

Lymon hadn’t said how to push back the Darkness nor had he told me where to go to do it. He had simply opened a Gate from the white place between the land of the living and the dead and motioned for me to go. Walk through and save the world or fail and watch the world and everyone I love die. The stakes were too terrible to even stop and consider. I went.

The first thing to hit me on the other side of the Gate was the heat. It was a living, breathing *thing*. It shoved against me like a belligerent boxer, forcing me to step back, landing blow after heavy blow against the dry

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skin of my face. It sucked the air from my lungs and left them gasping and empty. I bent double, struggling for breath as the burning heat crawled down my throat and into my lungs, taking up all the space there. Where was I?

As I stared at the ground, hands on my knees, the popping, crackling sound of fire filled the air all around me. The burning of pine needles produced a constant hiss like rain. Wood splintered and burst as the sap within it liquefied and then vaporized. Branches plopped to the ground with soft sighs. My heart beat faster. These sounds were wrong. They signaled danger.

I forced myself to stand up, to see where Lymon had sent me and to possibly understand why. The air was thick and gray with smoke. It pricked my eyes and made my nostrils burn. I pressed the heels of my palm into my eyes, then wiped away the tears that slipped out. Through the smoke was an inferno that had neither beginning nor end. It stretched in every direction, a terrible, hopeless firestorm unlike anything I had ever seen or ever could have imagined. Trees that had stood for centuries wore crowns of flames dozens of feet tall. The moss on the ground was a carpet of orange embers. Burning ash flew like fireflies on currents of air.

Through the trees in front of me lay the ruins of huts, ranged in a circle. By instinct, I approached them, cutting between the blazing torches that had once been fallen logs and saplings to avoid the worst of the flames on the forest floor. These houses, too, had been turned into so much firewood. Flames licked up their sides and reached out with fiery hands through open doors and collapsed roofs, pulling whatever was left of the structures to the ground with violent malice. I looked around for some clue to what Lymon wanted me to do here. A village on fire in the middle of the woods, too late to save. What was the link that connected it to the Darkness?

Then I noticed something to my left that made my heart skip a beat. It was a tree I knew from years of hiding behind it, ducking away from my brothers during games of hide-and-seek. Its gnarled trunk and twisted limbs like the antlers of a deer were unmistakable. *No. It couldn't be.* Deep, bone-chilling horror filled me like water poured into a glass. I looked closer at the huts in front of me, how they were arrayed around a central clearing, each house small and round. I knew this clearing. I knew this place. I knew it better than I knew any other place in the entire world, in fact.

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I was in Thamir, unmistakably and undeniably. The place where I'd been born and raised, where my family lived—was burning.

Urgency and panic crashed over me. I pulled the front of my black tunic up over my nose and mouth with my left hand, trying to block out the smoke choking my lungs. Frantic energy filled me. My family. I had to find my family.

I ran forward toward the village, dodging trees and huts, oblivious to anything but the need to find them. The hair on my arms stood on end, unable to offer relief from the relentless heat that came in waves. I coughed, the thick smoke clogging my throat and lungs, and pushed forward anyway.

As I ran through the clearing and then past it toward the huts that lay sprinkled among the trees on the other side, the fire didn't abate. It was a sea of red and orange that melted like molten wax from trees and huts alike. My mind raced, full of questions, but only one mattered: what had happened here?

Something caught my eye, and I slid to a stop, my boots skidding on the charred embers that blanketed the forest floor. It was an arrow, stuck deeply into the frame of Odev's smoldering hut. I didn't recognize the white fletching. At the sight of it, ice filled my veins so quickly I might have completely frozen there but for the heat of the flames. An attack. This fire wasn't an accident. Someone had set it. The Northmen.

Months ago, a small army of Northmen had helped Iliryan Dark Mages open a Gate for the One God to enter our world. We had stopped those mages, but now our northern neighbors had begun their invasion in earnest, not waiting for a second invitation. Ilirya had guessed it would come but had been helpless to stop it. Thamir, my beloved home, was right in the invaders' path.

I drew my magic to my free right hand, ready to fight if they were still here but at the same time terrified. I was one person against an army.

The world turned blue as I raised a shield of magic around myself. My mind was still churning sluggishly, struggling to overcome disbelief and horror at the scene around me. Houses I'd seen only half a year ago were now kindling. Had the garrison that lay between the border and Thamir had time to send a warning to my village and the rest of the Ice Crown? Had anyone survived? I had only questions and no answers.

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I ran north past more collapsed houses, recognizing them clearly now, even though they were little more than the charred bones of the places they had once been. Although my heart cried for them, there was no time to mourn. I was too full of panic and fear to pay much attention to the sizzle of fire searing the soles of my boots. An ember landed on my sleeve and burned all the way to my skin before I noticed it and patted it out. Everywhere I looked, more destruction. On my right, Ma Ren's hut had lost two of its walls. More arrows with white fletchings were lodged in the two that remained. On my left, Ioffren's hut had collapsed entirely.

Dread turned my stomach into a hard knot. My throat was narrow as a reed, my lungs two stones. *No. No. No.* The words came with every beat of my heart, every footfall. Not my village. Not my family. This terrible nightmare couldn't be real.

I saw no bodies, but it was no comfort. My friends and family could be inside their ruined homes, trapped before they could escape, smothered or burned, the places they'd lived turned into their funeral pyres. I forced my feet to fly faster, fast as peregrine falcons in full dive, fast as the racing horses of Rath, ducking around trees and jumping over blazing moss as I moved away from the center of the village and toward its edge. I had to reach my parents' house. I had to know what had become of them.

My breath came in short gasps, choked by fear and the oppressive smoke. My heart beat faster than hummingbird wings. A terrible fear nipped at my heels, always urging me faster: what if I was too late?

When I reached the house, I slammed to a halt. It was as if I'd been punched in the stomach. I stifled a moan of despair and wrapped my arms around myself, fighting not to collapse to my knees. My heart sank, trembling.

Little remained of the place I had once called home. Some of the thick logs of its walls lay askew on the ground as though scattered by the swipe of a careless giant. Nothing remained of the thatch roof. What few possessions we'd had were lost within the broiling cauldron of fire. Surely nothing inside had survived.

My body shivered despite the sweltering heat, making my teeth chatter. I clenched my jaw to stop them. Had my parents been at home when the fire started? Had they made it out? Although I could create mage fire,

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my magical affinity didn't make me immune to the heat of regular fire. I couldn't walk through the flames engulfing my home to look for...

For the space of several breaths, I was numb, unable to allow myself to even consider what might lie inside. The world was filled only with despair and the sound of crackling fire. I had been through many things over the last few months, but nothing had prepared me for this.

The tears that had been building in my eyes broke free, flowing down my cheeks and onto the scorched earth. If the water sizzled when it hit, unable to last longer than a few seconds in the smoke-filled air, I didn't see it. I should have been here. I should have been here to protect them. I knew the danger Thamir was in. I should have helped fight.

Self-recriminations filled me, more numerous than grains of sand in Rath's desert; all the things I should have done but hadn't. Guilt and blame for the destruction around me lodged in my throat. I gasped, struggling to breathe past this lump. I was a war mage, and I had failed to protect my own family. I had crisscrossed the world looking for loci of Dark Magic but had never once come home to see my family. I was too late, and it was all my fault.

A small earthquake rocked the village. The shockwave was strong enough that I lost my balance and had to throw out my arms to keep from tipping over. I was instantly on alert, looking around for the source. There were no earthquakes in the Ice Crown. It must have been an explosion. Were the Northmen still here, wreaking havoc? Had someone or several "someones"—maybe even my family—escaped the devastation? Or had the garrison turned up to push the Northmen back?

Hope, sparking small and delicate, burst into flame deep inside me, chasing away some of the black misery there. I abandoned my ruined home without a second thought, racing in the direction of the explosion. The rushing of blood in my head drowned out all other sounds, even the persistent sizzle of the fire. I didn't have time to worry I could be running into the entire Northman army. If there were Northmen still prowling around the village, I would fight, no matter how many they were.

I followed the sounds of fighting deeper into the woods, away from the burning houses. As I traveled along the paths of my childhood, a tingling sensation tickled at my mind. It was the sort of feeling one got when being watched. If the hair on the back of my neck hadn't already been raised

from the heat, it might have stood up at the feeling. But this feeling of wrongness, of something being out of place, was a subtle feeling, and I had other things to worry about. If a Northman lookout was observing me, the rest of the army would be close by.

The farther I ran west from the village, the more smoke I encountered. Wind had carried it away from the fires, and now it gathered in thick clouds that sat just above the forest floor. The world was dyed a shade of dark gray until I could only see a few dozen feet in front of me. I listened for sounds that didn't belong in the forest to tell me where to go, relying on my ears rather than my eyes. More powerful explosions rocked the forest. The ground pitched under my feet. I felt a niggling of doubt. Why were we so far from the center of Thamir?

I rounded a thick stand of trees and ran smack into an unexpected sight: a massive dome of bold purple magic. It was just visible in glimpses through the wispy gray smoke. Inside, dozens of people were huddled close together, clutching each other and staring out at the woods around them with wide, fearful eyes. The despair that had pulled at my feet as I ran, dragging me down with infinitely heavy weights, dissipated in a flash. My heart leapt, light as one of the floating lanterns used in the winter equinox ceremony in King's City carrying hope for the new year. I recognized each and every one of the people inside the shield. They were Thamir's villagers!

Magic the color of the shield only belonged to one person in all Ilirya. In fact, I could just make him out inside the dome, throwing enormous blasts of purple mage fire into the smoke. I would have recognized Kjelborn, the legendary Sword of Ilirya, anywhere. *He* was the source of the massive explosions. I hurtled through his shield, overjoyed to see both the villagers and him, but the villagers shied away and shrieked, terrified. For all they knew, I was a Northman charging them from outside the smoke. They clutched each other, weaponless and dressed in whatever they'd been able to grab, their faces drawn tight with alarm.

My hands shot up, palms facing them. "It's okay. It's me, Aeryn."

"Aeryn? Can it really be you?" Ma Ren, soot-stained and trembling, stepped forward. Her brown eyes were as round as plates, her black hair bedraggled and full of twigs. Although she'd known me since the day I was born, she looked at me as though she didn't recognize me.

"Yes, it's me. I'm...here to help."

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The urge to search for my family among the villagers, to reassure myself they had escaped the destruction of the village and were safe, was overwhelming. I forced myself to stay focused on Kjelborn. My priority had to be helping him. If he was throwing fireballs, it was because the Northmen were nearby, and if he were to be overpowered, everyone under his protection would be in mortal danger, including my family—if by some miracle they were here.

Kjelborn, his rugged face dyed brown by decades in the sun, was so intent on the enemy concealed somewhere in the woods beyond that he didn't notice my arrival by his side. He was drenched with sweat. Salt collected in the fine wrinkles of his forehead. His short hair was matted to his head. A delicate steam rose from the cuffs of the brown robe he wore, caused by the purple mage fire burning around his hands. It was clear he had been fighting for some time, but how much longer could he last? He was a Great Mage and a demigod, but he was old, and he couldn't hold out forever against an entire enemy army.

I peered in the direction he was facing, trying to see the enemy hidden there, but I saw nothing. The smoke provided an opaque, impenetrable cover. If the Northmen massed an attack, we likely wouldn't see it coming until it was too late.

Laying my hand gently on Kjelborn's shoulder to draw his attention, I asked, "How many are out there?" For all I knew, it could have been a hundred or ten thousand.

He startled, reflexively throwing his thin body away from me and raising his hands in preparation to attack. Purple crackled at his fingertips, sparking dangerously. His brown eyes registered shock as they recognized me. His mouth was slack. "Aeryn? But...what are you doing here?"

I shook my head. Since realizing I was in Thamir, I had completely forgotten about Lymon's directive to me to stop the Darkness. Now, however, was not the time to explain. "It's a long story. What's happening?"

Kjelborn quickly collected himself. "An hour ago, dozens of Northmen entered the village and set fire to it. They're likely a scouting party from the main body of the army." His normally calm voice was staccato with stress. He paused grimly, then grunted, "We're trapped."

I chewed my lower lip, considering how we could get the villagers to a safe place far from the invaders. For a moment, I thought of opening a

Gate to King's City. I could do it using the infusion of Death's power that Lymon had given me right before I arrived in Thamir. It would be as easy as snapping my fingers. We could step through and be free of all the danger and devastation around us.

But I hesitated. It would be a huge risk, one better taken as an absolute last resort. I was a war mage, not a true Gate mage; my Gates might not be normal Gates. It was possible I was the only one who could pass through them and anyone else who tried would be killed. After all, Lymon had warned me to be careful of using Death's magic around humans. It had a tendency to create collateral damage among the living, he had said ominously. I didn't want to kill my friends and family in the course of trying to save them.

The alternative was to help Kjelborn fight. Perhaps together we could push the Northmen back and then escape to some part of the Ice Crown that hadn't yet been invaded.

"Can you hold out much longer?"

The sporadic twitching of Kjelborn's left eye told me the strain he was under. He shook his head, grimacing. "No."

A volley of pale green mage fire hit his shield from somewhere on our right, crackling against it like lightning. The magic dissipated without breaking the shield, but even so, several of the people behind us, both men and women, screamed in fear, their voices shrill and brittle. A child began to wail before its cries were muffled.

The terror swirling in the air behind us was contagious. My heart beat faster. The Northmen had at least one pyromancer with them. What other mages were out there? What would appear next out of the smoke? If Kjelborn was already tired, we would be hard-pressed to move our unseen enemy a foot, much less the distance we would need to make our escape.

"What do we do?" My voice came out pinched.

Kjelborn grunted, sweat glistening in his thick eyebrows like dew on a spider's web. "We fight until we can fight no more." He said the words with determination, his eyes free of fear or sadness. Kjelborn, the great savior of Ilirya, who had come to King's City to stop a god from entering our world even when he had no magic and nothing but two knives in his hands, would gladly die trying to save the people under his protection. That was

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who he was, the very essence of his being. He was a hero, possibly the finest ever born in Ilirya.

But who was *I*? I wasn't sure anymore. I was no longer the simple young Aeryn who had grown up in Thamir, but I wasn't the war mage student from Windhall University either. Who did that make me? And more frightening, how much longer would I be me? My war magic teacher, Raelan Bloodmoon, once said, "Everything in this world has a price. At some time, in some way, the debt must be paid: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." I had made a deal with Death to return to the land of the living in return for becoming his mortal champion, but he hadn't said how long I could remain here.

I overlaid my own magic shield on Kjelborn's to strengthen it, gritting my teeth with determination. "We'll push them back, then run."

Kjelborn threw a jet of purple fire blindly in the direction from which the enemy blast had come. Without being able to see the mage who had sent it, however, he had all but no chance of hitting his target. The magic disappeared, swallowed whole by the smoke. He growled. "We can't run without knowing where the enemy is. We can't risk running straight into them. Or into the fire."

The fire. I had been so preoccupied worrying about the enemy soldiers I hadn't even considered what the flames consuming Thamir meant for our escape. I stared out into the ashen smoke around us, ignoring the stinging in my eyes and the burning in my nose, trying to remember where the fire had spread. But it was no use. I had been so distracted trying to find the explosions I hadn't paid attention to anything around me. The flames could be almost anywhere.

A baby began to cry behind me, and I turned to look, compelled by some preternatural intuition. There, tucked among the cluster of villagers, their faces white with fear, were my brother Kem and his wife, Denver. In her arms, she held a baby girl with hair black as the night sky and eyes like tiny opals. Even though I'd never seen the child before, I knew her immediately. It was my niece, born after I'd been abducted and taken to King's City. Her face was red and tearstained as she screeched with hunger or fatigue or fear, or maybe all three at once.

An explosion of joy coursed through my veins. At least some of my family had survived! But my elation turned to thick, sickly dread as I

realized what their presence meant. If Kjelborn and I couldn't find a way to repel the Northmen or help the villagers escape, my family might die here, before my own eyes. The smoke became a rope that tightened in a noose around my neck. How could I save them?

Kill the Northmen. The voice that whispered the words was a strange one, like a hundred serpents slithering over and around each other at the bottom of a deep hole. I looked for the speaker, but there was no one. The voice continued, *You have the power. Take them. Save your loved ones.*

I realized with a shock the voice was coming not from another person but from within my own mind. And then a second, more surreal shock: it was Death's magic hissing these words to me. I blinked, disbelieving. The idea was so absurd that I could barely believe I'd even thought it. Magic couldn't *talk*. And yet...it was. I could feel it. The words and thoughts came from the god's magic circulating in my veins, animated by a strange sentience of their own.

The magic drew a picture in my mind, showing me how I could save my village and my family. It would be easy, the magic promised. All I had to do was let it work. The magic of a god was far more powerful than the magic of any mortal. The Northmen would be neutralized. The villagers of Thamir would be safe.

My stomach lurched. I wanted to save my family, but Death's magic was proposing a massacre. *No*, I thought, *I can't. I won't.*

It is the only way, the magic said.

I looked at the terrified faces of my family, then back to Kjelborn, staring blindly into a bleak gray world. He was right: we were trapped. And we couldn't hold off the Northmen forever.

Find the enemy's lifelines, the magic ordered.

Although I had never seen a lifeline before, I obeyed the command, reaching beyond myself into the forest for the Northman lifelines scattered individually and in groups among the trees. Death's magic highlighted them to me, sparks of life that shivered and shook among the smoke and trees like tiny flames. They were a sea of candles, lighting up the forest. And, I noticed with horror, they had us almost completely surrounded.

The lifelines were bright and sparkling, except for one, which was blacker than night and seemed to deflect my gaze when I looked at it. It did not belong to a Northman; it was something else entirely. But I didn't

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have time to wonder about it. The Northmen were my focus. *They* were the sword hanging over my family.

Take them and save the ones you love, Death's magic said.

Dazzling as the sparks were, the Northmen's lives were tethered to our world by only the thinnest of strings. The line between life and death, it seemed, was no thicker than a hair's breadth. I reached out and, with what felt like no effort at all, cut those strings. All around us, hidden by the smoke and the trees, Northmen soldiers fell silently, limply, to the forest floor, every light snuffed. Dozens of souls had been sent to Death in an instant. I had killed them all.

Desolate, empty silence filled the air. I dropped to my knees, hands to my mouth. I had never killed anyone before. Now I had killed dozens in an instant. My hands shook. It took everything I had not to retch.

"Are you all right?" Kjelborn's voice was too loud in my ears as he crouched next to me, putting his hand on my shoulder. His fingers were like claws, and I shied away from them.

My body was cold and stiff from using Death's magic, colder than an Ice Crown winter. I had used much more magic than I'd realized. I couldn't feel the toes of my right foot. They were encased in ice. I tried to swallow, but my mouth was drier than sawdust.

Kjelborn had killed dozens, if not hundreds, of enemy soldiers while defending Ilirya, but I wasn't him. Although fate had chosen me to be a war mage, I had never wanted to kill anyone. The newly made corpses weighed so heavily on me, they bowed my shoulders. I didn't want this. I had never wanted this.

Kjelborn raised his head and looked around, his keen brown eyes probing through the smoke as though he could see what lay in the forest beyond. But of course he couldn't. He couldn't see the lifeless bodies lying there, destined to turn to dust on the Iliryan side of the border. He looked back at me, and his expression was momentarily sharp with suspicion. "You've done something." It was a statement, not a question. He wrinkled his nose as though smelling sulphurous brimstone. "The reek of Death's corrosive touch is everywhere. The air is crackling with it. What's happened?"

"I...killed them all."

"You what?" His eyes bulged in disbelief.

"The villagers are safe now."

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My head started to spin. The cold in my body was freezing my limbs. I was turning into a statue of ice. I wanted to rush to the villagers, to see whether my parents and my brother Kyan were there, but I was too weak to move. I couldn't even lift a single finger.

The sound of waves lapped against my ears, even though the ocean was hundreds of miles away. Tiny suns danced in front of my eyes. The ground tilted and then raced toward me as I collapsed to the forest floor. Unconsciousness swept over me.

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If I didn't get warm, I would die. I rolled myself tightly into a ball, wrapping my arms around my knees, trying to find heat. Frostbite burned the tips of my fingers and toes. In the Ice Crown, nothing killed faster than the cold. I had to find a way to reheat.

Then an awful flash of memory: nothing would ever make me warm again. A dead body can't reheat itself.

I heard a soft exhalation beside me and froze, trying to recall where I was. The overpowering smell of smoke wafted into my nostrils, strong as a hundred campfires. Wintry, hard ground pushed into my shoulder and hip. These clues jangled inharmoniously with my last memory, which was of standing in the white marble palace of the King of Cats in the Southland capital of Nyara, watching as my friend Asher destroyed the final locus of Dark Magic in our world. I shivered, remembering the sight of the Dark Magic becoming a terrible black cloud that dissipated into the air.

Oh no. Panic filled my chest, hammering at my ribs. My eyes flew open. The Darkness! I had to stop it before it was too late! I tried to scramble to my feet, but I was stopped by a hand firmly but gently pressing against my chest. Kjelborn was sitting beside me.

"It's all right. You're safe."

Kjelborn? I stared at him blankly. What was he doing here, wherever *here* was? I looked around. We were alone somewhere, surrounded by trees. A forest? I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to remember. Were we practicing magic in the woods? No, that couldn't be right. We hadn't done that in months, not since I'd been abducted and brought to Windhall.

The timeline of the last few months was jumbled in my mind, as though someone had put all the events in a mug and shaken them. I

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waggled my head, and in a rush, they gathered themselves together in the correct order. Abruptly, I knew where I was. Thamir. The Northmen. Fear squeezed around my chest like a snake, cutting off my breath. "Where is everyone? How many survived? Are my parents alive?" How long had I been unconscious? Had more Northmen come?

Kjelborn moved his hand to my arm, steadying me. "Relax. Breathe. Everyone survived, including your parents. I sensed the attack before it came and was able to move the villagers away in time and alert the garrison. When the Northmen arrived, they found only empty houses. Aside from a few careless bruises and rolled ankles, everyone is fine."

I let out a breath as the snake uncoiled a little. Kjelborn had once told me he could see "threads of destiny," although he hadn't explained what that meant. Whatever flashes of the future he had seen, and in whatever way, it had been enough to allow him to save Thamir. Thank the gods.

His right hand tightened around my bicep, demanding my attention. "What happened in the forest?"

I ducked my face and rubbed my hands as though I might be able to take away the stain of the blood on them. They trembled at the memory of what I'd done, of the lives I'd taken. I crossed my arms, trapping them against my body. I had saved my family. There was no shame in that. I should be grateful I'd been able to do it. And the Northmen had brought it on themselves by invading. But I couldn't stop the guilt and the awful feeling at the pit of my stomach.

"I told you. I killed the Northmen." I couldn't meet his eyes as I said it.

"But how?"

There was no quick answer to that question. I began to tell him all that had happened to me since our last parting and how I had become Death's champion. In what felt like a lifetime ago, he had warned me not to make deals with Death. He hadn't known it was already too late. I hoped he would understand.

When I finished my recounting, he said, "I see. Death chose you to retrieve the loci of Dark Magic because he can't interfere in the human world himself, and you are the only human who can come and go between the land of the dead and the land of the living because you are already dead." His eyes narrowed. "But why are you *here* now?"

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Unwillingly, my mind flashed to the dozens of Northmen lying dead in the woods, puppets with their strings cut. I had turned Thamir into a graveyard. But this couldn't be why Lymon had sent me here. He didn't care about human wars. There had to be something else. Was the Darkness *here*? Was that the presence I had sensed in the woods?

I pulled my knees to my chest and wrapped my arms around my legs, hugging them tightly. I wasn't dressed to be in the Ice Crown. The cold air passed right through my thin cotton leggings and bit into my thighs. "I don't know."

Kjelborn rubbed the salt-and-pepper stubble on his chin. His hands, I noticed, no longer shook the way they once had, although they would always be gnarled by age. He sighed heavily, his thin shoulders rising and falling. "It seems you and I have the same unfortunate habit of appearing right where the danger is greatest. We are the unwilling playthings of destiny."

He opened his mouth to say something else, but then he stiffened abruptly. His eyes traveled to a point in the woods somewhere beyond us. His look was so intense, I turned and followed his gaze, but I saw nothing, only the last traces of gray smoke twining themselves around the green trees. "What is it?"

"Something that does not belong here." His few words were ominous and full of heavy foreboding.

"Something from the Darkness." It was both a statement and a question at once.

Kjelborn pressed his thin lips together. They were cracked and dry, and a few flakes of white ash still rested on them, as it did in the hair on his head. "I suspect so. It was not here before you arrived, and now it creeps slowly closer."

The skin on my arms tingled. I called magic to my hands, staining them bright blue.

Kjelborn laid his hand against my forearm and shook his head. "I have chased it once already while you were still unconscious, and it only melted away into the woods. Whatever its purpose, for now, it is only to spy."

"But—" If it was from the Darkness, I had to stop it.

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“There is no use chasing after it. The time will come eventually. In the meantime, you must go to Friel. As Lymon has told you nothing about how to stop the Darkness, she will know what you must do.”

“Who?”

Kjelborn’s sad brown eyes looked deeply into mine. They had seen too much hardship in his long lifetime. “She is one of the god-touched, like me. She is the daughter of Hoven the All-Knowing. She will have the answers you seek.”

I stared at him, too shocked to speak.

He snorted, his unexpected amusement incongruous with the mortal seriousness of our conversation. “Did you think I was the only one?”

After learning about Kjelborn’s divine parentage, it had occurred to me there might be more demigods living in our world, but I had been so totally consumed by my search for the loci I hadn’t had time to revisit the issue. Now a dozen questions flooded my mind. Which god was Kjelborn’s parent? Had they met? How often? Since the gods were prohibited from interfering in the mortal plane, how were there demigods here? How many were there? Did he know them all?

I settled on the first and most obvious question. “How do the god-touched exist?”

Kjelborn shrugged. “The gods do not interfere in the societies of men, but that does not mean they are prohibited from *all* association with humans. Throughout history, a handful of gods have amused themselves with mortal liaisons. The existence of the god-touched is a well-kept secret, one guarded closely by their families. Otherwise imagine the temptation of rulers to seek out the god-touched and use them for their own ends.”

If the children shared at least some of the qualities of their divine parent, as Kjelborn seemed to have implied about Friel, I could see why. What monarch wouldn’t move mountains to acquire someone able to predict the future? And who knew what other amazing affinities the god-touched might have? I could imagine the race to collect the demigods and demigoddesses as if they were trophies. No wonder the families hid the secret of their existence.

More questions bubbled into my mind. What did the gods look like? Did they reveal themselves to their human paramours? For how long did

they stay in the mortal plane? Did they love their human consorts? What about their half-human children?

With so many questions, I settled on asking, “How many of the god-touched are in Ilirya?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think many. I have met some over the years, always by chance. I can sense when I’m in their presence, and they in mine. We are kin of a kind, unique in this world.”

Abruptly, he rose. He extended his hand to me. “Thamir has burned to cinders. If the villagers are to survive, they will need more than these woods can give them. I’ll send them to Namoreth, then try to find the body of the Northman army and keep watch.”

His words struck me like a clap of thunder. I had forgotten that the Northmen we’d encountered were only a tiny part of the Northman army. Even now, thousands of enemy soldiers had likely swarmed over the border and were marauding through the Ice Crown, streaming south and east toward the rest of the kingdom. My knees went weak, terrified for my kingdom. “With the Iliryan army still tied down fighting the Southerners, how will Ilirya stop them?”

Kjelborn’s face darkened, full of grim determination. “We fight until we can fight no more.”

It wasn’t enough. *Who* would fight? With what weapons? Thousands of innocent, untrained Iliryans would die if they tried to fight off an invasion, and even then, King’s City would surely fall if the Northmen tried to take it.

Kjelborn put both hands on my shoulders. When his tattered brown sleeve rode up on his right arm, it revealed the last letter in the faded black ink of his old King’s Regiment tattoo. *Death before dishonor*. “The Northmen are for me and others to worry about. We’ll do what we can to slow them. As for you, fate has set you to a larger, more dangerous task. Go, find Friel. She lives in Avgaras, at Mirror Lake.”

I opened my mouth to protest. I couldn’t leave yet. There was still so much to say, so much to do. I hadn’t seen my family since I’d been abducted from my home months ago. What had happened to my parents while I’d been away? I longed to meet my niece too. Surely Lymon wouldn’t begrudge me an hour to see my family.

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Something dark flickered in the corner of my eye. As I turned to look, Kjelborn drew in a sharp breath. In an instant, purple magic flared in his hands. "Go now."

His alarm was infectious. My fingers twitched, trying to ball themselves into fists. "Let me—"

"Go."

"Where do I find Friel?"

"One does not find Friel. Go to Mirror Lake. *She* will find *you*."

Death's magic tingled in my veins, a feeling like thousands of bubbles percolating through my blood, and a burst of blinding white light filled the air as I opened a Gate behind me. The problem with using Death's magic was that it came at a cost. With every Gate I opened, it was drawing the heat from my body. It was killing me. I stepped through. And prayed I would see my family again before Death reclaimed me.

CHAPTER 2

“Only Hoven knows the future, and he tells no one.”

– Common proverb of the Uvulu ethnic group, circa 189

WHEN I STEPPED OUT OF the Gate, I thought for a moment my eyes were playing tricks on me. Before me, there were two identical worlds. One world, right side up, was a scene of lush emerald mountains with snow-dusted peaks. Above them stretched an endless blue sky. At their feet clustered tall, skinny trees with green pointed tips like spearheads. The other world, upside down, was its mirror image. In this world, the ground was the crystalline cerulean of a flawless sky. Craggy green mountains formed a jagged ceiling above them.

The two worlds were so perfectly flawless it took me a second to realize the latter was an optical illusion created by a small lake in front of me. Mirror Lake’s water was reflecting everything around it down to the smallest detail. I marveled at how beautiful, how achingly pristine and unspoiled, the landscape was. I knelt down and scooped some of the cold water into my hands. It had likely come from the snow on the mountains. I splashed it over my face.

“So this is Death’s champion.”

I spun round at the sound of the voice and pulled magic to my hands, instinctively prepared to fight. In front of me stood a thin young woman with high cheekbones, full lips, and dark red hair that fell in a thick braid down her right shoulder. A spray of brown freckles ran cheek to cheek across the bridge of her nose. Her large, catlike hazel eyes were set off by her matching clothing: a green corset, brown leggings, and a brown leather

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necklace from which dangled a round metal pendant. Across her forehead stretched an intricately wrought leather chaplet, in the center of which was mounted a large oval malachite stone. She leaned casually on a longbow that reached almost to her shoulder. I could just see the fletching of the arrows she carried in a quiver on her back.

She smiled, her eyes knowing. "How is the old Sword of Ilirya?"

I gawked at her, too astonished to speak. "You're the daughter of Hoven," I finally managed to say. I could hardly believe I was meeting another demigod, and the daughter of Hoven at that.

She gave a playful half-bow, her braid swinging with the movement. "Friel, at your service. Welcome, Champion."

"Do you know *everything*?" The words slipped out with a mind of their own, reflecting neither diplomacy nor tact. I winced, my hand flying to cover my mouth.

She snorted, her smile never faltering. "No. Only Hoven knows all. I'm an oracle. I see mere glimpses of the future, pieces of a puzzle that only he can see in its entirety. I knew you would come, for example, and that Kjelborn would send you but little else."

"Oh." I didn't know what to say to that.

She cocked her head. "Although, often I'm able to see more of the future if I'm asked specific questions."

Silence fell between us as I absorbed this new information.

Her thin right eyebrow arched up. "Would you like to ask me a question? Perhaps something about the danger you face?"

"Oh! Yes!" I blushed, feeling childish and stupid. "How do I stop the Darkness?" It was an inelegant, crude question, but it was the only one that mattered.

The amusement dropped from Friel's face, leaving in its place a blank expression. She closed her eyes for a moment, exhaled deeply, and waited. A moment later, she opened them. I imagined in that instant I could see the entire world in them. They were the green of forest moss, the brown of the loam of the earth...and they were full of deep concern.

She rubbed her left forearm with her right. Her mouth quirked into an unhappy frown. "That which the gods call the Darkness has entered our world through four tears. You must destroy the creatures that have come through and close them. Only once all the Dark monsters have been slain

and the holes between the worlds closed will the Darkness be stopped. Nothing Dark can remain in this world. It must be cast out completely and never allowed to return.”

My heart sank. Four tears? Dark monsters? This was nothing like hunting down the loci of Dark Magic. “How do I do all that?”

Friel’s eyelids fluttered fast and light as moth wings, her long eyelashes quivering. “First you must gather the Tailor. He is god-touched. Only he can find and sew the tears shut.”

I stared at her. Another demigod? My acquaintance of demigods had tripled in the space of only a few minutes. I shook my head, trying to focus. “Where do I find him?”

The ghost of a fond smile curled the corners of her lips. “In Port Bluewater. Bonrin has a shop there along the waterfront. He mends sails for the great ships at port. He will jump at the chance for another adventure after so many years.”

“What about the monsters?”

A curtain fell over her face that dimmed even her lustrous eyes. All trace of her smile disappeared. “You will find them in Prann, Nyara, and Menon. The Dark Rider...will be wherever you are.”

I shifted my weight uneasily. I didn’t like how that last sentence sounded. “How do I fight them?”

She shook her head, now playing nervously with the pendant on her necklace with long, slim alabaster fingers. “I don’t know. Dark Magic cloaks the future in an impenetrable black cloud. It hides this knowledge from me.” She shook her head ruefully. “Only my father could see through it completely.”

“Are there many of them, the monsters?” I couldn’t keep the frantic desperation from my voice. I needed to know *something*. Was I walking into a veritable sea of fanged and clawed monsters? How could I be expected to push back the Darkness without knowing what I would be confronting and how to defeat it?

Friel’s eyes became pools of deep green. “I’m sorry. I wish I were able to see more at this time. All I can tell you is to beware the Dark Rider. As you try to push back the Darkness, he will seek to stop you. He is the Darkness’s paladin, and he will confront you at every step.”

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The word *paladin* had no meaning to me. It might as well have been another language. “What’s a paladin?”

“He is your mirror image. As you are Death’s champion in the mortal realm, tasked with stopping the Darkness, he is the champion of the Darkness, tasked to ensure it succeeds. He exists because you exist.”

I wrinkled my nose. Her answer wasn’t any clearer. Releasing the tension in my face with a sigh, I rubbed my eyebrows with the tips of my fingers. It didn’t matter. Whatever lay before me, I had to confront it. In the end, only one thing mattered. “Can the Darkness be stopped?”

Friel drew her thin, arched red eyebrows together, creating a deep furrow between them. Slowly, she shook her head, her braid brushing against the top of her bodice. “I... don’t know.”

“Look again,” I begged. “Please. What do you see? Anything would be helpful.”

The muscles of her jaw twitched as she grimaced and looked away. A bird chirped, its call echoing over the water, breaking the terrible silence forming between us. With a curt nod, she closed her eyes and dropped her chin to her chest. When she spoke, her voice was deep and full of sorrow.

“I see death. Chaos. Despair. The Dark monsters that have come through the tears already are nothing compared to what waits on the other side. Dark armies are massing to invade the mortal plane. Only a few days remain before the Darkness will break completely through the veil into this world.”

A chill almost as cold as the aftereffects of Death’s magic ran through my body. I had known the situation was dire, but watching the blood drain from the oracle’s face brought home how real the threat was. I had only days to stop the annihilation of our world, with no guarantee I would succeed.

This flush of trepidation was almost immediately followed by a burst of broiling anger. If the world was in such mortal danger, let someone else save it! Hadn’t I done enough stopping the One God and trying to remove all the loci of Dark Magic from the mortal plane? I wasn’t a Great Mage. I was a marginal mage at best. I hadn’t even graduated from Windhall yet. Why did the future of our world rest with me? All I wanted was to be back at school, the other half of my soul, Lyse, tucked safely in my arms. I wanted to spend whatever time I had left in the land of the living with her, not facing down an enemy that made even the gods tremble.

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“Why can’t the gods help?” My voice vibrated with fury. “Surely they could break the prohibition on interference in the mortal plane just once and force the Darkness back themselves. Or they could rally the armies of the mortal plane to confront the Darkness.”

There was pity in Friel’s eyes. Her face softened. “I don’t know the rules that govern the gods, only their consequences. But because the gods cannot help you, I will do what I can.”

My heart was so sick with dread and anger and despair I barely heard her. I was charging blindly into battle with no clue but to find the demigod Bonrin. But I didn’t have a choice. I had to push back the Darkness to keep Lyse safe. I couldn’t do the one without doing the other; they were inextricably entwined.

To keep myself focused, I dug my fingernails into my palms and enumerated what I needed to do. Find the god-touched Tailor in Port Bluewater. Close the tears in Prann, Nyara, Menon, and... Wait. Friel had only mentioned three locations. “Where is the fourth tear?”

She lifted her chin. “Not now. When the time comes to close the fourth tear, you will know.”

I frowned. It was a strangely cryptic thing to say, but I sensed there was no use pressing her. I had one last question, the one that mattered most to me. “Will Lyse...be all right?” I would save the world or I would fail, but I had to know that if I succeeded, Lyse would be waiting for me at the end of it. Otherwise none of it mattered. I couldn’t save the world just to lose her.

When Friel closed her eyes, it was barely longer than a blink. “So long as the Darkness does not win, it will be possible to keep her from harm.”

I didn’t miss that her words were carefully chosen. Lyse’s safety depended on me keeping her away from danger. I nodded, grimly determined. I would protect her with every fiber of my being.

Friel tossed her braid over her shoulder. “Go now. There is nothing more I can tell you. May you have the strength to do what must be done.”

I opened a Gate behind me and stepped through. Tomorrow I would save the world. Tonight I had other plans.

* * *

The sun was only beginning to set over Windhall’s campus when I stepped out of the Gate, so I lingered in the orchard, stretched out on my

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back on the branch of my favorite apple tree, until the glowing orange ball disappeared completely beneath the horizon. I waited even longer for the sky's last reckless splashes of purple and blue to yield to the concealing black of night. It took that long for the freezing chill of Death's magic to finally seep back out of my skin and dissolve into the night air. Each time I created a Gate, it took longer for the iciness to dissipate. Already, I was much cooler to the touch than a living body should be, and it took all my skill and cleverness to keep Lyse from noticing.

I had never intended to keep any secrets from her, but now there were some she couldn't know. My death was one. My indentured servitude to Death was another. Now I had a new one: the battle I was about to fight to save our world.

When all that remained to observe me were stars and fireflies, I crept across Windhall's broad green and into the dorm. I could still remember the first time Lyse brought me there, to her room. Second floor, third door on the right. How many lifetimes ago had that been? At the time, I had believed I was an orphan, the lone surviving refugee of a village sacked by the Northmen. Now part of that lie had finally come to pass in reality: Thamir lay in ashes. At least my parents had survived. I held that spark of hope close to my chest. Despite the Northman invasion, they were still in the land of the living.

I eased open the door to Lyse's room and slipped through, taking care to move silently as a hare. Lyse was sleeping with her face turned toward the wall, her long brown hair spread on the pillow like spilled coffee. Her shoulders rose and fell gently under their white night shirt. As it always did, my heart thrilled to see her. Here was the light of my life, the other half of my soul—my everything. No day went by when I wasn't grateful she was part of my life.

Feeling hadn't returned to the toes of my right foot since I had used Death's magic in Thamir. As I slipped off my boots and climbed onto the small, narrow bed, I prevented the foot from touching her so she wouldn't feel the coldness in it and tried my best not to disturb her. Wriggling close, I curled around her sleeping body, wrapping my arm tightly around her chest and pressing my own chest to her back. She was soft and warm and smelled, as she always did, softly of cinnamon. Her hair tickled my nose, and I rubbed it against the nape of her neck.

She shifted. For a moment, I thought she would go back to sleep, but she rolled her body to face me, her eyes scanning my face.

I ducked my head. When I first began using Death's magic, the effects had been minimal. In addition to the cold that infused my body after creating Gates, the irises of my eyes had developed a milky tinge. In the last few days, however, these effects had begun to compound. When I'd caught a glimpse of myself in Mirror Lake, I saw a veil of white had almost completely covered my eyes, as though I were going blind. Thankfully there was little moonlight to illuminate the room. With luck, Lyse wouldn't notice.

Lyse reached out her left hand, and my cheek tingled where she stroked it. "Where have you been?" Her voice was fuzzy with sleep.

"Here and there." I kept my voice low and smiled so she would feel my face move under her fingertips. I turned my face to kiss them. "Now go back to sleep."

She did not.

"Kaylara said you weren't in class today. Cayleth didn't see you either. Where do you go when you disappear?"

I recognized the unhappiness, accusation, and hurt that colored her words, and I winced. This wasn't the first time she'd asked me. My disappearances from campus on Death's errands were a kind of betrayal to her. We were supposed to tell each other everything, but both of us knew I was hiding something. Even so, I couldn't explain working for Death without also revealing that I myself was dead.

And so these dodged questions were quickly driving a wedge between us. I would rather have sliced my soul into a thousand pieces than hurt her, but I had worked too hard to keep her—and all my friends at Windhall—from finding out about my death. Why let Lyse worry over something she couldn't change? As far as she knew, I had survived when Raelan had warged her and used her to stab me in the garden of King Hap's castle. She didn't need the truth nor the details of my errands for Lymon.

And now, more than ever, keeping my secrets from her was the key to keeping her safe. If I told her the difficult, perhaps impossible, task that lay before me, she would demand to come with me, and I couldn't allow that. I needed her here at Windhall where she would be out of harm's way. If I had to lie to her to make that happen, so be it.

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I kissed her palm. "I was in the orchard."

She shifted her body away from me. A void opened between us. "So you won't tell me."

The disappointment in her voice was the fiery sting of alcohol on an open wound, and I absorbed it without protest as the just reward for my duplicity. Still, I didn't want to fight. I wanted her near me, our bodies melted into each other. I shimmied closer and nuzzled my face into the space between her shoulder and jaw. "I *was* in the apple orchard, but there were no apples to bring you to prove it." It was technically the truth, although a partial one.

Lyse let out a soft breath, quietly dissatisfied, and I was glad I couldn't see her face. "You can tell me where you go and what you do. I won't judge you." Her hands stroked my hair, smooth and gentle. "Whatever it is, you don't have to go through it alone. You have friends here. Let us help you carry whatever burden that's on your shoulders."

No. I had to fight to keep my body from stiffening. I had involved my friends in my activities once, and even then, it had been more of a risk than I should have ever taken. As Lyse, Kaylara, Pavo, and I had fought our way through the castle, taking on two full war mages before finally confronting Raelan, it had been a miracle I'd been the only one killed. Now the danger was infinitely worse. This time, I wouldn't let any of them get close enough to be hurt. Protecting them mattered more than anything.

"I know it's been difficult for you. There's been so much to recover from," Lyse continued.

If only she knew. She thought everything had ended the moment Kjelborn killed the One God, but for me, that had only been the beginning. Today alone I'd seen the Southerner king, the King of Cats, dissolve into nothingness and my village burn to the ground. I'd killed dozens of Northmen and spoken to the daughter of Hoven. Tomorrow I would find a demigod and try to stop the total destruction of the mortal world. I clutched her tighter. I couldn't control the future, but I could control what was happening here, now, and the feeling of her body alongside mine.

Lyse was silent for several minutes, although she continued to stroke my hair. Then, in an unexpectedly shy, uncertain voice, she said, "We could get away from King's City and go to Rath for a week. You could meet my family."

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A week. The mortal plane didn't have a week before the Darkness broke through and consumed it. I squirmed. All of a sudden, the blanket was too hot. I kicked it off my feet, leaving the bare skin exposed. "Let's talk about it later."

The relaxation of Lyse's muscles and the way her fingers froze against my scalp signaled clearly her dismay. She made to roll away from me and back toward the wall, but I tensed my arm around her, stopping her. I didn't care about saving the world. I cared about saving *her*. And I would do whatever it took to keep her safe.

"Things will get better," I whispered. "I promise. Soon."

She stilled and stopped trying to move away. After a moment, she tugged at my tunic. "Take this off. You smell like you've been standing next to a bonfire all day."

Fire. Thamir. My home. Every trace of the world in which I'd grown up was burned to the ground. I didn't even know for sure whether my brother Kyan had survived. I wanted to mourn for my village, but it would have to be in silence. I couldn't tell her or else I'd have to explain why and how I'd been there. I bit my tongue, feeling a swell of loneliness. It was hard not to share my worry and fears with Lyse. My friends and family were still at risk. They could be crushed by the main part of the Northman army as it passed through the Ice Crown. And I would be far away, fighting an enemy strong enough to challenge even the gods.

I eased off the bed and stripped, dropping my black tunic and leggings to the floor. My shoulders and arms ached from the tension I carried in them. I picked ash out from under my fingernails and shook it from my hair. I longed for a hot bath to wash away the soot that was ground into every crease and fold of my body and to ease the knots in my muscles, but it would have to wait.

While I undressed, Lyse rolled back to face the wall. When I crawled in next to her, I nestled close, fitting our bodies together perfectly. Unbidden, I saw Friel's bloodless face as she described the chaos and destruction of the Darkness. It didn't matter that the odds seemed insurmountable. I had to find a way. For Lyse, for my family, for our friends, for Kjelborn. No matter how impossible the battle, I would fight for them.

"You're so cold." Lyse wriggled away from me a little when my bare skin met hers.

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I closed the newly opened gap between us, unwilling to lose contact for even a moment. "It's chilly outside. Share some of your warmth."

Lyse didn't protest when I wrapped my arm around her again. On the contrary, she snuggled closer, covering my hand with her own. She was silent for so long and her breath so even I thought she had fallen asleep, but finally she said, "King's City is safe again, Aeryn. You don't have to worry anymore. The Dark Mages are all gone."

I wished she were right. I hoped she would never find out how utterly, impossibly wrong she was. I rubbed my forehead into her neck. "I know." Then, after a beat, I said, "I love you."

"I love you too." The words were slurred. Lyse was already falling back asleep.

I rose long before dawn to slip out of Lyse's room. She would be saddened to wake alone, I knew, but it was better to sneak away like a thief than risk her noticing my dying eyes in the clarifying morning light. I made my way to my room downstairs, where I changed into a clean pair of black leggings and a faded blue tunic, then crept out of the dorm and to the armory. If I was going to take on Dark monsters, I needed to be ready to fight.

I selected a chain mail tunic with dragon scale at the shoulders and an arming sword. Although heavy armor was always tempting, it was cumbersome, and I preferred agility and mobility to dressing like a turtle. At the last moment, I grabbed a knife. It was a simple one with a round pommel stamped with Windhall's crest, a lion rampant. If I'd learned one thing since leaving Thamir, it was that knives could be deadlier than magic. Maybe they would work on Dark monsters too.

The day was bright and cloudless. Nothing stirred in the quiet campus, not even birds. It was as though time had frozen at Windhall, protecting it from the danger howling at the door of the world. I opened a Gate to Port Bluewater. It was time to find the Tailor.

* * *

The Gate deposited me in an empty alley a block from the wall that ringed the harbor. I quickly walked to the main street that overlooked the wall and approached the first person I saw. It was a young sailor. He had

a heavy blue sack slung over his shoulder that matched the fabric of his breeches and jerkin. I caught his eye and waved.

“Excuse me, I’m looking for Bonrin the Tailor. Do you know where he lives?”

The young man looked at me through narrowed eyes. For a moment, I thought he might not help at all. Then he said, “Third house on the right from the tower. That’s where he’ll be.”

I thanked him, and he moved on.

Port Bluewater was one of Ilirya’s oldest and most beautiful cities. Built of light brown stone and red tile roofs, its famous harbor was a kaleidoscope of exotic blues and greens. In the shallows, where tenders and small coastal craft bobbed merrily at anchor, the water was a translucent turquoise. Further out, where the galleons and deepwater vessels floated like sleeping ducks on the water, the sea was a blue darker than the bluest afternoon sky. I took only the briefest moment to stare at it before continuing my search for the Tailor. Who knew if I would ever come to the city again?

The tower was easy to identify among the buildings that lined the harbor. Squat with narrow windows, it was two or more stories taller than all the houses around it. I made my way to it, then counted the doors to the third house on its right. All the houses in this part of the city looked identical: small boxes with roofs like red clay and a single square window. I knocked on the door of the one that allegedly belonged to the demigod Bonrin. No answer. I knocked again, louder this time. What if Bonrin wasn’t home? Or was home but wouldn’t answer?

As I pondered those questions, the door, its pale green paint flaking at the edges, creaked open with the scream of unoiled hinges. At first, I saw nothing and wondered if my knocking had somehow opened the door on its own. Then a voice demanded, “Well? What do you want so bloody early in the morning?”

My eyes were drawn down. The gruff voice belonged to a man standing on the other side of the door, barely taller than my waist. He looked at me impatiently, his bushy blond eyebrows drawn over his bright blue eyes—the hairs were so long some of them curled at the tip—and his hands on his hips. The extremely fine hair of his head, parted down the center and tied below his ears with red ribbons, was the same flaxen color.

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"If you've got a sail that needs repairing, bring it back at a decent hour. The ship won't sink before then." There was an annoyed frown to his voice.

I gaped at him without meaning to. "Are you... Bonrin the Tailor?"

"Eh?" He scoffed, a phlegmy sound caught in his throat. "Nobody calls me that. Bonrin the Sailmaker, aye, that'd be me." He cocked his head, his eyes squinting up at me. "Well, what is it? You've not got the look of a sailor about you. Soldier?"

"No, I'm... Friel sent me. I need your help."

Bonrin's face brightened. He stood taller, and the ribbons swept across his shoulders. "Friel you say? The oracle herself?" He leaned out the door and looked around the street to make sure no one had seen us. "Come in, come in. Shut the door behind you."

He disappeared into his house, trundling down the hall on bowed legs like an anchored ship on rolling waves. I followed behind, noting his baggy blue pants, patched white shirt, and tan belt stocked with tools and pouches. Who was his divine parent? Was it Wavro, the goddess of winds? Gridevoll, master of the seas?

Bonrin led me into a small parlor. Much of the floor was covered in piles of sails that rose halfway to the ceiling. The fabric was everywhere, scattered carelessly without any evident order. Bonrin kicked a sail aside with his foot and jumped onto a stuffed purple velvet chair. His short legs stuck straight out in front of him, revealing long black shoes that ended in points. He wore mismatched socks, one red, one white. Although there was a matching chair across from him, it had already been taken by a bunch of sails thrown together in a disorganized pile.

He wriggled deeper into the seat, making himself comfortable. "I haven't seen the oracle in at least a decade, not since she was a sapling. You know, I once had to smuggle her out of—" He stopped abruptly, checking himself. "Well, anyway. A friend of Friel's is a friend of mine. Although..." He squinted at me. "You're not one of us."

"My name is Aeryn, and I'm... here on behalf of Death."

The nostrils of his snub nose flared, and his eyes hardened suspiciously. "Go on. What's Death's business here in the mortal world?"

It seemed Kjelborn wasn't the only one who didn't like Death. I twisted my fingers together. If I couldn't convince Bonrin to accompany me, all was lost. I definitely couldn't mend the tears myself. He *had* to come.

“There are four tears in the veil between the mortal and divine plane, caused by the release of Dark Magic. Friel said you’re the only one who can sew them closed before terrible monsters come through, seeking to destroy the mortal plane.”

Bonrin stared at me for a long minute, absorbing my words. He chewed on a thumbnail. “I heard the tears when they happened yesterday. But I didn’t know what it meant.”

He had *heard* the fabric of our world tearing?

“Will you come? Can you fix them?”

Bonrin raised his pointed chin, his broad chest puffing out. “Bonrin the Sailmaker can sew anything. Aye, even the fabric between worlds.”

He bounced off his chair and walked to the fireplace, weaving expertly through the sails without stepping on any of them. Standing on his toes, he just managed to lift from the white mantle a small red wooden box, from which he withdrew a needle the length of his hand. It seemed to glow, catching all the light in the room and reflecting it back with a brilliant shine. He brandished it with a proud flourish. “My mother gave me this needle. I’ve been saving it for something better than sail canvas.”

I had a flash of understanding. His mother must be Zin, the goddess of cloth. That was why he mended sails and why Friel had called him the Tailor. It was also why he was the only person in the mortal plane who could mend the veil.

He tucked the needle into a pouch at his waist and then rubbed his meaty hands together. “All right then, let’s go sew up these holes, eh? Do you know where they are?”

“The first one is in Prann,” I said, choosing them in the order Friel had said them.

Bonrin hoisted up his pants, which had started to sag. “Prann the capital of Prabst? It will take us days to get there.” He gave a long, theatrical sigh full of feigned suffering. “All right, give me some time to pack a rucksack. I don’t suppose you have a wagon outside the city, do you? Or we will be hoofing it.”

Abruptly, I realized the problem of our travel. We didn’t have months to journey from one tear to another. The Darkness would have long since swallowed the world. My mind churned. Friel wouldn’t have sent me to collect Bonrin if there wasn’t a faster way to get to them.

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"I...can create Gates." I considered Lymon's warning about the danger to humans. Bonrin was only half human. Would that keep him safe?

Bonrin snapped his fingers happily. "That'll do just fine!"

I shifted my weight uneasily. "It may be dangerous. I've never brought anyone through a Gate."

He shrugged. "I'm sure it will be fine. We god-touched are a hearty breed."

I put my hands on my belt and adjusted it nervously, dreading what was to come next. He might refuse to go once I told him. "That's not the only danger. To close the tear, Friel says we'll have to fight some...monsters."

It turned out Bonrin's eyebrows could go even higher. But when he spoke, there was no fear in his voice. He glanced significantly at my sword. "I assume that's why you're here. You fight, I mend."

"Oh." I didn't know how to respond to his undamped enthusiasm. In his place, I would certainly have thought twice. But at least he hadn't dug in and demanded to be left at home. "Shall we go then?"

Bonrin nodded. "Aye, let's go. I want to feel the veil of the world between my fingers." His voice was full of relish, and he almost bounced on the balls of his feet in excitement. Of the two of us, he was certainly more excited to go than I was.

I opened a Gate behind me, automatically closing my eyes as the white light burst out of it. Bonrin squealed, taken by surprise. I reached for his large, fleshy hand. He kept his eyes squeezed tightly shut, but he didn't resist when I pulled him through the Gate with me. When he opened them, we were in Prann.

He blinked in the unexpected sunlight. "Oh. So this is it then? Prann? I've never been."

I'd never been either, so I had no idea where we were in the city. I looked around. The cobblestoned street, worn smooth by thousands of feet, was surrounded by narrow houses. The street and the houses were the same drab gray. Whereas Port Bluewater had been light and airy, Prann was surprisingly dark and depressing.

Bonrin hoisted up his belt again, giving it an extra yank for good measure. "All right then. Let's go find this tear, shall we?"

I wrapped my arms around myself, shivering from the magic I'd used to create the Gate. It made my teeth chatter. "How do we find it?" What did a tear in the veil between the worlds even look like?

Bonrin's impatient tone suggested the answer was obvious. "Bonrin can find any tear."

He set off in front of me, walking quickly through Prann's streets, taking two steps for every one of mine. His head swiveled back and forth as he went, presumably using his divine gift to find the tear's location. Almost immediately, however, I noticed something unusual: nothing moved in Prann. Not a single person stood on its drab streets. No passersby, no merchants, no laborers walked from one place to another. There wasn't so much as a stray cat or a scurrying rat to be found. Even the air was still.

The hair on my arms stood up. This was wrong. Prann was the provincial capital of Prabst. The city should have been bustling with life, a smaller version of King's City. Where were the people?

Something turned the corner in front of us. I grabbed Bonrin's shoulder to stop him.

He stopped in midstride.

"*What is...?*" I had trouble pushing the words out. "...*that?*"

At the sight of the thing in front of us, all the air seemed to have been pulled out of my body. The blood in my veins congealed and refused to flow. Inside my chest, my heart vibrated with terror.

The figure wore a billowing, long black robe whose hood covered its face, a shadow so dark it swallowed all trace of what lay inside. Where its hands should have been were instead the fragile creamy white bones of a skeleton. A swirling cloud of black smoke collected all around the figure. When it moved, it floated rather than walked.

My heart beat double time. *Flee*, my mind screamed. *Get away while you can*. My fingers dug into Bonrin's shoulder so deeply it must have hurt him, but he didn't move to escape them.

"Oh no," he whispered. "It's a wraith."

CHAPTER 3

“Golem: a non-living, animated being created by a golem mage. Golems can be made of almost any element and operate independently of their creator. Unlike their relative the klant, some golems have been known to last for decades.”

– A Kingdom and its People, 4th edition

THE WRAITH—WHATEVER A WRAITH WAS—DRIFTED toward us. It exuded an indescribable malice that battered at us palpably like a relentless, piercing wind. The sky darkened, casting the world around us in shadow, as somber as twilight. I glanced up to see if clouds had rolled across the sun but found I couldn't see the sun at all. What had been early morning a second ago had now turned dark as twilight. The sun was lost behind the curtain of false night. I shivered as the air chilled and took a step backward.

Notes of sorrow and doom saturated the air, played by invisible, inhuman instruments. Whispers of dozens of voices wailing, full of agony, tickled my ears. The future loomed before me as an endless ocean of despair and tragedy. *Flee. Flee. Flee.* The words pulsed in my veins. My feet itched to run.

Although the magic was subtle, I could still feel the spark of it around me. I struggled to control my mindless fear. This was an illusion, I told myself, not truth. I called my magic to my hands, preparing to attack if the wraith got too close but praying it wouldn't. At the same time, I asked Bonrin, “What is a wraith?”

“Something that doesn’t belong in the mortal world.” His voice was tight and anxious. The pink had drained out of his face like water out of a basin. Even the bright blue of his eyes was muted and pale.

One of Friel’s Dark monsters. It must be. My legs trembled. Everything within me, heart and mind alike, told me we should get away from it. The feeling was overwhelming. It was everything I could do not to immediately turn and take to my heels.

Bonrin shot me a quick glance. “What’s your plan? Reckon you’ve got a way to fight this thing.”

Fight it? Hardly! I wanted to get far away from it. I wanted to put miles between us, even entire cities if I could.

I briefly considered Gating us somewhere else in the city to escape, but then we’d be back at square one looking for the tear. We needed to stay at least somewhere close so Bonrin could pick up the trail again. And as much as I found the idea overwhelming, I had to find a way to deal with the creature eventually anyway. Friel had said I couldn’t allow it to remain in our world.

I took a few more steps back, trying to buy distance. “I think we should avoid it.”

“Works for me.”

We took off at a run down the narrow alley to our left, not knowing where we were going but determined to leave the wraith behind. The unfamiliar city was a maze, full of streets and alleys that zigzagged in every direction. We took several random turns as we fled, determined to lose the wraith but still trying to remain close to where we’d started. Everywhere we went, the city was lifeless. If all the residents of a place could be made to disappear with the snap of two fingers, this is how I imagined it would look.

When the sun came out again and the oppressive feeling of malevolence and hatred lifted, I felt certain we had escaped. We stopped to catch our breath outside a bakery. Yesterday’s round brown loaves hung in wicker baskets strung from the ceiling, and I resisted the urge to take one. I hadn’t had breakfast. I was hungry.

As Bonrin gasped and wheezed, hands on his knees, I looked for the baker. At this time of morning, there should have been fresh loaves rising

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and the delightful smell of baking bread in the air. But the oven was cold, the bakery just as deserted as the rest of the city.

The aura of desolation lingered here too. My skin prickled. "Where is everyone?"

Bonrin pulled up his pants—it was a miracle they hadn't fallen during our mad dash through the city—and wrinkled his snub nose. "It's the wraiths. They've sucked the life out of the city. Everything they touch shrivels, full of despair, and dies."

"Wraiths?" We had seen only one creature. Why did he assume there were more?

He looked around suspiciously. "Where there's one wraith, there will be more. There's never just one." He spat on the ground to emphasize his point and then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

I was at a loss. "But what *are* they?"

He shuddered. "They're what happens when something other than Death tries to pull a shade back from the Eternal Realms. It's only happened one other time in Ilirya's history. Although it's been mostly forgotten now, a few cities were lost before the creatures were finally destroyed."

I leaned forward, hopeful. "How did they do it?"

Bonrin shrugged. "It was a thousand years ago. That part didn't make it into the ballad."

I gritted my teeth, holding back my frustration. It wasn't Bonrin's fault a song didn't offer explicit instructions on how to defeat monsters. I motioned toward an alley to our right. "Let's go." The sooner we found the tear, the sooner we could leave. I didn't want to spend a minute longer than necessary in this unsettling city.

Both of us on our guard, we crept through the abandoned streets slowly, checking around each corner and behind every fountain and wagon for lurking wraiths. Wherever they had gone, however, it was well away from us. We saw no more.

After hours of walking and what felt like our fourth lap of the city, Bonrin finally stopped and held up his hand. His snub nose twitched like a rabbit's. "Here. The tear is here."

I looked around. We could have been anywhere in the city, as far as I could tell. Every block looked like the one before, and nothing I could

see looked like a tear – only more of the city’s endless gray. I scratched my head. “Are you sure?”

Bonrin looked as though I had questioned the very foundation of his being. His chin retracted into his neck and his nostrils flared. He looked like an insulted parakeet. “Of course I’m sure! Bonrin can see the tear in the fabric of the world as clear as the nose on your face.”

He got down on his hands and knees and ran his right hand along the cobblestones in front of us. To my astonishment, where his hand passed, what should have been solid, unyielding stone rippled and danced like the surface of a stream. For a second, a silver line the length of his forearm glimmered against the gray stone. The tear!

Bonrin stood up and dusted off his knees. Then he grabbed the tips of the flaxen hair draped over his right shoulder and began to chew them, making a humming sound. “Now that we know where it is, we’ll need thread.”

I gaped at him. “Thread? Didn’t you bring some?” I looked at the bulging pouches on his belt. There were only two things needed to mend a tear. How had he forgotten one of them?

He put his hands on his hips, frowning his eyebrows into a single bushy line like a woolly caterpillar. “This is a tear in the veil between the worlds. You can’t just go about sewing it up with any old thread.”

“Well, what *do* you use?” I didn’t bother mentioning that if we needed thread, he should have brought it from the beginning. It was a little late now.

“It will have to be a very special thread.” He pronounced the words with pompous gravity, as though announcing the new chancellor of Windhall University.

I ground my teeth together so hard it made my head hurt. I didn’t have time to slowly tease the answer out of him. The wraiths could appear at any moment. “Fine, and where is this special thread?”

Bonrin nodded to himself, reminding me once more of a parrot. “The Cloud Palace.” He said the place name as though I should know it.

I stared at him blankly. “Where is that?”

He sucked on his front teeth for a moment, rocking back and forth on his heels, and looked away. “You’re not going to like it.”

Why not? Where could it possibly be?

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"It belongs to the Empress of the North."

"*It's in the Northlands?*" The words burst out of me in a geyser of disbelief. "Bonrin, you can't be serious."

He crossed his arms over his round stomach, face mulishly stubborn. "Don't worry. She never visits it."

"But her *palace*? We're at *war* with the Northmen."

He uncrossed his arms and gestured animatedly at the tear, a flurry of motion. "It's the only way to close the tears. There's a Great Mage who can spin clouds into indestructible thread. She's kept locked away in the Cloud Palace, and her thread is used exclusively for the empress's clothing. That thread is the only thing strong enough to hold together the veil between the two worlds. We have to steal some of it."

Steal because of course the Northmen wouldn't turn over their prized thread to two Iliryans just days after launching an invasion of Ilirya. I bit my lip, considering. Well, this wouldn't be the first enemy castle into which I'd Gated. Although it now felt like years ago, it was only yesterday I'd tried to take the Death Stone from the King of Cats. I supposed if I could Gate into his palace in the Southlands, I could do the same to that of the Empress in the North. If all Bonrin and I had to do was Gate there, snatch the thread, and leave, it might be doable. That is, if everything went in our favor. And the castle guard was sleeping.

But the prospect of such a high-stakes heist made me anxious. Too many things could go wrong. The castle could be too heavily guarded for us to reach the thread. Bonrin could be killed in the attempt, or we could be captured.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and squeezed my eyes shut. "You're certain this is the only thread that will work?"

"I had to feel the tear to be sure, but *aye*, it is."

"How do you even know about this thread?" It didn't seem like the sort of information the Northmen would spread around freely, and certainly not in Ilirya.

Bonrin smiled so broadly I could count every one of his big white teeth. His chest puffed. "Word of a mage who can spin thread from clouds is hard to keep a secret, even if that mage is in another kingdom locked far away in a castle. I tried to sneak into the palace once, many years ago. I wanted to see her work for myself. Feel her thread in my own fingers, you know."

Those same fingers, thick and short as sausages, twitched as though he was rubbing the very thread between his thumb and forefinger. He gave a sheepish grimace. "I was caught trying to scale the walls."

I briefly had an image of Bonrin, rope looped over his shoulder, ascending horizontally up a stone wall with no more difficulty than if he were climbing a mountain.

"But you're Iliryan! How did you even get close to the castle?" It was one thing to Gate into enemy territory for a few minutes and leave. It was another to cross the border, hike through hundreds of miles of unfriendly terrain, and try to break into an enemy castle. And Bonrin didn't exactly blend in.

Bonrin chuckled. "A pannier, a horse, and a blanket," he said somewhat cryptically.

"What happened when they caught you?"

His proud smile crinkled his eyes into slits. "I escaped."

One day, I hoped to hear the full story. Clearly, it was no ordinary tale. But at the moment, we had to find a more effective way in and out of the palace. I tapped my foot against the cobblestones, thinking aloud. "We'll Gate into the palace, grab the thread, and Gate out. It will be so fast the guards won't be able to catch us."

Bonrin shook his head, making the two tails of his hair sway like shimmying dancers. "If only it were that easy. The palace has magic wards like King's City. Once we come through a Gate, they'll wake the two ice golems that protect the palace. Then we'll have them to fight too."

Ice golems? My mind searched back for the day when Raelan had explained the difference between klants and golems in class. Both were animated elemental figures that were almost impossible to stop, short of killing their mage creators. The difference was a klant was like a giant puppet, controlled by a mage who had to keep it in view at all times, while a golem, on the other hand, wasn't physically tethered to the mage that created it. It had just enough consciousness that it could operate independently, sometimes miles away from its mage.

I waved a hand, dismissing Bonrin's concerns. "If you know where the thread is kept, we can Gate into the room and bypass them. We won't even see them."

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He gave me a baleful look. “Ah, no. Remember, I never got past the walls. The palace is very small, but I’ll still have to search for it. In the meantime, I’ll be needing you to keep the golems and the soldiers occupied.”

Golems and soldiers and an enemy castle. I closed my eyes, fighting back frustration. Every task led to yet more complications. Every step I took brought me deeper into danger. I took a breath and forced myself to relax. We could do this. We *would* do this.

“Just find the thread. I’ll handle the rest.”

* * *

We exited the Gate into the middle of a large square courtyard. Snow drifted around us, pushed by a light mountain wind that piled it into deep drifts in the corners. If I hadn’t already been chilled to the bone after creating the Gate, I would have shivered in the freezing air. Wherever we were in the North, we were clearly at a high altitude. Bonrin grunted and immediately rubbed his hands together, blowing on them to warm them. Red spots blossomed on his cheeks as his eyes pricked with tears.

I searched for signs of danger. On either side of us were small one-storey buildings that might have housed anything from servants to guards. They had swaybacked, green tiled roofs, and behind them was a tall wall, perhaps the very one Bonrin had been caught scaling. Directly in front of us, at the top of a short staircase, was a bigger building. Tall, rectangular pillars enclosed a recessed inner sanctum. The roof of the square, multi-tiered tower was lost in the low hanging clouds. I guessed if the empress ever visited, that was where she stayed, but by Iliryan standards, it was a modest building, more of a royal retreat than a castle.

I rubbed my palms against my legs to generate some warmth. The silence around us made me uneasy. There was no sign of life anywhere—no people walking around, no guards protecting the sanctum, no tracks in the snow, no laundry hanging from lines. Had the palace been abandoned in the years since Bonrin’s failed escapade? If so, how would we ever find the thread we needed?

A fast-moving cloud passed through the courtyard, hiding the palace behind a thick white mist. I turned to Bonrin. “Are you sure—” The cloud thinned, and my words caught in my throat.

KAREN FROST

Ice cracked and shifted as something underneath it came to life. Huge sheaves fell to the ground and shattered into shards against the stone. My heart skipped a beat. Seated on either side of the stairs were two giant statues carved of ice. And they were moving.

“Those would be the golems.” Bonrin’s voice was unexpectedly light and unconcerned. He was barely looking at them. His attention was reserved for the buildings around us. “Remember, keep them busy until I can find the thread.”

Then he was gone. He took off at a run across the courtyard, his legs pumping as he dashed for the building closest to us on the right. He held up his pants with both hands, his flaxen hair waving behind him like a pennant.

Dismay crackled across my skin. Keep them busy? I looked back at the creatures. As statues, they had been unremarkable: two bears rampant, part of the empress’s sigil. But now, somehow, the golems had doubled to twice their size. Their new form was humanoid but eyeless and lanky, with long arms that reached to their knees and ended in sharp fingers like icicles. As they uncurled to stand, they were three times my height. They were made of pale blue ice and must have been extremely heavy because, when they stepped toward me, the ground trembled ever so slightly. One blow from their fist or foot would crush all the bones in my body.

I called my magic to my hands. Familiar heat built in my palms, temporarily chasing away the mountain chill. The golems were made of ice. Perhaps I could melt them.

I unleashed an exploratory burst of mage fire and watched to see what would happen. The sizzling magic smashed into the chest of the nearest golem...and dissolved without any evident effect. Sparks of blue shimmered to the ground and disappeared. The golem didn’t so much as flinch. It advanced toward me across the square with long, determined strides.

I tried sending out a larger volley, a jet of crackling fire so intense it made my blue tunic smoke at the wrist. The magic crashed against the golem, and for a moment, I felt hope. The creature took a half-step backward, struggling against the force of the blaze burning against its chest. But I couldn’t hold the jet indefinitely, and when the fire petered out, it revealed an undamaged golem that merely shook off the attack and immediately regained the distance it had just yielded.

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Meanwhile, the other golem came at me, and fast. It crossed the courtyard in a matter of seconds and swung its long arm toward me, trying to either snatch me up in its fist or brush me aside. I dodged at the last minute, watching the blue claws rake the air in front of me. The wind created by its passage ruffled my hair. I felt like a rabbit caught between two hounds. How could I keep the two creatures distracted without being caught?

There was no time to think. I ran in the opposite direction from Bonrin, trying at least to lead them away from him. I'd figure out what to do as I went along. I ducked around one of the small buildings, legs flying. I hadn't made it more than a few strides, however, before my foot hit a patch of ice hidden under a snowdrift and I slid, flailing my arms to avoid falling. My heart leapt into my throat. I couldn't afford to fall. The golems would be on me in an instant.

I regained my balance and pumped my arms, determined to pick up speed again, but then a golem's oval head appeared around the side of the building in front of me. Its fingers, each one as long as my arm, wrapped around the edge of the building as it pulled itself forward, a terrible nightmare that somehow escaped into the waking world. I skidded to a stop and prepared to run back the way I'd come. But by now, the other golem was rounding the corner into the lane behind me. I was trapped.

I turned back at the first golem. Without thinking, I threw my hands in front of me and *pushed*. As if it were caught in a strong wind, the creature was thrust backward. My magic was working! The golem's fingers scored deep lines into the plaster wall of the building as it tried, and failed, to hold on. I stalked forward, using my magic to keep forcing the creature away from me. It fought, thrashing its arms and trying to dig its feet into the ground, but it couldn't resist the force of my magic. Foot by foot, it was pushed backward.

I had never tried to move something so big before. The heaviest thing I had lifted had been a tree trunk in the forest around Thamir, and that had been a lifetime ago. Nor had the tree fought back. The feeling now was like holding a door closed while an entire army tried to push through from the other side. Sweat broke out along my forehead and under my arms despite the freezing air. I started to pant. The golem was *heavy*.

The creature and I spilled back into the palace courtyard, where the second golem followed us. It reached out with its long arms to grab me from behind. Desperate, I moved my left hand to push it too. For an awful, terrifying moment, I thought I couldn't hold off both of them. The second golem's icicle claws were almost close enough to reach me. They swiped the air mere feet from my body, impatient and deadly. A little closer and I would be cut to ribbons.

But then, slowly, the second golem, too, slid backward unwillingly, pushed by the force of my magic. Finally, both were well out of range. I bit back the scream of agony building in my lungs. The power coursing through my body in two opposite directions felt like it would tear me in half. It filled every inch of me—a ripping, burning sensation. How long could I keep this up? If only I still had access to Lyse's magic.

The enraged palace guardians flailed, scrabbling to make headway. If either my energy or concentration lapsed for a moment, they would surge forward and I would be captured or, worse, smashed to pieces. The muscles of my chest trembled. My legs cramped.

A loud crashing sound caught my attention. The door to the building Bonrin had entered a few minutes ago flew open, and Bonrin tumbled out. Immediately behind him was a cook in a stained white apron. The man yelled something I couldn't hear and tried to tackle Bonrin, but Bonrin ducked away at the last moment with unexpected spryness. The man sprawled on the ground, empty-handed. Bonrin didn't so much as pause. He dashed into the next building, followed, once the man recovered his footing, by the irate cook. So much for my hopes for a stealthy visit to the Cloud Palace.

The shaking in my chest moved to my arms. I ground my teeth even tighter together. I was expending too much magic too fast. I wouldn't be able to hold the golems off for much longer. The blood rushing in my head was as loud as a waterfall; it was all I could hear. Minutes that felt like hours ticked past as the three of us remained locked in our temporary, magic-enabled stalemate. At least I no longer felt the cold at all.

Hurry, Bonrin, hurry. Although he couldn't hear my thoughts, I hoped he could somehow sense my urgency.

The door to the second building opened, and Bonrin flew out empty-handed, chased this time by several young women wearing diaphanous

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silk gowns in a rainbow of bright colors. They swarmed behind him like a flock of angry geese, pursuing him with a cacophony of shrill shrieks and cries. Bonrin dodged them and covered his head with his arms to protect himself from the blows they tried to rain down on him and ran into the next building. I counted how many buildings remained. Six. We wouldn't get to them all. If Bonrin didn't find the thread soon, we were done for.

The broad metal gate that separated the palace from the mountain around it opened with a grating squeal, and what was already a bad situation immediately became ten times worse. A squad of Northman soldiers marched in, holding their square shields at the ready in front of them. At last, the castle guard had been alerted to our presence. Bunched together as they were in their heavy armor, they looked like a giant snapping turtle. When they saw me, they drew their swords, the metal glinting in the pale light. My heart sank. I couldn't hold back the golems *and* the soldiers.

The guards marched toward me, their faces grim under their helmets, their yellow eyes fierce and unblinking. I had seconds to find a solution to keeping them away from me without releasing the golems.

You already know what to do. Take them, Death's magic whispered. *Take them the way you took the Northmen in the Ice Crown. They are the enemy. They would do the same to you.*

I sensed the soldiers' lifelines, a throbbing call to Death's magic. One snip and their attachment to the world of the living would be cut. They would feel nothing. In fact, I could kill *everyone* in the palace if I had to. Then I could concentrate on holding off the golems, who had no lifelines.

No! I rejected the odious idea. I had killed the Northmen in Thamir because it had been the only way to save my family, but I still felt sick every time I thought about what I'd done. These were guards, and they were only doing their job. I didn't want to kill them, not if I didn't have to. There had to be another way to stop them. I had to at least try.

I had an idea. Saying a prayer for luck, I released the golem facing the soldiers. The resistance it had been fighting against now gone, the creature barreled forward uncontrollably, like a child running down a hill. It careened toward me, arms swinging as its feet tried to keep up. I pulled its chest forward, further helping it overrun its balance. After a few top-heavy strides, the golem fell, crashing heavily to the ground. The stone beneath

my feet trembled, and snow slid off the roofs around us, splattering against the stone beneath.

As I had anticipated, inertia carried the golem forward like a rock pushed across a frozen lake. A split second before it would have crashed into me, I redirected it. The soldiers didn't see this coming, and the golem slid into them before they had time to move. Swept off their feet, they bowled left and right, limbs and helmets flying. Many of the soldiers dropped their swords as they fell, so I pushed them far away, where their owners couldn't speedily retrieve them. It wouldn't buy me long, but it was something.

My left arm, still holding the other golem back, was heavy as stone and on the verge of giving way to exhaustion. Salty sweat dripped into my eyes, making them burn. I was at the end of my magic, a candle whose wick had burned down. The golem still standing took first one labored step toward me, then a second as my strength buckled. I groaned, willing my magic to somehow persist. I had to keep buying Bonrin time to find the thread.

The golem took a third step. My hand shook and spasmed as the last of my magic fizzled out like water poured over a cooking fire. Now free of any restraint, the creature lunged toward me, claws extended. I dove to the side and landed hard on my palms, barely avoiding its long blue arms. Out of time. We were out of time.

Thick white clouds once more swept across the courtyard, carried by the brisk wind, and I scrambled to my feet, trying to hide myself in them. My arms were limp. I ran as fast as I could in the direction I'd last seen Bonrin go.

"Bonrin! You'd better have it!" I yelled loudly enough that everyone in the whole palace could hear me. It didn't matter anymore. By now only the dead wouldn't have been woken by the ruckus we were causing.

The door to the third building, the last one I'd seen Bonrin enter, was open, but I couldn't see inside. It was a black rectangle from which no light seemed to enter or leave, nor could I hear anything but the slap of my boots on the hard ground and my own breathing. Even the shouting of the soldiers behind me faded into the background. Where was Bonrin? Had the Northmen wrestled him to the ground? Were there more soldiers inside? There was no way to know. All I could do was keep going.

I could feel the golem hard on my heels behind me, the ground rumbling with each step it took, but I didn't dare look back to check its progress. I

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focused on reaching the building, pumping my legs harder, wishing my arms weren't so useless.

Find Bonrin. Find Bonrin. I chanted the words in my head, forcing myself to ignore everything else around me. Once I knew where he was, I would figure out what to do.

When I was still several strides from the door, Bonrin burst through it, coming from the opposite direction. His hands were full of spools of a shining white thread that he carried clasped tightly to his chest. "Got it!" he bellowed when he saw me.

We didn't have time to celebrate the success. Just as I was being chased, so, too, was he. A sea of Northmen flooded behind him, waving various objects they'd repurposed as weapons: rolling pins, hairbrushes, and even a vase. The sight might have been comical if our situation hadn't been so dire.

I opened a Gate midway between us. Bonrin charged toward it, blinking against its brightness, then dove through, disappearing in a flash. My legs burned, struggling to follow before the golem could stop me. Only a few strides remained, but the timing would be tight.

There was a gentle tug against my shoulders and the sound of cloth ripping as the golem managed to hook the edge of my tunic. *No!* I put on a burst of speed to shake free.

Three steps. Two steps. One step. I leapt through the Gate, pulling it closed behind me so nothing from the Cloud Palace could follow.

I landed in a heap on the other side. My knees slammed into the ground so hard it made my teeth rattle. The heels of my palms scraped against the hard stone of the street, peeling off skin. Still, against all odds, we had done it. We had stolen from the Empress of the North and lived to tell the tale. I let out an unsteady breath, fighting back hysterical laughter. We were safe. And we had the thread.

* * *

We were not safe, however. As we lurched from the North back into Prann, it was only to go from one crisis to an infinitely worse one. Waiting for us beside the tear, their black robes billowing out around them as though carried by a breeze that blew over only them, were three wraiths. My body immediately felt as if encased in ice. Even if I had wanted to—and

surprisingly, I didn't—I couldn't move. Beside me, Bonrin slumped to his knees.

"No." My tongue was thick and swollen. It was hard to speak. The words came out slurred and tired. "We have to get away. Bonrin—"

I was overcome by the same feeling of hopelessness and despair as when we had encountered the first wraith. It was like quicksand, pulling me down, down into an inescapable pit. I was so tired; I didn't want to fight anymore. I wanted to give up. What hope did we have anyway? Yes, we had retrieved the cloud thread, but how could the two of us stop the army of the Darkness? It was all useless.

No. It's an illusion, a small part of me said. You must keep going. You can't give up.

But giving up was so tempting. I had fought enough, more than my fair share, in fact. Giving up would be like slipping into a warm bath after a long, exhausting day.

If you won't do it for yourself, do it for Lyse, the part of me that refused to give up cajoled.

I roused myself. If the Darkness won, Lyse would be killed. I had to keep fighting. I had to protect her. I reached inside myself to find the magic for another Gate to take us to safety, but there wasn't enough. I had used too much of Death's magic since I'd seen Lymon yesterday.

The creatures drifted silently closer, accompanied by crushing waves of malice and malevolence. They *hated*, and their hate smoldered like an ember. I hung my head, my already weak resolve flickering. The victory of the Darkness was inevitable. These wraiths were just the start. Much worse things were yet to come. Friel had said it herself. I couldn't fight it all.

The hard-won spools toppled from Bonrin's arms, which dropped limply to his sides. The thread rolled away over the cobblestones before coming to rest out of reach. The wraiths ignored them, either not knowing or not caring what they were. With superhuman effort, I tried once more to shake off the despair holding me down. Lyse. My family. My friends. I had to keep fighting for their sake.

"Get up, Bonrin. Get up."

"I can't." Bonrin's voice was a soft whine.

Since I had no more magic left, I pushed myself to my knees and pulled my only knife from my belt. Although my arm was still shaking

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with exhaustion, I lobbed the knife at the head of one of the wraiths. I willed it to have some effect, to slow the creature's advance in some way, but the blade flew straight through the black hood and was lost forever. The wraiths were insubstantial as smoke. Suddenly, I remembered what Bonrin had said about them and stiffened, a tiny flame of hope growing inside me.

What little remained of Death's magic in my veins bubbled, the voice so quiet I could barely hear it. *Yes, that's it. They are dead, and the dead belong to Death, not to the Darkness.*

The wraiths were just out of arm's reach now. Two had come for me while the other one floated toward Bonrin. There was only infinite, yawning blackness beneath their hooded cloaks. Fear, hopelessness, and resignation pinned me to the ground as their skeletal hands reached for me. But Death's magic had confirmed my hope. Death had dominion over the dead, and because I shared Death's magic, that meant *I* did too.

I reached out with Death's magic, not knowing what I was feeling for but certain I would know when I found it. And I did. Thin black threads connected the wraiths to the land of the living. Unlike the lifelines of the Northmen, these threads, belonging to creatures already dead, were dull and weak, no thicker than a spider's web. But they were lifelines, and they were the wraiths' weaknesses.

With certainty bordering on exultancy, I grasped at them with Death's magic and pulled. Almost imperceptibly at first, but then faster by the moment, the wraiths started to dissolve. The black mist around them grew as they disintegrated into it. I was *unmaking* them, pulling their essence apart, returning them to Death, their rightful master. The Darkness siphoned Death's power and stole its shades, but it couldn't break Death's dominion over the world of the dead.

As the wraiths' quintessence unwound and was released into the air, the gloom they spread started to lift. With every passing second, I felt more optimistic. No matter how many wraiths were in the city, I knew now I could unmake them all.

The wraith menacing Bonrin dissolved as soundlessly as it had lived during its return to the land of the living. The wraiths didn't fight against their own destruction. They simply perished— three black clouds that faded and disappeared like smoke blown away by the wind. In a matter of seconds, there was nothing left to show they'd ever been here in Prann. The

sun, which had been clouded and dark in their presence, shone brightly once more.

Now it was time to cleanse the city of the other wraiths. I reached out with Death's magic and found Prann had been overrun by hundreds of them. The devastation they must have caused in the city made my mouth water with nausea. I gathered their strings together, grasping them as though they were in my fist, and then unmade them all in an instant. Prann, whatever was left of it, was free once more.

The Dark monsters taken care of, I walked over and stooped to collect the spools where they had come to rest, grabbing them with great difficulty. My fingers were so cold they could barely curl around them. My teeth chattered. For the first time since yesterday, I realized that I still couldn't feel the toes of my right foot. They were truly dead. Three of the fingers of my left hand were numb now too and wouldn't bend.

"Are they gone?" Bonrin's eyes were dazed, his face pale. He made no immediate effort to rise from where he'd slumped to the ground, as though his legs refused to lift him.

"Yes, we can fix the tear now." I handed him the spools as he slowly got to his feet. As I did so, I noticed how silken the thread felt where it brushed against the fingertips of my right hand. This was what a spun cloud felt like.

Bonrin's hands shook as he tucked three of the spools into the pockets of his pants, but he nodded, more to himself than to me. He kept the third spool in his right hand, and from the leather pouch on his belt over his left hip withdrew the long silver needle his mother had given him. Steadying himself, he threaded it carefully with the cloud thread, then got down on his hands and knees and squinted at the tear. I watched curiously. How did one sew closed a tear in the veil between the worlds? Had such a thing ever been done before?

Bonrin squeezed the two sides of the tear together and made neat, meticulous stitches to bind them together, no differently than he would have two pieces of canvas. Both thread and tear were almost completely invisible, a hairline crack of silver against a backdrop of uniform gray. If I hadn't known exactly where to look, I wouldn't have seen them at all. Even now, if I looked away and looked back, I would never find them again.

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Bonrin sat back on his heels, admiring his work. “Aye, that’ll do.” He pushed a few blond hairs that had escaped their ties back behind his ears and nodded. “She’ll hold. Just a few more stitches and she’ll be done.”

My heart swelled with optimism. As crazy as it seemed, we had done it. We had stolen the thread from the Cloud Palace, stopped the wraiths, and were about to close the first tear. Although the path that lay before us would certainly be difficult, perhaps the challenge we faced wasn’t impossible.

My thoughts were interrupted by the unexpected clatter of horse hooves against the cobblestones. I frowned. A horse? Here? But the city was empty. I looked in the direction of the sound to see who was there.

My heart skipped a beat.

At the far end of the street, astride a massive black destrier, was a rider in midnight black armor. This, however, was no regular horse and no Iliryan knight. Red flame glowed beneath the chanfron, the armor plating sitting on the horse’s face where its eyes should have been, suggesting an otherworldly origin. The knight’s helmet was decorated by swept-back wings like a black swan, and a ragged black cloak billowed out behind him like an ominous shadow. In his hand, he held a flaming, brilliant sword like a beacon.

Every hair on my body stood on end. I recognized this presence. I had felt it in Thamir. This must be the Paladin Friel had warned me about.

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BY KAREN FROST

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