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M.L. Spencer



DARKLANDS

Book Three of the
Rhenwars Saga

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Darklands

Book Three of the

Rhenwars Saga

Stoneguard



Publications

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

DARKLANDS

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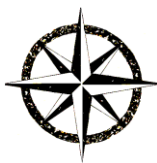
M.L. Spencer

THE RHENWARS SAGA

Darkstorm

Darkmage

Darklands



Chapter One

Infernal Commission

Aerysius, The Rhen

The old man wandered the dark corridor toward his death, the girl trailing after him.

The girl's right hand clutched a thin-bladed knife, the sort of knife once used by hunters of the clans to scrape the flesh of beasts away from bone. But the girl had encountered no such beasts in her nineteen years of existence. The knife in her hand wasn't meant for the flesh of animals. It thirsted for the blood of the old man.

Azár glared ahead at her master's life-weary gait with a scowl of derision on her face. Zamir was selfish, and his selfishness had imperiled all the clans. He should have made this last journey months ago, back when his death might have actually counted for something. Now, too late, Zamir's belated gesture of sacrifice was just as wretched and irrelevant as the old man himself.

"Here." Zamir grimaced, bringing a trembling, rheumatic hand up to trail down the weeping surface of the stone passage. In the darkness, his damp and gnarled fingers resembled the tangled roots of trees. Azár's gaze lingered on them, apathetic, her hand compressing the hilt of the knife in her palm.

She waited, staring dully, and said nothing.

Azár watched in silence as her master shambled forward through the nebulous tendrils of magelight that churned at his feet. Her eyes remained fixed on the scraps of colorless fabric that clung to his emaciated back. She made no move to follow him into the shadowy chamber beyond, not until his voice called out from the darkness to rebuke her. Azár forced herself to move

forward through the doorway.

She stopped, mouth agape. Her hand on the blade fell limply to her side as she gazed at the bleak images that confronted her. To one side of the chamber was a dark stone altar set with four ancient, rusted chains. To the other side of the room stood an ominous ring of man-carved stone.

Azár watched with morbid curiosity as Zamir sat himself down upon the worn surface of the altar that rose from stagnant pools of water collected on the floor. He lay himself back, adjusting his position, folding his arms across his chest. His age-leathered face gazed upward into the shadows, eyes fiercely introspective.

“Recite the forward sequence,” he instructed her in a gravelly voice.

Azár’s gaze swept across the room in the direction of the well.

The Well of Tears appeared exactly as she’d expected, exactly as she’d feared. It was made of staggered granite blocks stacked as high as her waist. Carved all around the rim were runes at once both sinister and familiar, sad vestiges of a lost heritage one thousand years dead. The runes themselves seemed to beckon, compelling her to approach.

Azár scowled at the markings, resenting them. It was because of the runes that they were here, such a far and dangerous distance away from anywhere they were supposed to be. The runes were a key that unlocked a door, a door between worlds. Azár had spent the past two years preparing for this journey. Even so, she felt horrendously anxious. This was a path she had never desired for herself, would never wish upon anyone.

“*Sistru, qurzi, calebra, ghein, vimru...*” Her voice faltered. Azár cleared her throat, edging cautiously forward as she continued reciting from memory the order of the ancient cypher. “*Ranu, benthos, metha, zhein, noctua...ledros. Dacros.*”

She dropped to a crouch beside the Well of Tears as her voice trailed off into a festering silence. She lifted a finger to trace over the first of the sacred markings to confront her: *dacros*. The final rune of the sequence. Ancient symbol of Xerys, God of Chaos and Lord of the Netherworld.

“You make me proud,” uttered the old man from behind her. “What will be is better than what is gone.”

Azár didn't turn back around to look at him. Instead, she remained squatting in a tarry pool of stagnant water with her hand raised before her face. Her eyes considered the rune that seemed to glare out at her like a brand seared into the Well's stony hide. Azár slowly lowered her hand and cast a wordless glance back over her shoulder.

Zamir yet lay on his back on the stone altar, arms folded across his chest. His tired eyes stared upward at the ceiling or perhaps straight ahead into eternity. He made no further effort to instruct her. There was no need.

Azár rose to her feet and stalked back across the chamber. From the woven belt at her waist, she produced a small pewter cup, which she set down on the rough surface of the altar rock at her master's side.

Face utterly impassive, Azár took Zamir's arm into her hand. Wielding the thin-bladed knife, she drew a deep slit into his skin all the way from his elbow to his wrist. Azár stared down at the blood that welled from the gaping incision. As she watched, the dark fluid coursed over her fingers and ran, dribbling, over her hand. Gradually, she became aware of the sound of the old man's voice muttering the phrases of the *dhumma*, the prayer that is spoken with the last breath before dying.

Azár studied Zamir's face, gazing with curiosity into the old man's dimming eyes. She set the knife down and centered the pewter cup beneath the running trickle of blood to better collect the spilt offering. The vessel filled quickly to the brim. Azár gazed down into his face as his lifeblood drained out of him.

The girl said nothing. She stood there, holding her master's hand, watching as the last light faded quietly from his eyes. As it did, Azár felt the warm stirring of power that grew within her fingertips. Her eyes went wide, her breath catching in her lungs.

The swelling warmth of the Transference swept up her hand into her arm, spreading outward through her chest, raging like a firestorm through her veins. The power coursed through her, filling her, penetrating every fiber of her being.

Then, abruptly, Azár felt the conduit slam closed.

She cried out, cringing back away from the emptied husk of the old man. Her eyes bright with alarm, she took a staggering

step away, her breath coming in sharp and panicked gasps. Her gaze darted wildly around the dark chamber, her brain struggling to make sense of the confused perceptions that assaulted it. Tears wrung from her eyes by the violence of the Transference streaked her face, dribbling from her chin. Her whole body was shaking, weakened from the deluge of powerful energies.

Panting, Azár summoned a faint glow of magelight. A shimmering mist was inspired into being, roiling tendrils exploring the wet floor around her feet. The magelight pierced the shadows of the chamber, driving them back against the recesses of the walls. By the light of her own newfound power, Azár's eyes were drawn once again toward the Well of Tears. She glared at the portal, despising it utterly.

Steeling herself, Azár reached for the life-warm pewter cup at her side. Taking it into her hand, she made her way across the chamber. She knelt beside the Well, holding the cup of her master's blood with trembling hands. She dipped a shaking finger into the cup and then raised it up before her face. Turning her finger slowly, she observed the wet sheen of blood in the soft tendrils of magelight. Azár leaned forward and applied Zamir's spent lifeblood to the first rune of the sequence. The blood absorbed quickly into the porous stone as if sucked inside.

Before her eyes, the ancient rune *sistru* awakened from sleep and began to glow with a green, ethereal light. Azár moved around to the far side of the Well, to the next marking of the sequence. She brought that rune, too, to life. Then she moved on to the next. Calm and deliberate, Azár took her time, working meticulously all around the rim until, at last, all of the ancient markings glowed with their own inner light.

When Azár was finished, she stood up and backed away. She regarded her work, satisfied. The gateway was unlocked in this world. But someone else would have to open it from the other side.

Azár rose and used her nascent powers to slide the cover off the Well of Tears. The thick granite slab lifted of its own volition and glided smoothly aside. It hovered for a moment in the air, as if suspended from invisible strings, before lowering the rest of the way to the floor.

Azár turned back toward her master. Zamir had one last journey to make. The Well of Tears demanded a sacrifice, and the old man's soul would be the final gesture that would unseal the gateway.

Zamir had been frail, but the dead weight of his corpse was still too much for Azár's slight build to manage. So she closed her eyes, aligning her thoughts with the rhythmic pulse of the magic field, allowing the power of her mind to supplement the strength of her flesh. Azár lifted Zamir's body up over the Well's rim, giving him a shove.

With the slightest scraping noise, the corpse slipped into the gaping shaft and tumbled downward into darkness.

Azár turned away. It would take some time for Zamir's spirit to complete the final task he had set for himself. There was still yet time to ascend the long flights of steps to the level of the surface. She would have to hurry; her part was still far from complete.

Azár sent her magelight roaming forward, her feet following its glowing trail out of the chamber and into the dark passage beyond. She knew exactly which direction to turn; her master had made certain she would not falter in her task. The corridor she traversed was part of a larger warren of passageways that infested the mountainside below what had once been proud Aerysius, city of the mages. Now just a sad and desolate foundation that stood forlorn three thousand feet above the Vale of Amberlie.

Following the map she had committed to memory, Azár let her feet carry her up a narrow stair, moving through a glowing trail of magelight that spilled ahead of her. Her eyes rejoiced in the texture of the light, awed by the magelight's warm, summery glow. It was her own creation, her very first. A lifegiving thing of wonder and graceful beauty.

Azár sent her mind out, sampling the pulse and rhythm of the magic field in this place. It was soothing and vibrant. It was hers, now, to command as she pleased. She could feel Zamir's power stirring within her, a wondrous and potent legacy.

She emerged at last from the depths of the mountain into a cool, clear night. She gazed out upon the terrace that stretched

before her, captivated by the stark austerity of Aerysius's bare foundations. Azár gazed upward into the sky, tilting her head back as an abrupt gust of wind seized her long, dark braid.

Before her, violent energies shot toward the sky, penetrating the dome of the heavens with a violence that was alarming. Lightning licked down to assault that awful spire, raining trails of sparks across the sky.

Confronted with such a daunting vision, Azár felt her courage falter. She lowered her gaze, biting her lip. She concentrated on the sound of her breath, willing her mind to focus. When she opened her eyes again, she regarded the gateway with newfound resolve.

Azár's breath caught in her throat.

From out of the dazzling brilliance of the column, dark figures were emerging. Stirred by the sight of them, Azár's heart quickened its pace. She stood her ground with fists balled against her sides, feet apart, back rigid. Shivering with excitement, Azár looked on as the first man-shaped silhouettes drew forth from the glaring wash of light to converge on her position.

The man who approached first was easily identified by the spiked weapon he bore: Byron Connel, ancient Warden of Battlemages, wielder of the legendary talisman *Thar'gon*. To his right strode an elegant woman in a flowing white gown, dark of hair as well as skin. A demon-hound with menacing green eyes stalked at her side. Azár had heard enough tales of the Eight to recognize Myria Anassis, ancient Querier of the Lyceum.

Another woman with loose chestnut hair approached Azár. She strolled alongside a man just as handsomely sinister as the woman was deceptively beautiful: Sareen Qadir and Nashir Arman. The pair approached gracefully. The woman's eyes seemed to glisten, a smile of excitement growing on her lips.

So distracted was she by the pair that Azár almost didn't notice the two men approaching from the opposite direction. She turned, startled to find herself confronted by the imposing forms of Zavier Renquist and Cyrus Krane. The two ancient prime wardens drew up together before her, the white cloaks of their office billowing behind them, stirred by gusts of wind displaced by the gateway. Cyrus Krane regarded Azár with a sneer rendered

all the more cruel by the jagged red scar that bisected his face. His dark eyes were murky pools of unveiled threat.

Zavier Renquist paused before her, arms behind his back, gazing down upon Azár with an expression of somber esteem. His dark hair was pulled back from his face, gathered into a thick braid at the top of his head. He gazed at her expectantly, as if calmly waiting for her to speak first. Had he been any other man in the world, Azár might have considered it.

Appearing satisfied, Zavier Renquist lifted his chin and addressed Azár in a deep and resonant voice:

“Our Master extends to you His gratitude. In you, Xerys is well-pleased. He commits to you the services of the Eight and His army of the night until the initial purpose of our summoning is fulfilled. So, my child, it is time to speak your desires. What shall be your command?”

Azár swallowed, unable to look away from the mesmerizing shadows that simmered in Zavier Renquist’s eyes. She held his gaze with her own as she summoned a fragile voice, praying her words would not falter and betray her fear.

“I command you to save my people.” Azár channeled every scrap of assertiveness she could muster into her tone. She squared her shoulders, lifting her chin. Her fists were still clenched tightly at her sides. “Deliver us from the darkness. Raise us up from the ashes. Return to us our birthright—this is my command!”

Zavier Renquist stood there regarding her for a prolonged, searching minute. It was impossible to read his expression; the ancient demon’s face was altogether blank, without any hint or trace of emotion. He stared deeply into Azár’s eyes as if scrutinizing her worth, contemplating the fabric of her soul, weighing the mettle of her character. At last, apparently satisfied, he gave a terse nod.

“Then it shall be as you command,” he said, shifting his weight over his feet. His indigo robes swayed with his motion. He turned to cast a predatory stare across at Cyrus Krane then turned again toward Azár. Very formally, he spread his hands and assured her:

“Malikar’s deliverance is long overdue. And this time, there will

be nothing in this world that can deter us from our goal. Allow me to introduce to you the man whose responsibility it shall be to reclaim the light and heritage that was lost so long ago when Caladorn fell into darkness.”

He gestured with his hand, indicating a man who had drawn up silently behind the others and now stood with hands clasped in front of him, head bowed against his chest. As Azár’s attention focused on him, the man glanced up through matted strands of long, black hair that had fallen forward over his face. His yellow-green eyes locked on hers with an intensity that was frightening.

Azár felt herself taken sharply aback; she had no idea who this man was. He fit none of the descriptions she had ever heard spoken of the Eight. The look in his eyes chilled her very soul.

She frowned in consternation, her brow netting. “I don’t understand,” Azár whispered. “What has become of our mistress? Who is this man? How is it that he alone is expected to accomplish what all Eight of you could not achieve before?”

Zavier Renquist clasped his fingers together in front of him: a gesture of patience. “Your mistress failed. Her soul has been consigned to Oblivion.” He fixed Azár with a flat, significant stare. He extended his hand, indicating to Azár the stranger across from her with the haunted eyes. “This is the man who bested your mistress in combat and has replaced her at my side. He has assumed all of Arden Hannah’s rights, privileges, and obligations.”

Azár fixed this newcomer with an incredulous stare, shaking her head in confounded dismay. “Who *is* he?”

Zavier Renquist explained, “Darien Lauchlin is the lone Sentinel who laid waste to Malikar’s legions at the base of Xerys’s Pedestal.”

Azár’s mouth dropped open. She had not been present at the massacre, but she had heard of the atrocities committed by Aerysius’s Last Sentinel, his final act of desperation. Thousands of brave warriors had not returned from that campaign, their bodies reduced to charred ash scattered on the wind. Azár shivered as she regarded the disquieting man before her, coming to the slow conclusion that Xavier Renquist had to be telling the truth about him. It was the only explanation for the depths of

torment in those harrowing eyes.

“This is impossible!” Azár managed at last. “The man you speak of is dead!”

“As am I,” the prime warden reminded her with a shrug and a smile. Spreading his hands, he went on to explain, “Darien Lauchlin committed his soul to the service of Xerys. He is now one with us in purpose. He has assumed all rights, responsibilities, and covenants of the Servant he replaces. So Darien is, in every respect, the overlord your people have been so long awaiting. Your request is his singular purpose to fulfill.”

Azár turned her head and spat upon the ground. Whirling away, she exclaimed in anger, “I will not suffer the company of this man! He is not even a man—he is a demon, a monster!”

“Perhaps.” The ancient prime warden raised his eyebrows. He did not appear affronted in the least by Azár’s accusation. “But I would strongly advise you to reconsider, and think very carefully before declining Darien’s assistance. Because, considering the nature of your demands, it sounds like a monster is exactly what you need.”

Azár gazed at him with dread in her eyes, knowing deep down in her gut that Renquist’s assessment was probably accurate. She sighed, giving in, heart heavy with dismay.

“Go with her,” Zavier Renquist commanded his newest Servant in a voice suffused with arrogance and ice. “You heard her demands. Go forth and fulfill them.”

The dark-haired demon nodded slightly. “I will do my best, Prime Warden.” His voice sounded terse, strained. He strode forward.

“Stop.”

Renquist’s sharp command halted him in his tracks. As Azár looked on in fascination, Darien Lauchlin turned back around with weary patience in his eyes.

Zavier Renquist promised him, “Your best isn’t going to be good enough. Instead of your best, *I demand your worst*. You must let go of your past and embrace your destiny. Unchain your inner demons. Conquer your own ghosts just as you once conquered my armies. Transcend the constraints you have used to shackle your conscience and experience firsthand what true freedom

feels like.”

Darien Lauchlin nodded, dark strands of hair swaying forward into his face. “It shall be as you ask, Prime Warden.”

“It had better be. For your sake. And for hers.”

Azár stared long and hard at the two men, her brow furrowed in consternation. Renquist’s threat had not been directed toward herself. She let her gaze linger on the man trudging toward her, a demon-hound jogging behind in his wake. Frowning, she wondered which woman’s life Zavier Renquist had just threatened. And why that woman’s life mattered so much to this tormented monster of a man.



Chapter Two

Message from the Past

Rothscard, The Rhen

Kyel Archer gazed up at the corrugated towers of Emmerly Palace with a growing feeling of trepidation gnawing at his already soured stomach. He'd never liked Rothscard, and today's visit was certainly no exception. Kyel's every experience of the city had been riddled with misfortune in some significant way. The first time he'd passed through Rothscard, Kyel had found himself falsely accused of murder, chained, and swept away to the Front as a conscript to fight in the war. His second visit to the city had ended with him in chains of a very different nature, though the experience had been no less demeaning. Kyel couldn't help but wonder if this visit would prove just as treacherous. This time, the matching pair of chains he wore on his wrists were of his own creation, forged by his own convictions. But that did little to ease the burden of their weight, or to render their harsh constraints less difficult to bear.

Kyel gazed up at the ramparts of the palace with a whimsical expression, one thumb stroking the new growth of beard he wore on his face. As the coach drew up before an elegant fountain in the courtyard, Kyel cast a quick glance at Naia, seated across from him on a leather bench. The smile of reassurance she gifted him helped a little. It gave Kyel enough strength to conjure up a fleeting smile of his own.

Naia appeared exceptionally in her element, he realized, completely at ease. The former priestess seemed more radiant than usual, her dark auburn hair gathered in a bun. Her face, once kept concealed by the white veil of Death, was almost shocking

in its beauty. In the past two years, Kyel had grown more accustomed to the sight of Naia's naked face, though he had never been able to take it entirely for granted. The absence of the veil remained conspicuous.

Their coach drew to a halt with a sudden jolt. Kyel swallowed against a hard lump in his throat, surveying the tall towers of the palace through the window.

He could hear Meiran's voice beside him, muttering in her usual, no-nonsense alto, "Breathe, Kyel. You look like you're going to be ill."

"I'm still not sure that I won't be."

There was a sharp clank as someone outside threw open the door of the coach. Kyel stared for a moment at the door's leather skin, then let his gaze drop to the boots of the footman awaiting them.

Kyel took his time about climbing down out of the coach; it had been hours since he'd last had a chance to stretch his legs. Fortunately, the footman had positioned a small stool just under the carriage, making the drop down to the ground far less of an undertaking. Kyel took a few unsteady steps, gazing around as his hands went to straighten the thick black cloak that hung from his shoulders.

Naia alighted gently at his side, followed immediately by Meiran, who strode forward between the two of them. The white cloak of her office flowed gracefully down her back, swaying with each movement of her body, the embroidered Silver Star glistening in the sunlight.

Kyel fell in behind her, Naia at his side, the uniformed guards of Emmerly Palace forming ranks behind their small entourage. Kyel had to rush to keep up with Meiran's long strides; she hadn't bothered to wait for an escort. Instead, she set her own course up the white marble steps as dignitaries rushed forward to intercept her.

"Thank you, Prime Warden, for your swift response to our invitation." The first breathless minister fell in beside Meiran, matching her stride for stride. He wore an opulent ensemble, sporting a plumed hat and a cape.

“Of course.” Meiran didn’t favor the man with so much as a glance. She kept her gaze fixed straight ahead as she strode swiftly into the depths of the palace, forcing the man to take hurried strides to keep up. “It’s never a problem. Without the support of Emmerly’s Crown, our time in exile would be much less comfortable. Queen Romana has been a most generous benefactor.”

The minister smiled with an accommodating nod. He brought a folded kerchief up to dab at his brow as he continued to keep pace with Meiran’s long strides. “My Lady Queen thanks you for making such haste. Her Majesty is anxious to hear your opinion on a certain, most urgent matter, and is wondering—”

Meiran cut him off in mid-sentence, snapping, “If your Lady Queen is so anxious for my opinion, then why isn’t she here to greet us personally?” Meiran raised her eyebrows in speculation as she finally turned to regard the man laboring beside her. Kyel allowed himself an amused grin as he watched the interaction. He could hardly imagine anyone more suited for the office of prime warden than Meiran Withersby.

Blotting at the sheen of perspiration on his brow, the minister looked troubled. “My apologies, Prime Warden, but Queen Romana requests that you convene with her in the Blue Room.”

“So, I’ve been relegated to the Blue Room, now, have I?” Meiran sounded irritated. Following behind her, Kyel couldn’t get a good look at her face. But he had no trouble imagining the characteristic scowl she must be wearing. “Has Romana become skittish of magefolk again, or is this ‘urgent matter’ really that desperate?”

The minister led her around a corner and into a long corridor lined with painted wood panels. “I’m afraid I couldn’t begin to speculate, Prime Warden,” he murmured in placating tones.

Meiran harrumphed. “No, I don’t suppose you’re capable. Ah. Here we are.”

She drew up before a wide set of double doors as Kyel almost stumbled into her back. He shot a small, knowing grin in Naia’s direction, who returned the expression in kind. They waited, Kyel glancing around as liveried servants threw open the paneled

doors, exposing the bright interior of the chamber.

Meiran swept forward into the room, quickly crossing the patterned rugs. There, in the center of the room, she drew herself up formally and simply waited. Her cloak swung from her thin frame, which was covered by a sumptuous gown of pristine white. Her rich brown hair was gathered behind her head in an elegant twist. Her gaze moved over the interior of the chamber in critical assessment. She drew herself up, shoulders squared and head held regally. Her very presence was suffused with authority.

“The Prime Warden of Aerysius, Meiran Withersby,” the voice of the minister announced belatedly.

Kyel’s eyes shot in the direction of the man, catching just a glimpse of him as the doors swung closed, shuddering as they latched. A long, tense silence followed. With a wrench of nausea, Kyel forced himself to look Romana Norengail in the eye.

Emmery’s queen had matured in the two years since he’d last seen her. Romana was no longer the disarming young girl he’d first met in her solarium. She seemed even more regal now, as though years and experience had somehow consecrated her right to her throne. She wore the Sapphire Crown of Emmery on her head, her shoulders draped in winter ermine. Her lovely face was both patient and serene.

At her side, seated in a chair not quite as tall or elaborately carved, was Nigel Swain, Romana’s husband. Kyel’s stomach physically squirmed at the sight of the prince consort. Even after all this time, Kyel was still not sure how he felt about the man. Swain had conspired to murder Darien Lauchlin and had manipulated Kyel into helping him. The underhanded way he’d gone about it still galled. Swain was a harsh man, uncompromising in his character. But his loyalty to Romana was flawless.

Confronted with the presence of the prime warden, both Romana and Swain stood and, taking a step forward in unison, dropped to their knees upon the rugs spread before them on the floor.

“Arise,” Meiran directed them with a curt wave of her hand.

Without any further attempt at ceremony, she seated herself in one of the chairs arranged before them, Kyel taking the seat to her right as Naia claimed the one beside him.

“Tea?” a butler inquired, indicating a wheeled cart that held an elegant silver service.

“Yes, that would be lovely.” Meiran’s hands moved to smooth the fabric of her gown.

The butler thrust an elegant cup and saucer into Kyel’s hands. Yes, he wanted cream. No, he didn’t care for any honey. No wafers, thank you very much. He brought the teacup to his lips, holding the saucer in his left hand as he managed a sip. The tea was fragrant with chamomile and very hot. He lowered the cup back down, resting it against his leg.

Queen Romana made a majestic but half-hearted attempt at a smile. “Prime Warden, let me first begin by saying—”

“Please.” Meiran cut her off, lowering her own teacup from her lips. “Let us dispense with formalities. We’re all very tired from the journey. So, just tell me: what has happened?”

The smile vanished from the lips of Emmerly’s queen. Her gaze wandered toward her husband. Kyel studied the two of them, trying to find meaning in the silent conversation that passed between them in the span of a single heartbeat. Turning back to Meiran, Queen Romana said in a troubled voice:

“A green spire of light has been reported in the skies above Aerysius.”

Kyel sputtered as he choked on a swallow of tea. Coughing, he leaned forward over his legs and set the cup and saucer down on the floor beside his chair.

“Has this report been confirmed?” Meiran sat as if frozen, her cup paused halfway to her lips.

Nigel Swain nodded. His grey-streaked hair swayed forward into his face. “The gateway is very visible, especially at night. It can be seen for miles in all directions.”

“It’s been only two years,” Naia whispered at Kyel’s side. The despair in her voice was painful to hear. “How could this be happening already? Who could have opened it? Who *would* have?”

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Meiran cast a withering glance in Naia's direction. She took a deep breath, appearing to be collecting herself, then uttered with a scowl, "It doesn't matter. What's done is done. No matter how it was accomplished, we now must deal with the consequences."

Kyel squirmed in his chair, his thoughts pulled in a hundred separate directions at once. He found himself transported back in time, back to a dark room in a damp cavern in the heart of an ancient mountain. Where a granite well encircled with glowing, sinister markings awaited him. It had been his job to seal those runes, to burn them clean of the blood that fed them life.

Apparently, his work had been undone.

"Have there been...other types of reports?" he said to no one in particular.

Queen Romana answered his question. "Not yet. But we must assume that the Eight walk the earth again. We need to consider the possibility that war might soon be upon us."

"They are no longer Eight," Naia corrected her. "Darien destroyed Arden Hannah. Their number has been reduced to seven."

The prime warden shrugged dismissively. "One less darkmage won't make a bit of difference. There's only three of us, each fettered by the Oath of Harmony. Kyel is the closest thing we have to a Sentinel."

Swain leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. "Which order did Naia take?"

Meiran responded, "I've been training Naia as a Querer."

Swain leaned back in his chair, eyes narrowing. "So. We've got one half-trained Sentinel and one half-trained Querer. And a prime warden we can't risk letting anywhere near a field of battle. Those are our assets. Against seven Unbound demons. Including Byron Connel, one of the greatest military minds the world has ever known."

Naia's gaze lifted to confront him. In a voice thick with the lilt of Chamsbrey, she asked Swain, "Perhaps now you can appreciate Darien's quandary?" The resentment in her tone was scathing.

Nigel Swain shook his head. "No. I don't. Because here we are

again two years later, in the same situation as before. All Darien did was buy us time. Nothing more.”

Naia glared at him, her lips compressed with bitterness. “No,” she growled in a voice low and defiant. “Darien’s sacrifice was not in vain. I will not believe that. I cannot believe that.”

Swain leaned forward, capturing her eyes with a cold, unfeeling stare. “It doesn’t matter what you believe; the portal’s open again. They’ll be coming. And this time, Darien’s not here to save or damn us.”

Kyel found himself gazing down absently at the chain on his right wrist, rotating his arm so that the markings shimmered in the light. “We must reseal the Well of Tears,” he said. “That will cut them off from their source of power.” He didn’t dare voice his next thought: that one of their own number would have to volunteer to be the next sacrifice demanded by the gateway. It had to be a Grand Master. Naia was only third tier; she ranked too low to be an option. That left only Meiran and himself.

Meiran was fingering the necklace she always wore around her neck. It was a habit she had, something she tended to do whenever something troubled her. The necklace had a silver pendant that looked to be made of one sinuous, intertwined strand that wove around about itself without beginning or end. The symbol was called an eternity knot. Darien had given her that necklace the day he’d left Aerysius for Greystone Keep. The same day Meiran had presented him with the sword he could never bring himself to part with.

“No,” Meiran sighed at last, still fingering the fragile pendant on its chain. “They’ll be expecting us to move against the Well. This time, they’ll be guarding it much more carefully. The Well of Tears will have to remain open, at least for now.”

Romana leaned forward, her hands squeezing the arms of her chair. “What, then?”

Meiran dropped her hand, looking up into the face of Emmery’s queen. “I’ve spent the past two years rallying the southern kingdoms in support of our cause. It’s time for those monarchies to do more than just offer lip service. On the morrow, I will pronounce a formal declaration of war. Let’s see

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how many battalions the South will be willing to muster.”

Looking at Swain, she asked, “What’s the status of Greystone Keep and Ironguard Pass?”

Nigel Swain shrugged. “Fortifications are well underway, though neither keep is combat-ready.”

Kyel frowned. “Has Force Commander Craig been notified of this?”

“I sent a bird to him before I sent for you.”

A liveried servant entered the room, swiftly circling the small ring of chairs and leaning over to whisper in Swain’s ear. The man’s voice was much too low for Kyel to hear. But he could see Swain’s reaction. The prince’s eyes widened reflexively, his body stiffening in his chair.

“Wait here,” he growled as he rose to his feet. He crossed the room in three cat-like strides and was already out the door before Kyel could wonder what had happened. He kept his gaze focused on the doorway, frowning after the man.

Naia was still talking, going on as though she hadn’t noticed Swain’s abrupt disappearance. “We should talk about making use of the temples. I could travel to the Valley of the Gods and speak with my father. It’s not far.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Meiran muttered, looking at the doorway rather than at Naia. “Do me a favor and bring it up again later.”

A loud noise echoed from outside. The sound of many running footsteps rang clearly from the hallway. Kyel started, surging to his feet just as a cluster of blue-cloaked guardsmen spilled into the room, sweeping forward around the chairs to converge on their queen.

Romana was on her feet in an instant, eyes wide with alarm, as the guardsmen encircled her, forming a protective ring. Meiran and Naia were forced to back away to make room for the swarm of armored bodies. Kyel found himself reaching for the magic field, holding it ready.

“Naia, retire with the queen.”

Kyel whirled at the sound of Swain’s voice calling out from the doorway. He clutched the scabbard of a longsword. He was

flanked by two more guards with bars of rank upon their sleeves.

Kyel stepped forward, inserting himself between Meiran and Swain, shielding the prime warden with his own body. He had no idea what was happening, had no clear evidence whether the guards were security or threat. He only knew that Meiran's life had to be protected at all cost. And he was the only thing close to a Sentinel they had.

Turning to the prince, Kyel demanded, "What happened? What's going on?"

Eyes only for his queen, Swain responded, "Two of Renquist's demons just showed up on our doorstep." To his guardsmen he instructed, "Escort the queen and Master Naia to the Residence."

Naia opened her mouth as if to argue as guards moved in close, pressing her backward with their bodies. She turned to Meiran with a questioning look in her eyes. The prime warden nodded, bestowing her assent, eyes glazed with worry.

"Protect the queen," she said.

Naia dropped a formal curtsy before turning away. The guards immediately surrounded her, directing her along with Romana toward a door on the opposite wall. Within seconds, both women were gone. The room was swiftly emptied. Kyel turned back to Swain.

"Now what, exactly, is going on?"

Swain explained as he donned his sword, "My men detained two darkmages at the palace gates. They carry a badge of truce. They say they desire parley with the prime warden."

Face aghast, Meiran strode toward him. "Who are they? Did they give their names?"

The prince only shrugged, adjusting the strap of the baldric that crossed his chest. "I have no idea who they are. I didn't care to ask. I had them escorted across the grounds to the citadel. I didn't want them under the same roof as the queen."

The prime warden stopped, lifting a pair of perfectly arched eyebrows. "You had them detained? Under a badge of *truce*?"

Swain grimaced. "Give me a little credit, Meiran. It wasn't that kind of escort."

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Kyel frowned, not liking the situation one bit. He stared down at the markings of the chain on his wrist, gazing at it as cold prickles of dread needled his skin. There was little he could do against two darkmages. Strong as he was, there was only so much he could manage within the confines of his Oath of Harmony.

Never to harm.

The words he had spoken to Darien beneath Orien's Finger echoed in his memory, chilling him just as thoroughly as they had the moment he'd uttered them. He had never doubted his decision to take that Oath, had never questioned it, not even once.

Never, until now.

Meiran was already moving toward the door. "Very well. Kyel, you're with me."

Kyel had to move quickly to catch up. Swain swept ahead of them with a glare, two guards bringing up the rear. He moved with the casual grace of a blademaster, a stride that reminded Kyel of the way a cat stalks a bird. There was no attempt at conversation as they continued down the long, paneled corridors of the palace. It became apparent that every door was warded, guards stationed at intervals all up and down the length of the hallways. There were many more than he remembered.

They followed their escort out of the palace and across the grounds. Kyel kept pace at Meiran's side, his black cloak rippling behind him as he moved, the Silver Star of Aerysius glistening at his back. They moved through a maze of garden walkways bordered by boxwood hedges. At the far side of the inner ward was the citadel, a sprawling building surrounded with what looked like an entire company of Bluecloaks. Kyel had been inside the citadel once before. It had been there, in that prison, that Kyel had received the Transference through the Soulstone.

They paused at the entrance to a circular chamber ringed by guards. There, Swain bid them halt as he strode toward an officer, pausing to confer quietly with the man. Kyel gazed around, taking in the martial look of the place, the combined scents of oiled metal and aged leather.

Swain nodded and took a step back. The officer barked an

order. The guards that ringed the chamber turned and strode together toward the door, clearing the room. The door was shut, the bar thrown.

The three of them were alone.

Meiran turned to Swain, expectantly cocking an eyebrow. The prince motioned with his head in the direction of a door, at the same time reaching up to remove the sword from his back, leaning both sword and scabbard up against the wall. Meiran nodded, eyes narrowing as she considered the doorway. Then she started toward it.

Kyel fell in behind her, drawing in more of the magic field until the song of it swelled inside his head and the energy bled from his body in a visible, golden nimbus that surrounded him. Whatever happened, he wanted to be ready.

At the door, Meiran hesitated. She reached out and clenched the handle and, closing her eyes as if uttering a prayer, pulled the door open.

As they moved through the doorway, Kyel's eyes immediately widened in dismay. He pulled harder on the magic field, sending a spill of magelight forward into the shadowy corridor ahead.

He hadn't known what to expect. Certainly, not this.

He halted in mid-stride, confronted by the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. She stood waiting in the center of the dark hallway, poised, a congenial smile on her face, chestnut hair spilling down her back. She wore an indigo robe with the image of the Silver Star embroidered on the breast. Kyel frowned at the sight of it, his eyes roving over the woman with blatant curiosity. She didn't look evil; there was no amount of malevolence in her eyes. In her upraised hand, she held a white drape of torn fabric: the badge of truce Swain had spoken of.

Beside the woman stood a man with dark, unkempt hair that curled about his collar. He appeared very thin, even gaunt. He was wearing a long black coat that covered a knee-length tunic. He held a black felt hat in front of his chest. There was a quiet sadness about his eyes that Kyel found intriguing. He couldn't help but wonder the reason for it.

Meiran raised her hand, stopping a short distance away from

their visitors. She stood there, considering the man and woman before her. She merely regarded them, her eyes narrowed and pensive. Kyel realized that Meiran had produced a glowing shield around her own body, a blue nimbus barely visible against the shadows.

She demanded in a firm voice, “What are your names?”

The woman brought a hand up to her chest. “I am Sareen Qadir.” She spoke in a voice thick with a rich and melodic accent. “This is my partner, Quinlan Reis. You must be Prime Warden Meiran Withersby.”

Meiran nodded, her face devoid of all emotion. “I am,” she responded flatly. “But help me clarify something. You both claim to be Servants of Xerys. So why is it that history has no record of your names?”

A good question, Kyel thought. He gazed expectantly at the two darkmages before him, realizing for the first time that he was staring at two people one thousand years dead.

The chestnut-haired woman offered Meiran an indulgent smile. “Trust me when I say that many things have become lost since our time in this world came to an end. Our names, unfortunately, were not the greatest casualties of Bryn Calazar’s fall.”

At her side, the man replaced his hat back on his head, adjusting the brim low over his eyes. Gazing at Meiran, he told her, “I once heard that Prime Warden Sephana Clemley had my name expunged from the record books. It’s my guess she didn’t want my reputation to tarnish my brother’s good name.”

Meiran frowned at his words, gazing at the man with kindled interest in her eyes. “And who was your brother?”

“Braden Reis,” the darkmage responded without hesitation.

Kyel’s mouth dropped open.

“Your brother was the *First Sentinel*?” Meiran gasped, obviously just as shocked as Kyel. She made a searching gesture with her hands. “And yet...you’re a Servant of Xerys. Explain.”

The darkmage sucked in a cheek, issuing a slight shrug. “It seemed like the right decision at the time I made it. Of course, in retrospect, I often find myself wondering why I didn’t do

things rather differently.”

Kyel couldn't help but stare at the man. He was fascinated by the two of them. He found himself far more intrigued than afraid, even though he knew that defied common sense.

“Why are you here?” Meiran asked.

The woman spread her hands. “We are here to deliver a message to you from Prime Warden Zavier Renquist.”

Kyel shivered at the very mention of that terrible name. He needed no further reminders that these two mages were very dangerous, indeed. He had been wrong to lower his guard. Kyel chanced a glance over his shoulder at Swain, finding the prince looking none too pleased and very much on edge. His sword arm twitched at his side, seeming to hunger for the hilt of his blade.

Meiran bowed her head for a moment. When she brought her eyes up again, her gaze was rigid. “Very well. Deliver your message and then be gone from this place.”

The woman named Sareen nodded formally, giving no indication that she had taken any offense to Meiran's terse command. She said, “Prime Warden Renquist has no desire for a war between our two nations at this time. Instead, what he proposes is an alliance. I have been sent to guide you north with me to Bryn Calazar, where Zavier Renquist desires to meet with you to negotiate the terms of a treaty that will be forged between our two peoples. I am to accompany you, Prime Warden, as your protector and guardian through the Black Lands. I have been instructed to leave Quin behind as assurance for your safe return.”

Kyel realized that he had stopped breathing long before the woman had stopped talking. Meiran couldn't accept such an offer. It was much too dangerous.

“And what if I refuse to come with you?” Meiran wondered. Kyel stared at Sareen, very interested in hearing what her response would be.

“I would advise against it,” the chestnut-haired beauty shrugged, casting her eyes downward and to the side. “That would leave our prime warden with little recourse but to act.”

Meiran stared at her unblinking. At last she said, “I will think

on it. Is there anything else?”

“Yes.”

It was Quinlan Reis who stepped forward, offering out a scroll of parchment toward Meiran in his hand. “I bear another message for you. This one is from Darien Lauchlin.”

Kyel stiffened at the mention of that name.

He took a step back away from the offered scroll. Meiran remained where she was. She stared down at the parchment as if it were a venomous snake, the color draining slowly from her face. Her blue eyes were wide with revulsion. Long moments ticked by. She stood staring at the scroll in the darkmage’s hand, refusing to accept it.

“I don’t understand,” she whispered at last. “Darien Lauchlin is dead.”

“As am I,” Quinlan Reis reminded her, gazing deeply into her eyes. “Like myself, Darien is now a Servant of Xerys.”

Kyel gaped at the darkmage, paralyzed by revulsion and dismay. His eyes darted to Meiran. He wanted to go to her, but he couldn’t bring himself to move. He remained rooted where he was, heart frozen in dread.

“Darien is one of the Eight?” Meiran gasped in a voice full of despair. She shook her head, gazing down at the scroll as her face collapsed into grief. But then she clenched her jaw, brittle strength returning to her eyes. She shook her head firmly. “No. I don’t believe you. Darien would never do such a thing. *You are lying.*”

Quinlan Reis just shrugged, hand still extended toward her in the air. “He wasn’t left with much of a choice, I’m afraid. It was the only way he could secure the release of your own soul from the Netherworld.”

Kyel closed his eyes, bowing his head. There was little doubt left in his mind; he knew the demon before him was telling the truth. He had to be.

Meiran’s whisper was barely audible. “My soul...? *That was the price?*”

Quinlan Reis nodded. “I’m sorry if these tidings bring you grief. I know how much you meant to him. Here. Take it.”

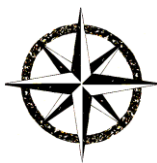
He pressed the scroll into Meiran's hand, squeezing her fingers closed around it. Then he stepped back. His eyes seemed even more saddened than they had before.

"Excuse me," Meiran gasped.

She turned and fled the room, leaving Kyel and Swain alone with the two unlikely emissaries. Kyel turned back to regard the darkmages who stood before him, waiting.

He felt completely at a loss.

He had no idea what to do.



Chapter Three

Demon

Aerysius, The Rhen

Darien awoke to the lambent orange glow of flickering torchlight distorting the shadows on the stone walls. The fact that he was even awake and alert in this world at all was strange enough, a sensation that was half-remembered, like a dream. The ruddy hue of the crackling flames seemed surreal, saturated with a bright intensity of color. A vibrant contrast to the monochromatic palette of the Netherworld. The flames of the torches seemed animated, intense, *alive*. They writhed in a vivacious dance, fueled by a breeze that stirred from the depths of the warrens.

He was awake and alert in this world, the same world that, somewhere, Meiran also occupied. Darien's first thought was that he wanted to go to her. He wanted that very badly. He wanted to tell her how grateful he was that she had been there with him at the end.

Meiran's presence at his side had kept the fear of death at bay. Her soothing touch had been the last thing Darien felt as death rose to claim him, catching him up and bearing him away, downward into darkness.

But the darkness had not been eternal.

On the other side, there *had* been light. An unholy light. A sickening pallor, the color of pestilence, of corruption, of decay. Within that cold and brittle light, Darien's soul had been received with delight by his new Master.

He'd had much to atone for.

Darien sat up, shivering, filled with a terrible sense of dread.

He drew his knees up against his chest and leaned back against the rough stone wall. He sat there for a long time, letting the chill horror of the memories slowly recede. All across the underground chamber, the other members of their party were beginning to stir. It would be morning soon. Almost time to depart.

He glanced down at the clothes he was wearing, the same tattered outfit he had worn to his death. He was dressed all in black: black breeches, a frayed linen shirt, the same black cloak he'd taken from an abandoned tent in the Chamsbrey encampment below Orien's Finger. There was no Silver Star embroidered on the back; as far as Darien was concerned, he'd lost the right to wear that emblem. He wore only a simple, plain wool cloak, something an officer might sport. Not a mage's cloak. He was a Sentinel of Aerysius no longer.

On the ground beside him lay the sword that Meiran had given him. It rested in its worn leather scabbard, the rubies set into the hilt glimmering like crystalline droplets of blood. His hand went to the sword, sliding it possessively nearer. It was the only thing he had left of her, the only thing he was likely to ever have.

Darien figured the letter he'd written should be enough to destroy any lingering feelings Meiran might still have for him.

He turned toward the sound of approaching footsteps. His hand closed reflexively around the hilt of his sword. But when Darien saw the face of the man who approached, he released his grip. Common steel could not defend him against such a monster.

Nashir Arman dropped into a crouch at Darien's side. His face was angular and chiseled, his stare intense and penetrating. Darien froze under the severe inspection of those eyes, dropping his own stare to the ground. In the Netherworld, Nashir had been assigned the role of Darien's tormentor. The demon took great pleasure in delivering pain. And he was very good at it.

Nashir stared at Darien with an ice-dead gaze. "You took the life of my woman," he said in a low and threatening tone, soft enough so that the others couldn't hear. "I promise you this: before you leave this world again, I'll see to it that you pay."

Darien kept his eyes lowered, focusing his own gaze on the floor. He knew by now not to try to look Nashir in the eye. The pain simply wasn't worth it.

The darkmage leaned forward, staring him in the face. "Perhaps I'll take the life of your woman. Flesh for flesh. Blood for blood. Pain for pain."

Darien glared his hatred at Nashir. It was the only thing he could do, the only defense he had against the sinister demon. He couldn't even sense the magic field, thanks to Cyrus Krane. The man had severed his connection with the field, and that damper was still in place.

"Stop provoking him, Nashir."

Byron Connel drew up behind Nashir, Myria Anassis at his side. Connel wore the indigo robes of the Lyceum of Bryn Calazar, the talisman 'Thar'gon swaying from a leather strap affixed to his belt. Darien was relieved the two of them had come to his defense, but not surprised. Connel seemed a man of character, patient and even-tempered. Myria was a stalwart intellectual, kind and sincere.

Nashir acknowledged Connel with a stiff nod of his chin. He rose to his feet, his eyes still intently focused on Darien. He turned and stalked away, but not without casting a significant glare back over his shoulder. Darien kept his eyes trained on Nashir, not trusting him at all.

Byron Connel knelt at Darien's side. "Never lower your guard around Nashir Arman," the Battlemage cautioned. "He can be...unprincipled. And unpredictable."

"I know." Darien's attention was still focused on Nashir's retreating back.

"Do you?" inquired Myria, hovering over them with arms crossed in front of her. "I don't know if you appreciate how dangerous he can be."

Darien allowed his gaze to wander upward. Gazing into Myria's face, he assured her, "I can be dangerous, too."

Myria Anassis shook her head, her long, dark hair swaying like a curtain to her waist. "No. Not like him. You have a conscience. A creature like Nashir does not."

Byron Connel adjusted his posture, draping an arm over one knee. “Compared to Nashir, you’re like a child, Darien. He was trained as a weapon from birth. He’s well-schooled in both offensive magic and tactics, and he’s had a thousand years to hone those skills. Your training as a Sentinel was grossly deficient. You wouldn’t last a minute against him.”

“Then teach me,” Darien challenged.

Connel grinned, shaking his head. He cast an amused glance up at Myria. “Sorry, but I can’t do that. My duties lie elsewhere, unfortunately. Just remember to watch your back.” He reached out, clapping Darien on the shoulder as he rose to take his leave.

Myria regarded Darien with a look of sympathy. “I’m sorry. I wish I could be of more help to you.”

Darien found himself intrigued. “Why?”

She paused in the action of turning away. She gave a slight shrug. “Because you remind me of someone I once knew.”

“Who?”

The look on Myria’s face made it obvious she had not expected either question. “Just a man,” she responded after a moment’s hesitation. “A man who’s been dead for a thousand years.”

Darien considered her answer carefully. “Did you love him?”

Myria blinked. Then she frowned. “No. But I did admire him.” Still frowning, she turned and strolled away.

Darien allowed his gaze to follow the pale texture of her gown that seemed to flare like fire in the torchlight. Like Byron Connel, Myria defied the concept of darkmage he had nurtured so carefully for so very long. He had thought they would prove to be all just like Nashir Arman and Arden Hannah. Sadistic and power-hungry. Potently cruel, like Cyrus Krane. But there seemed to be more than one type of demon. Apparently, there were many shades and gradations of evil. He wondered where on that continuum his own soul would rank.

At his side, the thanacryst made a noise that sounded almost like purring. Darien moved his hand to its neck, ruffling the course and matted fur. He had been surprised to find out that the demon-hound had once belonged to Nashir. He had offered to return it, but Nashir had wanted nothing to do with his former

pet. Darien was grateful; in all the world, the thanacryst was the only friend he seemed to have left.

He gazed across the chamber at the others going about the business of breaking down their small encampment. His eyes found Azár, the Enemy mage whose action of unsealing the Well of Tears had undone everything Darien had given his life for. Azár was awake and rummaging through her pack. She'd made her bed on the far side of the chamber, as far away from him as she could possibly manage. It was very obvious to Darien that he wasn't the savior Azár had been anticipating.

She glanced up and, for the briefest instant, their gaze met. Her eyes narrowed in anger before darting quickly away. Azár was ferocious despite her small size. She was thin and delicate, with ink-black hair that hung in a thick braid all the way down her back. She had a proud and slender nose, smooth bronze skin, and wide, almond-shaped eyes that liked to gleam at him with hatred.

Darien pushed himself up off the ground and strode away from her toward the doorway. As he walked, he shrugged the baldric of his sword on over his shoulder, letting the scabbard fall down across his back. They were still within the warrens beneath Aerysius, in a chamber somewhere in the levels beneath the Well of Tears. The Servants had used these rooms as a kind of headquarters during their last campaign. There were still plenty of supplies left over from that time: dried food stores, blankets, even weapons. They had lingered there for the past two days: provisioning, formulating plans.

Darien followed the damp passage ahead toward a narrow rise of stairs, the demon-hound padding along at his side. He wanted to go up that long flight of steps. He desired one last view of the mountainside before he had to leave, just one last glimpse of the foundations of dead Aerysius.

But it was not meant to be.

The sound of his name stopped him short. Darien turned, glancing behind down the passageway in the direction he had come from. Zavier Renquist was standing there, lingering in the doorway, face stern and expectant. Darien moved immediately

to retrace his steps. Of one thing he was completely certain: Xavier Renquist was a hundred times more dangerous than Nashir could ever be.

As Darien drew up before him, he ducked his head in silent deference. The ancient prime warden reached out and draped an arm over Darien's shoulders, pulling him in familiarly close. "Let us take our leave," he uttered in a deep baritone voice. With gentle pressure, he steered Darien back toward the deep bowels of the warrens. Glowing tendrils of magelight appeared at their feet, swirling to illuminate the path ahead. Darien's shoulders tensed at the feel of Renquist's hand on his back directing him forward.

"I thought you'd be interested to know that Quin and Sareen arrived safely in Rothscard," the prime warden said. "Hopefully, all will go well with their embassy. The letter you prepared should help. In the meantime, the hour has come for us to depart and be about our separate responsibilities."

His stomach clenched at the thought of the letter Renquist had compelled him to write. Darien had spilled his soul out in ink onto that parchment, knowing how imperative it was that Meiran believed him. If she didn't, the consequences were too terrible to consider.

Renquist continued, "Myria told me about Nashir. Be at ease. I've spoken with him."

Darien nodded his gratitude, his thoughts still on Meiran. He wondered what she must be thinking of him now, after reading that letter. The very thought of her reaction to his news made him feel physically ill with shame.

It didn't really matter what Meiran thought of him. In the scheme of things, that was of little consequence. All that mattered was that she believed him. Meiran could despise him for all eternity, so long as her anger kept her and the others alive.

"I want you to know that I have the highest expectations of you, Darien," Renquist said as they strode side by side down the dark corridor, glowing mist swirling beneath their feet. "Of all my chosen Servants, you are by far the most powerful and also the most decisive. You don't shy away from the hard decisions,

the kind that keep most men awake at night. You are intelligent, resourceful, and uninhibited. Once you have been properly trained, you will be the greatest Battlemage our world has ever known.”

Darien muttered, “If you say so, Prime Warden.”

Zavier Renquist stopped, taking Darien by the shoulders and turning him to face him. Darien forced himself to look the prime warden directly in the eye. It took every scrap of nerve he possessed to confront Renquist’s indomitable stare.

“I realize this is not easy for you,” the ancient darkmage confided in a gentler tone. “You made the right decision, Darien. You made the choice that was in the best interest of both our peoples. I think, finally, you’re beginning to understand just how imperative our work is here. I have every faith and confidence in your ability to succeed where others have failed.”

Darien couldn’t help it. He dropped his gaze to the floor under the weight of Renquist’s expectations. “Thank you, Prime Warden.”

Renquist patted him on the arm. “You’ll do just fine. Now. I’m going to remove your field damper. When I do, you’ll have a choice to make.”

Darien nodded, still staring at the floor. He understood. Renquist was going to give him back the magic field. When he did, there would be nothing preventing him from lashing out with his ability. But Renquist knew he presented little danger; Darien already had a deep appreciation for the consequences of such a betrayal.

Nashir had taught him that lesson very well.

The prime warden’s eyes narrowed slightly, his face going rigid in concentration. Then the magic field came flooding headlong into Darien’s mind like a river overwhelming a dam. He closed his eyes and reeled with the thrill of it, savoring the sweet ecstasy he had gone so long without. Darien took a deep breath, cherishing the feeling of comfort and sentiment the magic field inspired in his mind. Then he opened his eyes, conjuring a mist of his own.

Wondrously, his own magelight appeared at their feet, a

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shimmering blue glow that mingled with the turbulent vapor Renquist had already summoned.

“I don’t understand,” he whispered, reveling in the splendor of the cobalt mist, the signature color of the legacy he had surrendered at death. “The Soulstone took my gift. It drained everything from me.”

Renquist informed him flatly, “You don’t need the gift anymore. You’re not alive.”

Darien glanced up from the ground, confused and suddenly uncertain. “If I’m not alive, then what am I?”

Renquist allowed him a sad and fleeting smile, the kind of smile a father might bestow upon a young, wayward son. “You have been remade and brought back into being for a time,” explained the ancient darkmage. “You are clothed in your own flesh only by the will of Xerys. Through the Onslaught, you have access to the magic field. But only for a time.”

Darien shook his head, spreading his hands out before him. “I don’t understand. I breathe. I hunger. *I feel.*”

The prime warden dismissed his arguments with a shrug. “You are not alive, Darien, and you would do well to never forget that. You are a Servant of Xerys. A demon. Your soul has given up any chance or hope of salvation. When this brief flirtation with life is over, the best you can hope for is a return to our Master’s dominion. But, should Xerys ever become displeased with the quality of your service, He will exile your spirit into Oblivion. Your soul will be unmade, and you will simply cease to exist. It will be as though you had never been born. There’s no coming back from such a banishment.”

Darien considered this information, mulling it over, at last nodding his acceptance. He speculated, “Is that what happened to Arden?”

Renquist nodded. “Yes. That is exactly what happened to Arden.” He started down the passage, compelling Darien forward with a hand on his shoulder.

“What did Arden do to earn such displeasure from our Master?”

“She failed,” Renquist responded simply.

Darien understood. Failure was something their Master had little tolerance for. He was quiet for a long time as he contemplated the idea. He arrived at the conclusion that such a harsh penalty for failure was not as frightening as it first seemed; at least there was another option besides an eternity spent in hell. It was some small comfort knowing that. Darien pondered the notion as he followed Renquist down a flight of long, twisting steps that seemed to descend forever into blackness.

“Release the magic field,” Renquist commanded. “From here, we walk together in darkness.”

Darien understood the request. They were descending the long staircase buried deep within the heart of the mountain, the same one he had travelled with Kyel, Swain, and Naia two years before. Somewhere along that stair they would run into the vortex that surrounded Aerysius. He would need to shield his mind from it; the magic field would be inaccessible for a time.

He was reluctant to release the field’s soothing energies. But he did, allowing them to ebb and drain away. Complete darkness stole in around them. Darien could see nothing, not even the stairs beneath his feet. The pressure of Renquist’s hand on his arm compelled him forward. Together, side by side, they descended the stairs in consummate blackness.

“What other duties shall you have for me?” Darien wondered into the darkness. He could hear the sound of the thanacryst’s paws padding after them, keeping pace at a distance.

“Nothing for now,” Renquist’s voice responded. “You have enough on your plate. Attend to Azár and her people. That’s sufficient, for now. We’ll be using the transfer portal beneath Orien’s Finger. It will take us to Bryn Calazar. From there, Azár will lead you westward to the ancestral lands of her people.”

A cold breeze stirred up from the depths, playing with Darien’s cloak. He shivered. The air wasn’t fresh; the scent was stale, as if it had remained pooled within the mountain for a very long time.

They traveled together in silence down long flights of stairs broken every so often by the occasional landing. The journey took hours. The stairs led them ever downward, deeper into the mountain’s cold and clammy heart. They paused occasionally to

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rest in the thick blackness amidst the shadows. Neither man spoke; the descent was taxing, demanding a good deal of concentration.

Eventually, they reached the bottom of the steps. The stairs leveled off, arriving at a rock wall that marked the entrance to the warrens.

“*Qurfín*,” Renquist whispered. A door appeared like a growing crack in the rock wall ahead, yawning open with a silvery glow.

They stepped out of the mountainside into a pale gray morning. Darien was surprised to find that the other members of their party had already arrived ahead of them. Then he remembered: the stair within the mountain was like the Catacombs, a place where time and distance had little consistency. The other members of their party could have started out much later in the day and yet still arrived at the bottom of the mountain ahead of them.

He looked to the east, where dawn warmed the horizon beyond the dark frame of the valley walls. The tall pedestal of Orien’s Finger loomed ominously in the center of a horseshoe-shaped canyon. The ground at their feet was blackened, as well as the surrounding cliffs. There was no trace of green, not even a single blade of grass. The entire canyon was charred and scorched. Darien bowed his head, knowing this was his own doing. His intention had been to protect this land. Instead, he had defiled it.

As if sensing the direction of his thoughts, Azár turned to gaze at him with accusation in her eyes. Just looking at her rattled Darien’s nerves. She hated him, with good reason. The damage he’d inflicted upon the rocks of this canyon was trivial compared to the horrors he’d wrought against Azár’s own people. Thousands of lives torn instantly asunder. Charred remains, blackened to ash. Scattered about the ground and tossed by the wind.

“Azár,” Renquist called out. “Take Darien ahead to the transfer portal. Meet up with us in Bryn Calazar.”

The girl nodded, still glaring at Darien with hostile contempt in her eyes. Then, shouldering her cloth pack, she turned and

stalked away, crossing the black canyon floor toward the jutting tower of rock.

Flustered, Darien watched her go.

“What are you waiting for?” Byron Connel chided mildly, drawing up at Darien’s side. He nodded his head in the direction of Azár. “Better go after her before she leaves you behind.”

Darien grimaced. He hooked his hand around the leather baldric that crossed his chest and trudged after Azár. He trailed her around the wide base of the rock pillar until, mercifully, she drew to a halt on the far side. There, she stopped with her back to him and moved no further.

Darien approached her cautiously. She was standing stock-still, facing the orange disk of the rising sun. Darien paused, gazing at her with a questioning look.

Azár was staring straight ahead, her mouth slack, eyes wide with startled amazement. Her lips quivered. She was trembling all over, he realized, her whole body shaking. Darien took a hesitant step toward her, then another.

“You’ve never seen the sun before,” he surmised in wonder.

Azár tensed, her mouth snapping shut at the sound of his voice. She shot a smoldering glare his way. Then she shook her head, looking ashamed.

Darien chanced another step in her direction. “It can’t hurt you,” he assured her, trying to guess the cause of her reaction.

She glared at him with searing hatred in her eyes. He could almost visualize the anger bleeding off her skin to saturate the air between them. But then, suddenly, Azár’s expression faltered.

“What if it falls?” she whispered.

Darien was mildly shocked by the question. “What makes you think it will fall?”

“They say that is what happened to my homeland,” Azár explained without looking at him. “They say that the sun fell from the sky and charred the ground.”

Darien frowned, knowing for a fact that was not what happened. He’d met the man responsible for Caladorn’s demise. The sun was innocent of any such wrongdoing. A gust of wind seized his hair, whipping it forward into his face. Darien reached

up, pushing it back out of his eyes.

“I don’t think that’s going to happen here,” he said.

Azár fixed him with a cold, lingering stare. “Why not?”

“Because I won’t let it happen.”

Her gaze trailed slowly up the length of his body. Her lips curled in distaste, as if she despised everything she saw. “You are a very arrogant man,” she said at last. “And you are also a hypocrite.”

“Why am I a hypocrite?” Darien demanded, baiting her intentionally. This was the most he’d ever heard her speak. He was intrigued. He wanted to know more about this woman, this mage of the Enemy.

Azár gestured around them with a wave of her hand, eyes wide and incredulous. “Look around. The ground is charred, just as black as the soil of my own country. You did this. You desecrated your own homeland. You murdered a *hundred thousand* of my people!”

Darien nodded, knowing this had to be the source of her hatred. “There was a hundred thousand of them and only one of me. I did what I had to do.”

Azár seemed repulsed by his response. “You immolated an entire generation of warriors!”

Darien could only shrug, accepting full responsibility. “I swore an oath to defend my land and my people.”

Now it was Azár’s turn to take a step forward, her presence looming with hostility despite her size. Arms crossed in front of her chest, she sneered at him, “And now you’ve sworn another oath to defend *my* land and *my* people!”

Darien closed his mouth, having no idea how to respond to that. He dropped his gaze to the demon-hound, sitting on its haunches against the dark and ruined earth.

“You *are* a hypocrite,” Azár accused. “What are you going to do if you have to protect my homeland at the expense of your own?”

Darien could only glare at her in sullen silence. He had no answer to that. She had very quickly isolated and exposed his greatest weakness, his gravest fear. His naked vulnerability. She

stood there before him, arms crossed, eyebrows raised expectantly. Awaiting his response.

“So much talk,” she mocked him, “and now you have absolutely nothing to say! Why am I burdened with you? You are not a man to be trusted!”

Darien seethed at her in anger, his eyes scalding pools of resentment. He took a last step forward, closing the gap between them, and raised a finger before her face.

“I’m not a man,” he reminded her in a voice hoarse with caustic fury. “And you’d do very well not to trust me. I’ve broken every promise I ever made.”

With that, he turned and trudged away, back toward Orien’s pedestal. The thanacryst remained behind, growling at Azár, teeth barred and hackles raised.

“*Theanoch*,” Darien called back at it. With a yelp, the demon-dog sprang after him, bounding to catch up.

End of Preview