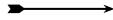


CAST IN FIRE

A Phoenix of Hope Novel



by Zora Marie



STARCHATCHER
— — PRESS — —

CAST IN FIRE

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*To Ducky for pushing me to be the best I can be.
(and for putting up with all my nonsense)*

1

“They know what is coming.”

Zelia was climbing among the upper branches of her home when she froze at the sound of Eleanor’s anxious voice. She hadn’t expected anyone to be up here today, and she had never heard Eleanor use that tone before. Leaves brushed her cheek as she crept closer to the high platform. Eleanor was the closest Zelia had ever known to a mother. She had been with Eleanor and Eadon for half a century, but she was not an elf as they were. Zelia was... well, she didn’t know, but she’d hardly grown in all that time and still looked like a young child, barely the height of Eleanor’s waist.

“Why do they not help us fight this war? The elders of all the people should be willing to stand up and fight against the Darkans. Is that not why these powers were given in the first place? The fight against the Darkans and the war against the gods to come are the only reasons—”

“Shh. They may hear you. You know what they say about the gods, especially Lumid. He can hear everything,” Vainoff warned.

“Not here. You know I keep this place hidden, particularly with her here.”

Who here? Zelia wondered. The things Vainoff said never made much sense to her, but he was the most frequent visitor the Elves had. Before Vainoff and Eleanor became members of the Wizard Guild, he had run messages for Eleanor in exchange for magic lessons as he had already outgrown what he could learn on his own. Zelia was always curious about his travels and loved the stories he told of the day Eadon saved him from a group of Darkans at their borders.

“I know you do. Just as you know, the elders have their reasons. It is best to leave them be. They still outnumber us if you recall.”

Vainoff and Eleanor fell silent. The only sound came from leaves and limbs as they rustled in the main entrance to the high platform. Zelia took the chance to move closer. Her thoughts quieted, so Eleanor wouldn't sense her nearing as she pushed her way through the leafy limbs.

"An urgent letter from Koin."

Zelia recognized Eadon's voice, but it seemed strained as if he dreaded the news they were about to receive. She climbed closer and parted the leaves to have a clear view. Blood spotted the tiny scroll Eleanor held, and her Elven glow dimmed as she skimmed the words.

"What does it say?" Eadon asked.

Eleanor did not move as Eadon took the open scroll from her and read it aloud, "We have won, but at a grave cost. Queen O'Fell asks for *her* gift to put the King and..." his voice trailed off, and the scroll slipped from his fingers.

Eleanor's lip quivered for a moment before she spoke. "Get Zelia and Alrindel. We leave at once."

Leaving? But I never get to go anywhere.

Eleanor turned and stared straight at her.

"Zelia, I hear your thoughts. Come here. We must leave, Koin needs us."

Zelia pushed through the leaves and stepped onto woven branches that formed a platform. Eadon was so distraught by what he had read that he did not even scold her for eavesdropping.

"Eadon?" she asked.

He knelt to her level as if about to give her some tragic news, but he found no words. She hugged him tightly, returning one of the many loving hugs he had given her over the years. She could feel him quiver as he exhaled, still unable to speak.

"It will be okay," she said, not understanding what was wrong.

With a silent sigh, he leaned back from her hug and brushed the leaves from her curly hair. "Would you go find Alrindel and tell him to pack a light bag for me?"

"Where are we going?"

"To the Kingdom of The Mountains," Vainoff replied. "Now go on, dear, and pack a bag of your own."

Zelia cocked her head. She didn't fully understand, but the thought of going on a journey away from home excited her.



“Lighnif!” Zelia ran up to the older Elf child. She was a close friend of Alrindel’s, as were most young Elves. “Have you seen Alrindel?”

“I just left him. He was on the other side of the pasture; I can get him for you if you like.”

“No. Starjaina can take me.”

Zelia hopped on the fence and let out a long and pretty whistle, something she was proud to have finally learned to do. A beautiful white horse galloped across the pasture and pranced as she slowed to a stop.

“Zelia! Hello dear. Here for a ride again?” Starjaina neighed.

“Eadon asked me to get Alrindel.”

“Well, come on. I’ll take you to him.”

Zelia climbed onto Starjaina’s back from the vine fence.

“So, what did Alrindel do this time?” Starjaina asked as she cantered across the pasture, the other horses parting for her as she went.

“Nothing, we’re going somewhere.”

“I hope you are taking me with you.” She bobbed her head as she slowed her pace.

Alrindel was running around a tree, chasing and being chased by playful foals.

“I’m sure we are since I believe Eadon is going with us.”

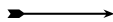
Alrindel stopped playing with the foals and stroked Starjaina’s forelock. “What are you two talking about this time? Not stirring up trouble now, are you?”

“No. Eadon sent me to get you. We are to pack a bag.”

“Pack a bag? There’s a war going on. Where are we going?”

“The Kingdom of the Mountains. I think something has happened.” She scrunched her eyebrows together and lowered her gaze. “I’ve never seen Eadon so... broken.”

“Well, come on then.” Alrindel swung himself onto Starjaina’s back and nudged her to start back across the pasture.



“Come Zelia, you will ride with me,” Eleanor said.

“But I wanted to ride Starjaina.”

Eadon picked her up, his long silky black hair tickling her cheek as he lifted her onto his horse.

“Then you may ride with me until dark, but then you will have to ride with Eleanor.”

He sprung on behind her, and they rode off. Eadon had called many of the healers he had taught over the years to ride with them. Some were from the trees right next to theirs, and others were from places sprinkled within the inner kingdom, but all were familiar faces, even if she did not recall their names.

One by one, they passed under the waterfall and into the outer ranges of Elyluma. A single tree root bridge connected the river island to the outer reaches of their home.

Alrindel carried his bow and rode on his own for the first time on such an occasion. The Elves were quiet as they rode, and the silence unsettled her. Even with the war going on, they were always cheerful, singing under the stars each night, but today there was no singing, and even the other Elves they had passed were silent.

“Starjaina?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Have you heard any news about what has happened?” Zelia asked her in the language of the animals, knowing the time wasn’t right to ask Eadon or Eleanor.

“The King O’Fell is dead, and many Elves, including...”

“Leena?” she asked when Starjaina trailed off.

There was a catch in Starjaina’s stride, and now Zelia realized the reason for Eadon’s reaction. Her aunt, his sister, had died in the battle. Zelia swung her leg over Starjaina’s neck and buried her face against Eadon’s chest.

“Starjaina told you?”

Zelia nodded.

“Told her what?” Alrindel asked.

Eadon wrapped his arms around Zelia, almost as much to comfort himself as to comfort her. “Le—” his voice caught, “Leena has fallen.”

“She fell trying to save King Skalary O’Fell. We go to release the souls of all of those fallen to the stars,” Vainoff said.

Zelia turned a bit to see that Vainoff’s gaze rested on her, and she wondered what her part in all this was to be.

“What will happen to Auntie Leena’s soul?”

“Leena is an Elf, so her soul will rest in the stars with our elders until she chooses to be reborn.”

“When will that be?”

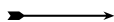
She stared up at him and waited for his reply.

“Our souls are bound to our lovers.”

“So, she will wait for Koin?” she asked.

Eadon nodded and kissed the top of her head. “You should get some rest now. We will not stop until we get there.”

Soon, his humming and Starjaina’s step rocked her to sleep.



Koin met them at the edge of a row of newly constructed pyres. The others continued on as Eleanor, Eadon, and Alrindel’s horses slowed their pace.

“I’ll go ahead with the others.” Vainoff nodded towards Koin and urged his horse on.

Koin’s forlorn gaze struck Zelia’s heart. She had never seen him so solemn. He usually glowed brightest among the Elves, but now his glow was gone. Blood stained the tips of his long silver hair and parts of his clothes.

Zelia didn’t even wait for Starjaina to stop, she slid from her back and ran to Koin. Koin knelt and caught her in his arms, holding her as if she could slip away and leave him in the dark at any moment.

“Thank you for coming so quickly.” Koin’s voice was quiet next to her ear.

“Koin, you are family. There is no need to thank us,” Eleanor replied. “I am so sorry.”

Zelia opened her eyes, as Koin nodded, to see the young and fair Queen Orania O’Fell’s approach, her daughter-in-law, Elizabeth, at her side. She had met them once before, but she remembered little of them.

“As am I sorry for your losses. I hate to ask at such a time, but Eadon, we need your help.”

Koin pulled away from Zelia’s hug, but he gave her one more squeeze before standing.

“She is expecting,” Orania nodded to Elizabeth, “but she is losing him.”

“How far along?” Eleanor asked.

“Only a month or two, maybe less. He’s all I have left of...” Elizabeth glanced back at the long row of pyres.

“May I?” Eadon asked, gesturing towards her abdomen.

Princess Elizabeth cringed as Eadon’s hand pressed against her. She doubled over in pain but pushed away from him.

“I... I need to get back to helping our people.”

Elizabeth fled towards the gates, one hand holding her abdomen as she went.

“Elizabeth!” Queen O’Fell called after her, but Elizabeth didn’t stop. “They found her on the battlefield covered in blood, cradling Skyril. She refuses to talk about it, and she won’t let anyone check her out. That’s the closest anyone has gotten to her.”

“She was out there during the battle?” Eadon asked, shock and concern in his tone.

“I saw her myself. When she refused to return to the women and children, I tried to get her to promise to stay close. She refused, saying she would fight alongside her husband and his father. We...” A tear ran down Koin’s cheek as he stared across the pyres to the ones that stood a little taller at the center.

“Koin, you and Leena did all you could to save them. We all know you did.” Orania cupped his hands in hers. “And we will never forget the sacrifice you made.”

“Eadon, would you go after Elizabeth? I’ll get Zelia ready, but Elizabeth needs you now,” Eleanor said.

“Get me ready for what?” Zelia asked once Eadon had gone.

“We would like you to do the honors of lighting the pyres, dear.”

“Why me?”

There was a glance exchanged between the adults, and Koin sighed.

“Because Leena loved you as a daughter.”

“And we thought there would be no one better to honor our fallen. Zelia, would you do us the honor of freeing our loved ones to take their places amongst the stars?” Queen Orania asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. Now if you will all excuse me, there are things I need to attend to before tonight.” Orania leaned in and whispered something to Eleanor before walking away.

“Come, Zelia, let us see what we can help with and clean up for this evening.”

Eleanor held out her hand for Zelia to take, but she couldn’t help but see the distant look in Koin’s eyes.

Zelia glanced between Eleanor and Koin, then took his hand in hers. His hand was clammy to the touch, and he didn’t look down at her until she moved in front of him.

“Koin, would you do me the honor of helping me tonight?”

She stared up at him, waiting for his response. She wanted to help him, and this was the only thing she could think of.

“I think Aunt Leena would want you to, Koin. Come on, let’s go get you cleaned up.” Alrindel grabbed Koin’s other hand, and together, they pulled him along.

When they came to the third-highest pyre, Koin stopped following along. He stared at the thin cloth that covered a slender figure.

“Alrindel, take Zelia and go inside. See if there is anyone the two of you can help. We will catch up with you there in a few,” Eleanor said.

Alrindel nodded and took Zelia’s hand. She watched Koin over her shoulder until they passed the big stone gates, and she turned to look at her surroundings. Great stone buildings rose around her, their make of Dwarven quality. She ran her hand across a smooth wall as they walked. She could not feel a single seam in the stones. Alrindel stopped the first guard they saw.

“Where are the wounded being treated?”

“Why?”

The guard stopped, but he favored his right leg.

“Because we can help. We are children of Eadon,” Zelia replied.

“Vainoff and our healers have gone ahead of us, and we are to assist them,” Alrindel added as he stepped in front of her.

The man looked them over for a moment before pointing down the widest path.

“Follow the path to the stairs. There will be another guard to direct you the rest of the way from there.”

“Thank you.” Alrindel nodded, then pulled Zelia along.

“You’re not an Elf, and people will recognize this. Not everyone will be our friend here.”

“I know, but I’m going to light the pyres, so won’t everyone learn of me then?”

“Maybe or maybe not. I’m not sure what Eleanor is planning to do. For now, let’s go see if we can put that first aid training to work.”

He tapped her nose as they came to the bottom of a set of stairs. Two guards stared down at them, their hands on the hilts of their swords.

“Halt! Who goes there?”

“I am Alrindel. Queen Eleanor has sent us ahead of her to give aid to the wounded.”

“And who is she?” The man nodded towards her, and she felt compelled to step closer to Alrindel.

“She’s with me. Come on, you two, I could use a couple extra sets of hands.” Vainoff appeared at the top of the stairs and waved them to follow.

The guard who had asked gave her a curious stare as they passed.

“Where are Eleanor and Eadon?” Vainoff asked. “The two of you shouldn’t be on your own.”

“Eleanor is with Koin, and Eadon is... busy. Eleanor told us to go help where we can and that she would catch up.”

Vainoff nodded, his lips pursed for a moment. “Yes, Koin needs her. Well, come on, we’ll find you someone where the skills of a young bowman and a Zelia can help.”

Vainoff winked at her and turned down a hallway lined with doors. Moans and cries came from behind most, and whimpers came from those who sat in the halls. Women and a handful of Elves moved from place to place, doing what they could. Vainoff stopped in front of a warrior who appeared to be about eighteen, still young to be in a battle. He held a cloth to his side where blood trailed down his front. His skin was ashen and sweat beaded his forehead. When he opened his eyes, his gaze first met Zelia’s.

“Here, let me look.” She dropped Alrindel’s hand and pulled the top of the soaked bandage from his side. “It’s not deep, but it needs stitches.”

She glanced back at Alrindel as he pulled off his pack. Vainoff stood behind him, a distant look in his eye as he watched.

“Well, I shall leave you to it then.” Vainoff gave her a nod and walked off, swinging his staff with each of his long strides.

“He’s acting weird today,” Zelia said as she wiped the blood from the boy’s side with a clean cloth.

“Of course, he would, he was a friend of the King, and our Aunt,” Alrindel said. “Here, your stitching is better.” He handed her a threaded needle.

Zelia took the needle and watched the boy’s expression for a moment.

“This will hurt, but it will stop the bleeding. You’ll have to be careful not to tear the stitches out though.”

“Who are you?”

“Zelia. Now hold still.”

She put her hand above the cut and pushed the needle through, being careful to do it as Eadon had taught her. Alrindel went on to the next person as she stitched the boy up and tied another clean cloth to his side.

“Now, keep it clean, and you can have the stitches removed in a couple of weeks. Other than that, just take it easy so you don’t rip the stitches out.”

“How did you learn to do this?”

The boy held his side again, but now more for comfort than out of necessity.

“They teach everyone how to do this where I am from. I learned it, hm, a hundred years ago.”

“I’m sorry to pull you away, dear, but we must get ready,” Eleanor said as she walked down the hall from within the castle. “Alrindel, Vainoff will fetch you when it is time.”

Zelia nodded, then turned back to the boy. “You get some rest.”

She could feel the boy’s gaze as she followed Eleanor down the hall but didn’t look back. When the latch of the heavy wooden door clicked, Zelia gained the nerve to ask Eleanor the question that had been bugging her.

“Eleanor, why do they want me to light the pyres? Shouldn’t one of their men do it?”

“One day, you will understand, but for now, I want you to take this task with the grace I have seen you use as you dance in the starlight. If for no one else, do it for Koin and Eadon. I know you love them both and your Auntie Leena.”

Zelia nodded and shifted her feet. *I love Auntie Leena, but why me?*

“Let us get you changed, and then I want to show you something.”

Eleanor pulled a little silk black dress with edges dipped in gold from an armoire and held it up in the sunlight streaming through the open window. Its long sleeves glimmered as the breeze swept through the room.

“I remember the day Orania wore this when she was about your size. She asked that you wear it tonight.”

Zelia washed the blood from her hands and slipped into the long black dress. It was tight across her shoulders as she had been working with a bow more than most women. Eleanor gave her a sad smile and platted her hair back in a long braid.

“You know, this is the first time I’ve ever gotten you into an actual dress.”

“They’re not good for climbing,” Zelia said, turning to give Eleanor one of her mischievous grins. “So, what did you want to show me?”

“Something special that you need to see.”

Eleanor took her hand and led her through a maze of corridors, leading deeper into the stone castle. When they came to a large set of doors, a guard nodded and pushed the door open for them. Orania stood at the edge of a

platform, staring down at the water falling beneath it. A statue of a man stood staring at the open sky above them, his hand on the hilt of his sword, and the brim of his helmet shading his eyes from the setting sun.

“Do you know what this is, Zelia?” Orania asked.

Zelia shook her head, but Orania didn’t need to see to know.

“It’s a reminder of where the O’Fell family came from. Do you know the story?”

“They are descendants of Yargo, God of the Fallen Warriors. He hoped to unite the people by giving them someone they could follow. And this must be Lumid, guard of the bridge and keeper of the stars.”

Orania turned from the edge.

“That is right, and you will release their souls to live with their ancestor, Yargo, among the stars. It is a tradition for a daughter of a fallen King to lay him to rest, and since he has no daughter, we have asked that you do it.”

Zelia nodded, but she still didn’t quite understand why they would ask her.

“Now, it’ll be getting dark soon. We should start gathering people outside.”



Men, women, and children had gathered on the walls and in the field all around the long rows of pyres. Koin stood by her side with Orania. Whatever Eleanor had done seemed to have eased Koin’s pain. Orania had just finished her long speech and excused Elizabeth for not being there, saying the grief was too much for her to bear.

Orania gave Koin a nod, and he handed Zelia a torch. As soon as she took it, the flame grew brighter, and an updraft pulled it higher into the sky.

“I’ll be right beside you the entire time,” Koin whispered.

She started with Skalary and Skyril’s pyres but froze as she went to light Leena’s. Koin squeezed her shoulder as if to say it’s alright, and she stuck the torch into the kindling. When the fire took off, she stepped back and looked up at Koin. There were tears in his eyes as the soft light of the flames lit Leena’s face.

“You can stay here, Koin. I’ll finish.”

She gave his hand a light squeeze and continued down the row. With each one she lit, she glanced back at Koin; the flames had grown, but he hadn’t stepped away. With everyone entranced by the flames, she moved from pyre to pyre a little faster and circled around from one end to the other.

When she lit the last one, she threw the torch at the feet of the King as the flames of the pyres already burned high in the sky. When she did, something happened that made all the crowd gasp. The flames turned blue, and little orbs of light rose from the bodies of those fallen. As each one rose, the flames calmed back to their orange glow.

“Koin!” Zelia pulled him back from Leena’s pyre as a wave of heat rolled out, and Leena’s soul rose from the flames.

One by one, the blue orbs lifted into the stars, twinkling until they faded from view. Zelia glanced around at the mourners. The families crowded together, and those who stood alone held clasped hands over their hearts as they stared up at the stars. The crowd stood staring at the stars long after the souls had gone, but one by one, people trickled away, and the somber silence moved with them.



The next few days went by in a bit of a blur for Zelia. They had stayed and tended to the wounded, and Eleanor had scarcely let her out of her sight. Their trip home was much slower than their trip there as the Elves who fought in the battle returned with them; many were injured or had not slept as they tended to the wounded. When they stopped for the night, Eleanor called out to Zelia before she could run off with Alrindel.

“Stay close by, alright?”

“I believe the two of you have some archery practice to catch up on,” Eadon said.

“But I don’t have my bow with me.”

“We can share,” Alrindel offered. “Come on. I saw a board back there.”

“Do not go too far,” Eleanor warned again before the two of them ran off.

They weaved between the clusters of Elves that tended to each other’s wounds. When they found a weathered board tangled in the grass, they wedged it between two stones and stepped back. Alrindel went first, drawing his arrow back by his ear.

“Alrindel?” Zelia asked.

“Trying to distract me?”

“No. I just... do you think Koin will be okay?”

Alrindel released, and the arrow just hit the edge of the board.

“What’s this about me?” Koin’s curious voice made her jump as he approached them from behind.

“Zelia here is worried about you.”

Zelia twisted her foot in the long grass and fought not to look up at Koin.

“She is now, is she?”

There was a hint of the old Koin in his tone, and she glanced at him.

“How about you show Alrindel how a real archer shoots?”

Alrindel pulled an arrow from his quiver and handed it to her.

“Your turn.”

She took his bow and drew it back a little past her ear. A hand touched her arm and pushed her elbow down, so it was level with her arrow.

“Remember, release with the last of your breath.”

She stared down the shaft of her arrow and released as her breath steadied towards the end. The half-rotten board splintered as her arrow shot through, just off the center.

As the arrow shattered the board, it was as if the shell of dark emotion that had held her captive within since the funeral shattered, too. She spun around and gave Koin a hug, holding the bow across his back as she did so.

“Thank you, Koin.”

“You’re welcome.” He gave her a light squeeze and leaned back from her hug. “Now, give the bow back to Alrindel before you hurt yourself with it. It’s still a bit too big for you.”

“But we just started.”

“I will make sure you make up for the lost practice when we get back. Deal?”

Zelia couldn’t help but smile as Koin looked down at her with a raised brow.

“Fine. Here you go, Alrindel.” She tossed the bow to him and grabbed Koin’s hand. “Let’s go find Eadon.”

“Sure,” Alrindel said as they disappeared into the crowd. “Just leave me to pick up your arrow.”



Time seemed to glide by as she lay on Starjaina’s back. They had returned to Elyluma and life resumed its normal pace, but Zelia couldn’t forget the burning pyres. While she had stopped asking why they had chosen her, she could not stop her thoughts from questioning why. Riding Starjaina was the only thing that calmed her rolling thoughts.

“There you are.” Koin pulled her from Starjaina’s back and onto his own horse. “You are supposed to be at practice.”

“So are you.”

Koin squinted at her with his lips pressed together, and she giggled.

“Sorry, Koin.” She spun around on her knees and gave him a hug.

“How is it you are so graceful on a horse and in the trees but so clumsy on the ground?”

“Guess I’m just not meant for blades.”

“No, we will get you using a sword with at least a bit of skill one day. We just have to make sure you do not hurt yourself before then.” He tapped her nose and turned his horse around to start back across the pasture.

“Wait, you are forgetting Alrindel.”

“Thanks,” Alrindel said with a sigh and stood from his hiding spot amongst the tall grass.

“Hey, you’re the reason I’m out here. I came to get you, remember?”

“Well, at least you two have been paying attention to one of your teachers. Eadon must be teaching you the ancient Fairy language now.”

“Why do we learn languages the Fairies don’t even bother to learn anymore?” Alrindel asked.

“Why do you use contractions like the humans?” Koin asked, and he let that sink in as they crossed the pasture. “We learn the languages both to keep them alive and because we may one day need them. Just because the Fairies on the mainland no longer use the language does not mean Fairies elsewhere do not.”

Koin helped Zelia from his horse and handed both her and Alrindel a bow.

“Now, you can’t leave until you each hit the target across the field three times in a row.”

Alrindel sighed, and Zelia laughed as she picked up a handful of arrows.

“What’s wrong, Alrindel? Afraid I’ll finish before you?”

“How about a wager? Last one has to retrieve all the arrows?”

“Fine.”

She pulled an arrow back to her ear and released, missing by a foot. Alrindel did the same, but he barely missed. Soon they both had two arrows in the target and they lined up for another shot. They released as one, and an arrow shot from the side knocked both their arrows aside.

“Koin!” Both children complained in unison.

“What? I never said there would be no interference. Try again.”

They sighed and leaned over to grab another handful of arrows.

“Rapid fire?” Alrindel asked in a hushed voice.

Zelia nodded and grabbed up a few more.

“You might need a few more, Koin!” Alrindel yelled as they began shooting arrows one after another at the target.

At first, they were in time with one another, but as they went, Zelia lagged behind. Still, they filled the target and surrounding ground with arrows.

“Alright, now go pick up your mess.” Koin laughed and walked off to where the other Elf children trained with swords.

“I saw some of the elder wizards this morning. Why do you think they are here?” she asked as they picked through the grass for their arrows.

Alrindel looked as though he was about to say something, but he shook his head.

“I don’t know, but they are watching us.”

Zelia glanced over her shoulder. Eleanor and the wizards she had seen stood on the dining room balcony of their home, their gazes all turned towards her.

“Why do they always watch me when they come here?”

“Why don’t you ask Eleanor that?” Alrindel asked. “But not until you find all those arrows.”

Zelia sighed and continued picking through the grass for her arrows, more of hers had missed than hit.

2

“Gotcha!” Alrindel exclaimed.

Zelia giggled as they fell back into the tall grass. “Fine, you win again Alrindel. But I am going to beat you at archery practice today.”

“Oh really? And what about swordsmanship?” he asked with a brow raised.

“Zelia! Come here, dear,” Eleanor called from across the pasture.

“What did you do this time?” Alrindel asked.

“Nothing, or at least I don’t think I did anything.”

“Well come on, then. It’s about time for practice with Koin, anyway.”

“Fine, race you to the fence?” She took off.

“No fair, you got a head start.”

“But you have longer legs!” She called over her shoulder.

Alrindel was about to pass her when she came to a dead stop at the pasture’s edge.

“Eadon, what’s wrong?”

An ashen tone replaced his usual bright, happy glow. She searched his and Eleanor’s faces for the unvoiced answer. Their vacant expressions told her they were speaking telepathically, something Eleanor used occasionally, to keep conversations private.

“Come Zelia, we are going somewhere,” Eadon finally answered.

“Where?” she asked, the edge in his tone gave her the urge to run.

“We will explain on the way,” Eleanor assured her.



Silence hung over their ride to the mountains and left Zelia’s mind to race. She ran through recent events, fishing for a reason, any reason for

them to act this way. She hadn't seen their light so faded since the day they received news that many of their kin and the old King had died in the last battle of the Daemon War many years ago.

The horses stopped and drew her from her thoughts. She looked around and saw the aged faces of many wizards, all men she had met at one point or another. She always thought the elders looked much alike, but then again, she seldom saw them, and they always wore the same grey clothing and long beards. Her favorite wizards of those who weren't Elves, were the Dwarf Multly and the human Vainoff. Multly, the eccentric lover of The Wild, would always hold a dear place in her heart as he mumbled to the animals but never truly understood them. The elders were human, but they were older than Eleanor. The power of the guild gave them far longer lives than most.

"We should camp here for the night," Eleanor's twin brother, Erolith suggested.

"No, we should continue on," countered the one who appeared to be the oldest of them all.

"Erolith is right," Asenten said, "she needs to rest before her test. Besides, it would do us well to stay within the guarded outer borders tonight."

Asenten's long unkempt eyebrows darkened the shadows across his eyes, yet she caught a gleam in them that made Zelia shrink back against Eadon. The tall and crooked wizard was always among her least favorite, but something about the others this night made him seem almost inviting.

Eadon wrapped his arms around her, his warm breath soothing against the top of her head. He took a breath as if to say something but released it in a silent sigh.

"Eadon, why are we going towards the Darkan Mountains? You have always told me never to go north of our kingdom."

"That..." his voice cracked, and she tensed. His voice had never cracked in such a way, not even when Leena died.

"He did, but now we must go there," Eleanor replied for him, the edge in her tone warning her not to push the subject.

They said little as they set up camp and ate. The food seemed dry and tasteless, but the wizards seemed content with the buzz from the elvish wine. For a moment, Zelia wondered what it was like, even when she drank more than her small cup, she never felt a thing. She looked back from where she sat almost touching the flames to Eadon. He had a distant look in his eye as he watched her.

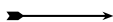
“Eadon?” she asked, coming to sit on his lap.

“I...”

She followed his gaze to the stern stares of the older wizards burning into them. She shrank back against Eadon’s chest and he stroked her long curls.

“Get some sleep.” He wrapped his arms around her and leaned back against a tree. For a moment, there was silence as he let out a long slow breath, the last of it coming as a whisper, “No matter what happens, I love you.”

“It’ll be okay,” she reassured him. She laid her head against his chest and stared at the darkness beyond the fire for what seemed like forever as Eadon hummed, wondering what silenced him and Eleanor.



The next day, they woke early and continued their journey, traveling well into the night. The wizards talked about things she didn’t understand, tests and powers. After a while, she realized they were talking about her.

“Her powers will emerge on their own, we just need to give them time,” Vainoff protested to the others.

“She’s been getting sick has she not?”

“Well, yes, but she hasn’t in a while. I’m not sure what that has to do with this.”

“It’s a buildup of her powers, if she doesn’t have a release soon it will kill her.”

“As soon as her powers emerge, she must train.” Asenten nodded to Zelia.

“But I already train. What are they talking about?” Zelia turned to Eleanor for guidance since Eadon didn’t seem to be able to answer her questions.

“You train with ordinary weapons; there are weapons beyond that.”

“You need to know how to use a sword and a bow because your powers will drain you, but you do have powers. Possibly beyond what we have.” Erolith’s voice was gentle, but it did little to soften the weight of the others’ gazes.

“But... I don’t have powers. I can talk to the animals, but that’s it.” She shrank back from them, a knot of worry and fear threading its way into the pit of her stomach.

“Here, may I?” Asenten asked as they stopped at the black summit of the Darkan Mountains.

The land before her was barren, not a single sprig of vegetation in sight. *How can Darkans live here?* She thought back to Eadon’s teachings about

the Darkans, they were once Elves that turned away from the star light and now wished for the whole world to be in darkness. They fought the Elves, Dwarves, and humans for their love of light and connection to the gods who shine the light upon them.

Eleanor nodded so Asenten pulled her to the side, away from the others, and knelt before her. Something had always seemed off about him; he was always overly kind to her, but it seemed strained as if he had to force himself to behave this way. The other elders were so cold and distant, it pushed her to accept his kindness despite her instincts screaming that he was a threat.

“I know you don’t believe that you have these powers but, trust me, you do. Here, I want you to have these.” He took her hand and placed two pebble sized stones in her palm. “When the time comes, channel your powers through these and you’ll be fine.”

She closed her hand around the white and red stones and Asenten urged her to return to the others at the peak of the mountain ridge.

When she returned to the others, the oldest wizard stared at her even more intently than usual. She shrank back towards Eadon. The wizard looked away from her and down at the dark canyon. He said one word. “Go.”

“What?” Zelia asked.

“Go on, show them what you can do,” Erolith urged her forward when Eleanor couldn’t bring herself to say a word.

“Down there? Eadon, Eleanor, what are they talking about? What am I supposed to do?” she cried. They had always taught her to never go near here, and everything about this terrified her.

Asenten knelt and whispered in her ear, “You must go down into the canyon. You will know what to do when you get there. Do it for Eadon, be strong for him. Go on now.”

She descended the steep slope and could hear Eadon break down and plead behind her, “She’s not ready. You can’t make her do this.”

“It is out of my hands and it has been decided.” There was an audible crack in Eleanor’s voice. “She must do it or we risk everything.”

Zelia could feel the edge in the air as she descended the side of the mountain. She had only been past the river a handful of times and now they expected her to do what even the Elves dared not do... walk unarmed into the land of the Darkan Mountains. Even armed the Elves avoided this place, only coming near to guard the farthest reaches of the kingdom from the Darkans whose hatred of light seemed to desolate forests with their mere presence.

She clenched her hands tightly, each hand holding one of the little pebbles Asenten had given her. The hair on her nape stood on end when she reached a set of stone gates that led into the side of the mountain. Hordes of dark and hunched figures flooded out from behind the twisted stone pillars. The largest of them were far taller than the Elves, even with their hunched backs. They grabbed and pulled her in different directions as they fought over her. One, in particular, towered over her and licked his leathery lips. His dark wrinkled skin stretching as he snapped at the other Darkans and in her face. She screamed and frantically scanned for a familiar figure. The strange creatures were everywhere she looked. They reeked of rotten flesh and the smell alone threatened to steal her breath.

The Darkans shoved each other as a little one elbowed his way to the front where others argued over her. Their words came out in a rush and mingled together, making them impossible for her to understand more than a word or two. The little one pressed a blade into her side, the cold and jagged metal biting into her skin, and her nails dug into her palms as her warm blood ran down her side. As fear burned through her, one arm erupted in flames, her other turning to ice. The Darkans holding her shrieked and scrambled away, some flaming and others claspings ice covered limbs.

A surge of pain ripped through her as her bones cracked, and her blood boiled where ice met fire. The two halves ate at each other, tearing her apart. She gave a blood-curdling scream and collapsed to her knees. Even though the flames and ice were a part of her she still felt the searing heat and the bite of the cold penetrate to her core as the two shredded her very being.

With one last surge of energy, the pain disappeared, and everything went black.



For what seemed like years she lingered in a void, feeling something move her, shift her, and pull her back together; the pain was agonizing as her broken body lay on the cold, uneven ground.

“Oh, thank goodness, you’ve come back! Do you know who I am?” The man’s long beard appeared to be blue in the light of his staff, but the shadow of his hat shrouded his eyes.

She propped herself up on one arm and surveyed her dimly lit surroundings. The air was stale and had a metallic tang to it, no light shone in from

the outside world. The damp chill of the cave cut right through her and sent her into an uncontrollable shiver. She looked down at her shaking hands.

“What happened?”

“What can you recall?”

“Darkans and darkness. I... I died. I should be dead.”

“Do you know who I am?”

“Asenten.”

She shot to her feet in a sudden panic, recalling bits and pieces of her final day. She remembered the pain, the faces of the Darkans, the blade, and the horrid stench.

“Where’s Eadon?”

Her legs buckled beneath her and sent her crashing to the ground, pins and needles jabbing through her every muscle. It was almost a welcome pain as the memory of her body exploding and trying to reform lingered. She could almost feel how the ashes and crystals of ice were swept up, and how each piece struggled to reform what she was now.

“My poor dear, have no fear. Eadon can’t hurt you anymore.” Asenten wrapped a blanket around her to shield her from the cold.

“What do you mean hurt me anymore? He never hurt me.”

“Tsk, ts, Eleanor must have meddled with your mind more than I feared.”

“No! Eleanor would never do that!” She pulled away.

“Careful, it’ll take you a while to get used to being back in your body.”

“What? So, I did die... but I never left it. Where are we?”

“We’re in the only place that I can shield you from the others. There’s something else I must tend to. Whatever you do, do not follow me, and stay in the cave or Eleanor will find you.”

“Wait, you’re leaving me?”

“Yes, but only for a short while. Rest assured I’ll be back. Here’s some food.” He placed a leather pack at her feet. “Remember, whatever you do, do not leave this place.”

With a blinding flash of his staff, he disappeared, only the echoes of his magic lingered in the cave.

For the next several hours she didn’t move and didn’t eat. She just sat and stared into the darkness, all the while she fought to understand Asenten’s words. She knew that Eleanor could sway people’s minds, but could she change someone’s memories? Had Eadon hurt her? She had so many questions and so few answers, but she knew one thing for sure. She shouldn’t be alive.



Zelia's exhausted body and mind gave in to sleep, but it wasn't long before she stirred to something tapping her foot.

"Zelia, wake up."

Even still half asleep, she could hear how forced his tone seemed, as if he were on the verge of screaming at her.

"Hmmm, Asenten? Did I do something wrong?" She rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

"No, no, my dear. You didn't do anything. Come, on your feet."

She squinted against the glow of his staff and steadied herself on the damp wall.

"Here, I have something for you." He held a sword out to her. "This is for you. Do you see that stone in the hilt?" She took the short sword and brought it closer to her face for a closer look. "That's a fire stone, just like the one I gave you that day on the side of the mountain."

With a jolt, she threw the sword away and cowered in the corner. The echoes of the sword chattering against the cave floor pounded in her ears, like great war drums.

"Heavens, child, it won't hurt you. Well, not so long as you don't use ice at the same time. Come on out of the corner," he coaxed. She edged from the corner but stayed clear of the sword. "Well go on, pick it up." When she shook her head, he strode towards her and shoved her towards the sword. "I said pick it up!"

Her heart wrenched in surprise as she dropped and, in that moment, her fear of Asenten was greater than her fear of the stone. She grabbed the sword from the cave floor, instinct and Koin's training took over, she flipped around and kept the point of the sword between her and Asenten.

"So, Koin did teach you a bit about the sword after all! Very good, now get up."

She stood with her back to the wall.

"Now light the sword, like you did the pebble on the mountain. Do it, or I'll leave you in the dark." He let the glow of his staff fade.

Something whirled around and smashed against her side. There was another swish of air and she lit the sword, but it didn't give more than a flicker of light before she fell to her knees. Her muscles already burned as if she had trained for hours when all she had done was light a simple flame.

CAST IN FIRE

“This won’t do,” Asenten muttered to himself and kicked a bag at her before mumbling on his way out of the cave.

As soon as he had gone, she fell over and closed her eyes, welcoming the rest that called her. Some part of her knew she should eat, but she couldn’t bring herself to fumble around with the bag.

3

Distorted voices echoed through the cave and stirred her from her slumber. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and stumbled towards the voices. With each bend of the cave their chants grew louder.

Before she reached them, they quieted until they were speaking rather than chanting. Their voices blended together as if there were a single person with Asenten, but the shadows from around the last bend in the cave showed otherwise.

“Does she know?”

“No, she doesn’t know that we are her creators. It appears the Elves kept her in the dark on a lot of things, as if they could hide what she is.”

“Like anyone could hide such a beast from the world. Eleanor may be powerful, but even she can’t do that.”

“You’re right on that, Zelia may look human, but she’s just a wolf in sheep’s clothing.”

“You’re still calling her by the name Eadon gave her?”

“What else am I supposed to call her? It’s not like I could even just call her by her species since she crosses so many races.”

An inaudible grumble echoed through the cave.

“Fine! Just don’t go getting attached to her like Eadon and Eleanor; she’s a weapon, nothing more and nothing less.”

Zelia turned to run from their words and tripped on the cave’s uneven floor. Her cry when she hit the floor sent echoes through the cave.

A hand, grasping a chunk of her hair, yanked her around the last bend in the cave tunnel before she could push herself back to her feet. She grabbed at the hand, trying to stop the searing pain in her scalp. They thrust her into

the center of the wizards' circle. She squinted her eyes against the blinding light that lit the cave. The butt of one of their staffs drove into her chest and pushed her harder against the cave floor with every breath, the uneven floor digging into her back.

"What do we have here? Someone is putting their nose where it doesn't belong. So, what shall we do with it?"

"We should teach it a lesson, eavesdropping is very, very bad," sneered one wizard, amusement at the idea played across his face.

"Yes, then we can use her blood to bind her soul here."

"That's enough, we don't want her knowing too much."

The gleam of steel flying towards her caught her eye a moment before the cold blade cut through her neck. What happened next didn't hit her until the last of her breath gurgled out and the blackness overcame her once more. She could feel her blood pool around her, turning cold, long after her last breath. She could no longer hear the wizards, but she could feel her muscles, skin, and veins pull back together at an agonizing pace.



"That's enough rest. Get up!" Asenten demanded.

Zelia dragged herself to her feet, her sword already in hand. She didn't take the time to think of her actions while in his presence. Instead, she let her instincts take over as if she were a wild animal in a never-ending struggle to preserve her existence. In her weakened and starved state, she couldn't help but shake under the weight of the small sword. Part of her wondered how long she had been there, but then it didn't matter much anymore.

"Hm, this will never do. Put the blade down, child." Zelia gave a slight shake of her head. "I said put it down!" he commanded and slashed the sword from her hands.

She fell back against the cave wall in surprise and clasped her bloodied hands. "P... please don't hurt me... I'll be good," she pleaded through muffled sobs.

"Good," he replied with a rather pleased and amused tone. "Now, first things first, no more crying." His staff raked across her ribs as he pried her away from the cave wall.

When she moved, the gleam of the sword caught her eye. She lunged for it but stopped short when something hard slammed into her side. Even

the echoes of her own ribs cracking didn't stop her. Her hand clasped around the cold leather hilt of her sword, but it didn't budge. She looked up to see Asenten's foot planted atop her only weapon and the butt of his staff flying towards her.

It slammed into her stomach, forcing her to release the sword.

"Now, we won't be doing anything like that again, will we?" Asenten asked with a wrench of his staff deeper into her side.

The rags she wore pulled tight around her, threads popping under the tension. She gasped through tears and pain and shook her head. With one last thrust for good measure, Asenten left the cave.

Again, she found herself left to grapple with her new reality in the pitch black of the cave. Darkness, that's all she had left now.



Huddled in the corner, Zelia watched Asenten lay the wood for a small fire. While she would be glad for a change from the blue light of his staff, she couldn't help but feel that the fire wasn't for her comfort.

"Go on, start it," he demanded, the corner of his mouth curled up in a wicked sneer. She saw no harm in starting the fire and plucked her red and black speckled fire stone from the floor. The logs crackled to life. With a smirk, Asenten scurried from the cave, and Zelia wondered what he was up to now.

She wasn't at a loss for long. Asenten returned with a young boy. The boy was pale and his light-colored hair shimmered in the firelight as the wizard slammed him to his knees with a sickening thud. Asenten held the boy so close to the fire that the flames would lick the boy's skin with the slightest change of position. The boy winced at the heat and stared at the flames with wide eyes.

"Do it! Or I'll do it for you, and it won't be as quick." He held the struggling boy's head closer to the flames.

"What? No, I won't. I won't kill him! He's just a boy!"

"You won't do it? Fine."

The boy screamed as Asenten shoved his head into the fire.

She clenched her fists so tight blood dripped from her palms. She bent the flames around the boy's head, and into Asenten's chest.

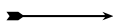
Asenten shoved the bound boy into the hot coals and struggled to rip the flaming tunic from his chest.

She bolted towards the screaming boy, but just as she reached him her chest burned. She looked to Asenten as he ripped the tunic from his chest, revealing blistered flesh where her own pain came from.

Asenten muttered some chant, and a blast from his staff slammed her against the cave wall. She struggled to break free, but his magic held her tight.

“Never forget, you did this to him! You caused this! All because you refused to do as I asked.” He pushed the boy further into the hot coals. “Remember, he died this way because you were too weak to do it yourself!”

Her head snapped to the side, and a loud CRACK echoed through the cave. The last thing she heard was the faint screams of the boy as the world went black. Once again, she faced this other darkness and pain filled every agonizing second as her body struggled to repair itself.



“No! Please! I’ll never do it again! Just please let me go!” a girl’s voice cried from the tunnel outside her cell and shocked her from her slumber.

Zelia drew a deep breath and stood to meet her captor, the lashing from his last visit still burned as a reminder. Sometimes she wondered why they didn’t heal like the blows that killed her, but part of her was thankful for it. At least the scars were proof that what she was going through was real.

“Good you’re awake. Get your stone,” he said when he rounded the corner.

“Oh, great Asenten, the mightiest of the wizards, which would you wish for me to use on this glorious day?” she asked with a grand bow. Over the years she had learned that he liked flattery and he would sometimes leave without hurting her if she did as he asked.

“Hm, what do you think? Fire or ice?”

“Uh... I... ice?” the red-haired girl stammered.

Zelia fought back the urge to save the girl. She knew all too well she’d only make matters worse. At least if she did it, she could spare her some pain and make it quick.

Asenten’s face looked even more evil when he grinned with wicked delight. “Fire it is!”

Zelia’s gut wrenched at the sight of his glee, never would she get used to that sight. She spun around and snatched the red and black speckled stone from the cavern floor. With a deep breath, she withdrew behind a wall

in her mind and it left a dead look in her eyes. She numbed herself to the world, it was the only way she could cope with what she was about to do.

Asenten flung the girl to the floor, and the girl pleaded from her knees. "Please, please don't do this. I just stole food for my little si—" the girl saw the look in Zelia's eye, her plea cut short.

Zelia held back the tears that threatened to spill over and clenched her fist around the stone as her open hand raised towards the girl.

In a flurry of panic and fear, the girl leaped at her. She knocked Zelia to the ground and landed on top. Zelia's breath whooshed out, and the stone rolled from her grasp. The girl jumped up and ran. Before Zelia had even caught her breath, Asenten dragged her to her feet by the hair of her head.

"Go get her, kill her!" Asenten demanded with a shove towards the cave entrance.

She caught the girl stumbling around near the dark entrance of the cave and lit her ablaze. When Zelia realized something was different, her gaze dropped to her empty palm. She staggered back. With the cold cave wall at her back she looked back to the girl, who gave one last scream and collapsed.

"But... but, how? I didn't have the stone."

She raised her gaze to Asenten's as he towered over her.

"You've lied all these years, decades."

She raised her hand towards him. She didn't care if burning him killed her, she wanted him dead. But his staff connected with the side of her head before she could burn him, and she collapsed in a heap. In that still moment before unconsciousness all she wanted was to get away, to be free of this place.



A warm light shined through her eyelids as she stirred. "*Where am I?*" she wondered. A shadow moved across her still closed eyes and dimmed the warm light.

"Do you feel that?"

"Feel what?"

"The presence of someone else." It sounded as though it came from her, only it wasn't her voice.

"Steffon, I think Rog has lost it."

Rog? Who's Rog? Where am I?

Her eyes flicked open, and she glared at the strange, yet familiar, boy, the urge to loathe him fell over her. She tried to look away, but her gaze was unmoving.

"Who's there?" the unfamiliar voice sounded through her head as if it were her own. She tried to reply but he didn't seem to hear her.

Am I dreaming? But why would I dream this? Where am I? An arena? She pulled as much of her surroundings in as she could, blurred forms dotted the huge stone stairs that led up to the blue sky. Sky, oh how she missed seeing the blue of the sky, even if all she could see now was from the corner of her vision, as she continued to stare at the strange boy.

"Rogath, sword up!" yet another voice interrupted her train of thought. Her head shook. "No more games, come on."

"I'm not playing, I feel someone else's presence!" There was that voice again, the one in her head. She felt her irritation with the blond-haired man rise, only it didn't seem to be her own irritation.

"Maybe if you didn't play tricks on everyone all the time someone might believe you. Now, raise your sword." The tip of the sword gleamed in the midday sun before her. "Well go on, back to the pells. Good job Terik, go again."

Rage swelled up and splinters of wood flew away with each hack at the post.

So I, or whoever's head I'm in, must be Rogath, the other boy must be Terik, and the boy, Terik, called the man Steffon. Why and how am I here, and where is here?

Steffon's coaching faded into the background, she wasn't sure if it was her doing or Rog's. With each turn, she focused on as much of her new surroundings as she could, the chipped and splintered posts, the wooden racks of weapons, the large wood targets, and the glorious white stone seats that sprawled in all directions.

They were on the verge of exhaustion when Steffon released them. "That's enough for today boys. Try to be a little more focused tomorrow, Rog."

With a roll of his eyes, Rog slid the sword into the wooden rack. It amazed her how he seemed to glide up the stadium stairs even when exhausted. They skirted the edge of a strange, yet familiar city and she marveled over the beauty of the stone buildings and enormous carvings of god-like men.

Rog glanced down the river and traced the line of a bridge. A pang of

joy fell over them, a mix of emotions from her and Rog. A round building seemed to float at the end of the bridge that jutted out past the edge of a waterfall. Something about it drew her to it, but they continued to move towards the golden building. Guards dressed in gold armor gave a curt nod as they passed and she, or rather Rog, returned the gesture.

She couldn't help but feel odd, and out of place in such a building, yet it felt as though it was home. They passed column after column. Hallways led in every direction. Each one appeared the same as the last. Soon she wondered less about where she was and more about how much Rog could feel of her, as she felt his every emotion.

They sat through a dinner with barbaric men who spoke of wars long since passed. She found how they spoke of death as this glorious thing to be off-putting. Part of her wished she could see death as they did, but she knew better.

Halfway through his meal, Rog pushed back from the table.

"Where are you going?" Terik asked.

"To speak with Mother."

"Okay... have fun with that."

Their eyes rolled again, and they returned to the hallway. They soon came upon a brown-haired woman wrapped in rippling waves of silvery cloth.

"Mother?"

"Yes, Rogath? What's the matter?" she asked.

"Mother, I feel someone else's presence as if they are a part of me, yet not."

"Oh, Rogath, you and your overactive imagination. How about you just go get some rest, I'm sure the feeling will go away soon enough."

"Alright, Mother."

The kind and gentle women leaned over and kissed them on the forehead, a warm feeling fell over Rog. Zelia longed to revel in the feeling, but her heart felt heavy with memories of a time she once felt love directed towards her.

Rog laid down in his plush bed and she stirred awake, back in the cave.



Was that real? Her head spun with a hollow ache.

She rubbed the back of her head and her vision focused, only to fall on the charred remains of the girl she had just killed. She recoiled at the sight, looking down at her own hands and recalling what had happened.

She swallowed back the knot in her throat and raised her hand towards the girl's charred remains. The chill of the cave had long since stolen the heat from the fire and yet the flames sparked to life to eat the last of the girl's body until nothing but her charred teeth remained in the darkened spot.

A single tear ran down her cheek. It wasn't just a nightmare. She was the sole reason behind their deaths. No longer could she blame their deaths on these objects the wizard had led to believe were the source of her powers. She knew she was always to blame, but she needed something, anything, to ease the guilt.

She recalled her past in search of any shred of information that could explain her powers. Time and time again all she could recall was the screams of those she'd killed, like the chorus of the dead screaming from the depths of Fregnar's realm. For hours, maybe even days, she sat and stared at her shaking hands, sick of her actions, yet knowing that the wizards would make her kill more in the future.

CAST IN FIRE

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