

## Chapter 1



I just stood there with the other young acolytes, looking up at the immense statue of One Who Knows. The icy wind whipped our ragged clothes, letting us know this was not the time to be looking at the statue of our order's leader. This was the time we should be entering our new home and seeking the warmth inside.

"Let's go, Sik!" another acolyte shouted. "We gotta get inside. Stop dawdling!"

But I just couldn't take my eyes off the huge monument at the top of the mountain. The stories of all the good this man had done for those in our villages filled me with admiration—a feeling I couldn't contain.

Our new home filled me with dread though. Something in the air felt wrong, but I couldn't figure out what. Even though I admired the man for

what he'd done, the mountain, the wind, and the cold told me a different story.

Trying to convince myself to go inside, I turned to Bakal, another acolyte and my best friend. "Just think about it. A month ago, we were poor with barely enough to eat. We were going to end up like our parents: starving in a village in the middle of nowhere. At least we can live in luxury here. How awesome is that?! There's no way I can ever go back to that life. All because we were blessed by One Who Knows. Remember all those stories about the others he's helped?"

"Yeah. I heard those stories." Bakal shivered. "Every time I ask anyone who knew someone who went up here, they said they never heard from them again. Not one person. Nobody. I figure they were killed and served up for dinner. These rich people are all alike. I still don't trust these priests, and I don't know why they picked us. Maybe they're going to fatten us up and eat us. Maybe they'll sell us, and that's how they can afford to build such a grand temple on the side of a remote mountain."

"Why are you even here then?" I asked. "Aren't you afraid of what is going to happen to you?"

"Nope. Not at all. I *know* what would've happened to me if they hadn't chosen me. I know what type of life I would've had in that village. I would've died of hunger soon enough. I've seen the light go out of enough people to know it would be a life of suffering. I'd rather take my chances with something I don't know."

I just looked at him thoughtfully. Bakal was always the pragmatic one. He really didn't care about dying. He just didn't want to suffer like his parents and others in his family had.

There were only a couple dozen of us acolytes, and we weren't sure what to do. Each had carried a message from the monastery at the base of the mountain and were given explicit instructions not to show anyone else our letters. They were only for those in the mountain temple. Letters held by me, Bakal, and a couple others had a purple seal while the others all had red seals. Bakal thought that this meant something nastier was waiting for us when we entered.

Freezing and hungry, we just stared at the immense double door in front of us. The thirty-foot doors looked to be made of solid rock and had been engraved with dark red sigils in a circular pattern. It reminded me of a clock face in which each hour position was engraved with a red sigil and a skull of a different creature. In the center of the two doors was a large inhuman skull with fangs that seemed to create door handles. The handles were easily eight feet up, and even if we could reach them, there was no way any of us were strong enough to open such a massive door.

So, we waited...and waited...and waited.

Shivering, we just stared at each other. Some tried to hide behind several large boulders, but the icy wind seemed to find us wherever we huddled. The minutes passed by.

I thought a voice in the wind screamed, "Goooooo...!  
Leeeeaaaavvvveeeee...! You don't belongggggg heeeeerrreeeee...!"

The faster the wind whipped at our clothing, the louder it sounded.

"Did you hear that, Bakal?" I asked. "Do you hear what the wind is saying?"

He just shook his head.

Several hours later, some acolytes looked back down the way they had come like it would be better just to go back. But no, we all knew our lives now—even stuck on the side of a frozen mountain—was better than where we had come from.

“What do you think, Sik?” Bakal asked, elbowing my ribs with a laugh. “Any ideas? Should we go back? It was a pretty long way up here, but I’m not a fan of just freezing to death up here while waiting for someone to come. Course, if they were meaning to eat us, this is a way they could have frozen dinners. That way, they can put us in their freezers and thaw us out when they are ready.”

“You’re an idiot,” I said. “They’re not going to eat us. We stay. It’s just another one of their tests. I’m going to wait.”

And wait we did.

For many of us, this was our first time away from home. In my village, our parents threw us a huge party in the village center before the priests took us away. I remember my parents looking sad but oddly hopeful. I wasn’t looking forward to working in the swamps alongside my dad or Bakal during the school break. Whatever happened here had to be better than that.

None of the other acolytes went back down the mountain, and we settled in the best we could. Some sat and tried minor meditations to take their minds off the wind and cold. I joined them but noticed that others walked around in circles, stomping their feet or running in place. Watching them, I thought they had the right idea because my mind was racing too fast; I knew meditation wouldn’t work.

I was still bothered by the intense feeling that something was off though, and after hearing the wind, that feeling seemed more justified. But I just focused on the large monument at the top of the mountain for now.

The dark evening sky clawed at the remaining light like fingers crawling out of a grave. I felt colder than I ever had. I don't know if it was my nerves, the actual cold, or the voice I heard earlier but I wasn't sure if I would make it through the night.

After what seemed like an eternity, the door creaked open. No one came out, but it was enough for us to get in.

## Chapter 2



Through the open doors, a blast of warm air caused several acolytes to collapse. No. It was not warm. It was *hot!*

The searing heat felt like every part of my body was blistering, on fire. I threw my clothes off as fast as I could, making the room more and more bearable. Eventually, there were no more clothes to remove. I just stood there naked with the other acolytes. Men. Women. Didn't matter. All that mattered was that the burning sensation had stopped.

One acolyte, Jacklyn, screamed when she noticed several piles of ash around us. I looked around. There didn't seem to be that many of us anymore. As a matter of fact, about one-third of the group was missing.

Bakal quickly recovered and looked at me with a fresh smile. "See! We've survived the preheat process! That means we'll survive longer in the ovens, and our meat will be tender!"

“You’re still an idiot,” I replied with a smirk.

I could never be mad at him. Sure, he was annoying a lot of the time, but he was one of my best friends. And he had a way of seeing life that I could never achieve.

When the initial shock of the heat and ashes wore off, I noticed the room around us for the first time. I mean...how could I not?!

In the center of the room, a large circular portal floated twenty feet above a black pool. Like someone had turned a lake on its side. A glowing blue liquid swirled in the center of the portal, where faces constantly appeared and disappeared.

The dark pool—which was made of the darkest material I had ever seen—had hundreds of thin tentacles rising out of the water to touch the blue portal. Whenever a tentacle flowed into the portal, a glowing blue ooze appeared at the touch point, and a face emerged from the portal’s water to swallow the ooze. I thought some of the faces winked at me, but it was probably my imagination.

Fascinating! The black tendrils reaching up, depositing the blue ooze, and returning to the black pool... Every so often, a dark shape seemed to disturb the surface of the black pool, but nothing ever surfaced. I just saw ripples in the pool.

From the shadows, a group of monks walked out in front of the portal and black pool. Most were dressed in black robes with ornate, glowing gold lettering on their sleeves. A tall one with a dark purple robe moved toward us. I would have said he walked, but it was more like a glide. I couldn’t tell whether he was a human or not since no part of his body was shown. His hood covered his face with a mass of darkness. On

his sleeves, glowing red sigils seemed to constantly morph into different shapes.

“Congratulations, my new Children of the Dark. You have survived the cleansing ritual,” the tall monk said. “Please step forward and show us your letters. And don’t be modest. This was the way you came into this world. In the world of darkness, you were cold, naked, and not sure what was going on. You then entered the light and the heat—naked for all the world to see. You are now pure. Please step forward.”

The tall monk pulled out a small card from his robe and whispered a soft phrase we couldn’t hear. I’d seen those cards in the hands of some elders in our village. My dad always told me to leave them alone. Those elders, sacramancers he called them, were unnatural, meddlesome, and thought they were better than everybody else.

The edge of the card lit up with a cold blue light as we stepped forward and handed him our letters. Every time the card touched the letter’s seal, the letter would transform into a robe. Those with red seals were given a bright red robe, and those of us with purple seals were given purple robes, which we all quickly put on. Being naked when we were born didn’t diminish the awkwardness.

When I was handed my robe, a voice spoke in my mind. “Talía. Protect her.”

I looked around but couldn’t figure out where the voice was coming from. But it definitely sounded like the one who was “talking” to me in the wind outside of the temple.

Touching the robe, I’d never felt anything so soft in my life. It was a true luxury. I had thought that having a full belly and a warm home was the best that I could have ever hoped for, but I was very much wrong.



After I put the robe on and joined Bakal, I asked, "Did you hear a voice in your head? Mine told me to protect someone called Talia."

He looked at me with a bit of relief. "Yeah. I heard it too. The voice told me the same thing. I talked to some of the other ones. You know...the ones with the red robes. None heard a voice. Don't know why. Maybe we aren't going to be eaten. Only the ones with the red robes are. Notice how the higher monks have black robes, and the lead guy has a purple one like ours?"

"Yeah. I noticed that. Wonder what it means. Seems there's something special about us. I just wish I knew what that meant."

I shifted on my feet as I realized a lot of the other acolytes were staring at those of us in the purple robes. They spoke in hushed tones, and I knew they were talking about us. They were probably jealous since the tall monk wore the same color. I guessed we were going to be treated better or were destined to have higher positions in the church. And I was okay with that!

"Come, child," the tall monk said. "Yes. You in the back. Come and show me your letter."

From the crowded back, a small naked woman strode forth. Everybody stepped out of her way, and the black-robed monks whispered among themselves. But the tall monk turned his head toward them, and they quieted down. Even the dark pool and portal didn't seem nearly as active.

Walking forward, she tried to avoid the eyes of everybody staring at her. I could feel her shrink before the crowd. The robed acolytes were like a parting red sea to allow a small vessel to continue its journey.

“Yes,” the tall monk said. “Come forward, my child. Don’t be shy. We’ve been waiting for you.”

With her letter in hand, he transformed it into a black robe with a bright red symbol on the back.

“Thank you. Join the other monks behind me. The One Who Knows would like a word with you. And what is your name, little one?”

“Talia,” she said, putting on the robe. She glanced at the back of the robe that held the circular red symbol with a cross in the middle of it. The more she stared at it, the more it pulsed...as if it was a living thing.

Bakal nudged me. “Well, she definitely won’t be one they eat. Wonder who she is.”

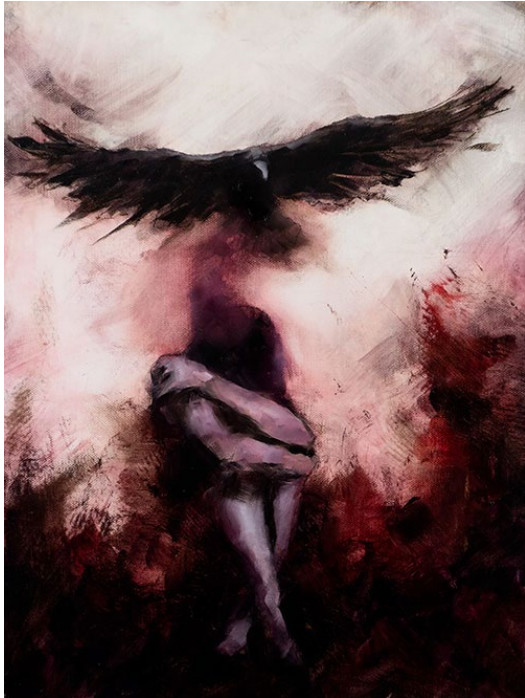
The black-robed monks approached her and escorted her to the black pool. As they got closer, the tendrils stopped moving toward the blue portal. Instead, they formed into a large, flat bridge above the pool. Even the portal stilled.

Within the pool, a shape moved under the surface and worked its way to a side of the bridge. A long, sinuous snake-like thing wound itself around the surface until it reached the top of the bridge, dripping onto it.

Once the thing was on top of the bridge, it flowed and shaped into the largest cat I’d ever seen. It looked very much like an alley cat near my house that I used to feed scraps to every morning. My mom hated that cat. She said I shouldn’t be wasting food on it, but I didn’t care. He was my friend, and I didn’t have a lot of them.

This cat just stared at the girl in the black robe.

## Chapter 3



A deep, rich voice sounded throughout the room. "Talía."

I didn't know if the sound was coming from the enormous cat or from inside my head. It didn't sound like the other voice I had heard when I had put on the robe, and I noticed the other acolytes also looked around as if to figure this out. The black-robed monks and the tall monk just looked at the black cat and bowed their heads.

"Talía," the deep voice repeated. "My special little girl. Within you lies the darkness that has caused you much pain for your entire life. You've heard the voice in your head that has guided you to do things you didn't want to. It caused you pain when you didn't want to listen. It has brought you to our doorstep, and it's now time for you to give up the dark feelings and let us take on that burden. You no longer need to be strong."

Talia fell to her knees and shook uncontrollably. Even though the monks at her side tried to help her get up, she stayed where she was.

“No! I can't. He told me about you!” She was screaming and crying at the same time. “He told me I couldn't trust you!”

“Then why are you here? If you can't trust us, why did you willingly come to this temple?”

With tears still falling, she softly whispered. “I don't know. I don't know what to do or who to trust. I just want the pain gone. I'm so tired of it.”

“I understand,” the deep voice said. “All you feel is pain. Remember: he wants to make sure that he controls you and that you will never force him out. That way, you will always be his. Our offer stands though. Stay with us, and we will protect you. We can get rid of the pain. We've done it before with others, and we can do it with you.”

“I don't know. I have to think about it. I need some time. Now that I'm here, I'm not sure who to trust anymore.”

As the black tentacles from the pool ebbed over the edge and crawled toward her, Talia threw off her robe and clutched her legs close to her. A darkness flowed from her legs and onto the surrounding floor. It created a shell around her that looked like an enormous egg, and as the shell formed, a small raven rose out of her back and hovered in the air until the shell was complete. At that point, it perched on the top of the shell and scanned the pool.

The ooze continued to flow toward them. We could still see her but barely. Her crying was easily heard as it echoed throughout the room. But none of us moved.

When the ooze reached out to touch the shell, the raven whipped down and bit off the end of the tendril. Flying faster than the eye could see, it snapped the tendrils in half every time. Eventually, the tendrils made their way back to the pool, unable to reach the shell. The raven then returned to the top of the shell, and it and the cat stared at one another. After what seemed like the longest time, the raven squawked and disappeared into the shell.

Talia collapsed into a small lump on the floor. The black egg dissolved around her.

Gesturing to the monks beside her, the tall monk said, "Help her to her bedchamber. She needs to rest and recover from this trying day. Also, escort all the red-robed monks to their chambers. Leave the three in purple. I wish to speak to them."

As the black-robed monks escorted the others away, the tall monk in the purple robe brought us up to the cat's altar.

"My lord, may I present to you Sik, Bakal, and Menlar," he said, bowing. Stepping back, he seemed to smirk—though it could've been my imagination.

"Welcome to my home," the cat said. "I hope you like it here. I know you are anxious and confused about what is going on and why you are wearing purple robes rather than the red ones. Like Talia, you are destined for a different role in the church. I've specifically chosen you three to join the Soul Harvesters."

At the name of our new job, a huge grin appeared on Bakal's face. Guess he was wrong about us being eaten. At least we were the ones who would *not* be eaten.

Menlar just stared at the cat with a blank expression, but I got the feeling that he didn't trust anything the cat was saying.

"You'll follow Sim here to your chambers." The cat tilted his head toward the tall monk. "I picked you three because of how you treated others in your village. We've watched you for some time now and feel that we've picked wisely. I'm sure you'll do a great job, and welcome to the family."

As Sim led us away, the cat and the bridge slowly melded back into the pool. Tendrils within the pool started working their way back up to the glowing portal once again.

"Was that One Who Knows?" I asked Sim.

"Yes," Sim said. "He told us about you three, and we're excited to have you join us. I know things are pretty strange at the moment, but you'll get used to it. I think you'll love the Garden of Souls. It is quite beautiful, and when there is a full moon, the plants glow with a special blue light that looks like nothing you've ever seen."

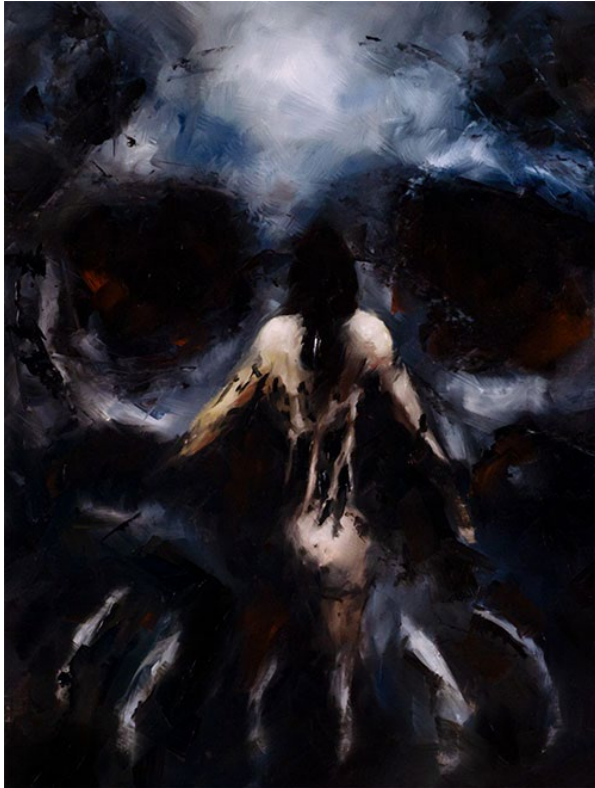
Our chambers were next to Talia's. Inside her room, she was screaming at someone. I was about to knock on her door to see what I could do to help, but Sim gently put his hand on my shoulder.

"No," he said. "There are rules you must abide by. You may not enter another acolyte's room without being invited in. She will be all right. It is our belief that each person shall deal with their issues. It makes people stronger, which makes the church stronger." He gestured to the door beside hers. "Here are your chambers. It's been a long day, and you three need to rest. I will be back before dinner. After dinner, we'll visit the gardens, and I'll assign your tasks. Please do not leave your room until I return. We'll know if you do."

My chamber was fairly sparse: just a wooden bed with a straw mattress, a chamber pot, a small desk and a chair, an oil lamp, and a clothes rack to hang my robes. A small journal and some writing pens were in the desk drawer. Nothing was in the journal, so I figured it would be something I'd need later.

My mind was still on Talia though. She obviously knew what was going on. And before she received her robe, I was sure she was staring at me. Like she wanted to ask me something but didn't get a chance to.

## Chapter 4



Groggily, Talia tried to focus as a loud voice screamed in her head.

“Wake up! Talia, wake up! It’s okay. It’s just me. Phalan. You’re okay now. I know you still don’t trust me. I understand that. But this is what we’ve always talked about! I promised I would leave you when we got into the citadel. I plan on keeping my word. This was my home, and I’ve missed it so much. I need you to be strong though. You felt it, didn’t you? You could sense the evil in him.”

“Yes,” Talia softly whimpered. “That cat thing said that he could get rid of you also.”

Every time the thing in her head talked, she thought her brain was going to explode. So much darkness and raw energy lived in the voice that



it felt like a knife was stabbing her eyes. She'd gotten used to it over the years but would be glad when it was over.

"He's right," Phalan said. "He can remove me from you. You won't like it though. It will be incredibly painful. You know, I've never lied to you. Please listen to me. If he removes me, he'll be able to control me, and he's planning to use me to inhabit his fell-beast. I can't have that. *You* can't have that. That beast will destroy everything in the villages below and bring the survivors under his control. That's why I had my acolytes gather up as much of my essence as they could and leave the temple. He's been bringing me back...piece by piece. You hold the crucial piece: my mind."

"Is this another one of your half-truths?" she asked.

Ever since she came up the mountain, she had this feeling that something was "off," and she already regretted her decision to come here. Something sinister lurked behind the simple priests and their mountain temple.

"No. This is the whole truth," Phalan said. "Years ago, Caleb—yes, that's his name—came to the temple as a simple beggar. But he was not who he appeared to be. He used magic to inject parts of me into his fell-beast. I knew I couldn't defeat him, so I had my acolytes carry parts of my essence and run. When they got out into the world, they had to pour my liquid black ooze into unsuspecting babies so that Caleb couldn't find me. Not all made it out. Over time, he's found the children who hold my essence and brought them back. You and a few others are the last ones. But if he captures you, I will fully be under his control.

"You need to get me into the caverns under the temple. That is where my essence flowed. Remember that pool of darkness in the main chamber? There are many rooms in the cavern that flow into that pool.

Each room holds a part of my body. Those parts are no longer under my control, but if I can go back into the chamber, I can regain control of them and get rid of Caleb.”

Talia tried to clear her mind of him, but she was so tired. “Sorry. I just want you out of my head. I’m still not sure I’m doing the right thing, but I think I believe you. At least I believe you more than Caleb. How am I going to make my way around here if I don’t know where I’m going? Are there guards? What if someone sees me?”

“Don’t worry. We won’t be walking through the hallways. I’m starting to regain some of my abilities, so I can guide you through the shadow passages. You’ll safely be in my primary chamber before you know it. Just turn off all the lights in this room, and I’ll guide you.”

After turning off the lights, Talia’s eyes widened. She could still see the room clearly as if the brightest lights were present. Every crack in the walls was visible. Even the area underneath the desk, which should have been in shadows, was clearly visible. On the far wall was an arched doorway that was not there when she had first entered the room.

She stepped through the doorway, slightly disoriented as the darkness engulfed her. But before she could cry out, she stood in a brightly lit cavern with a large black pool of ooze in the center.

“We’re here,” Phalan said. “In order to see in the chamber, you’ll need to light the sconces on the walls. I’ll still give you dark-sight until you do. Normally, you wouldn’t need to, but I’ve been away from the rest of my body for too long. I get easily tired. Being home restores some of my strength but not enough.”

Talia lit the sconces, and her vision returned to normal.

The enormous cavern held just the pool of ooze in the center. Five passageways led out of the room. On the far end of the room was a large, cracked wall that was covered in dried black mud. Along its base was a pile of cracked masks. Most were broken and charred but each one held the visage of a screaming person.

Phalan sighed with disgust. "See that? You never could see the floor in the other chambers. My essence would flow like a river through every room in these lower chambers. Now? Nothing. Just a little pool here or there. Look at my beautiful children! This is what Caleb has planned for you. I've got to regain my body. Caleb must pay for this!"

But now that they were here, Talia was unsure what to do. Something moved inside of her, but she wasn't sure what it was.

"Stand in front of that wall," he said. "The large cracked one. Just stand there, and I'll take care of everything else."

As she positioned herself in front of the wall, the movement inside her grew stronger. The black ooze that was Phalan poured out of her mouth, eyes, and nose. In its rush to get out, her skin cracked. More ooze made its way out of her body. After cascading down her body, it crawled along the ground and worked its way up into the cracks in the wall.

The largest skull she had ever seen emerged from the wall. The cracked masks, now restored by the ooze, melded into the wall and worked their way up to the skull's eye sockets. More and more, ooze continued to flow out of her.

Yet the pain also left her body and mind. She was going to be free! Just when she thought it was almost over, a sharp pain flashed across her back. Falling, she briefly spotted purple robes before she lost consciousness.

## Chapter 5



As I lay on my bed, the same voice that had spoken to me through the wind and when I got my robe, screamed in my head.

“Sik! Talia needs you!” the voice yelled. “There’s no time! Go through the dark archway!”

What archway? Talia? Wasn’t that the girl in the next room? The one crying? As I looked around though, an arched doorway formed out of the shadows next to my desk.

“Hurry!” The voice was getting louder. “She’s running out of time!”

Rushing through the archway, I plunged into the darkness, and momentarily, I couldn’t see a thing. The next thing I knew, I stood in a large cavern. Talia had collapsed against a wall of black ooze and a giant skull. A large amount of blood pooled around her exposed back. She appeared to

be alive, but I wasn't sure how long she had to live. There was a *lot* of blood.

Screaming at the skull, Menlar stood over her with a large dagger.

Bakal was here also! He had the same surprised look as me on his face. However, I knew we had no time to figure out what was going on. Talia was in trouble.

"Your high priestess is down!" Menlar yelled. "You have no more power here! It's time you and your filthy church disappear from this world! You won't harm my family or my fellow parishioners anymore! With your dying breath, remember that it was the Church of Absolution that caused your downfall!"

From his robe, he placed three small flowers—with bright purple petals and a small skull for a head—on the ground in front of the wall. Synchronously, each flower opened its jaw, causing the ooze on the wall to flow downward toward them. Talia tried to reach the flowers, but she wasn't close enough. When the ooze touched a skull, it vanished in a puff of smoke, and the voice from before screamed.

"Sik! Bakal! Help!" the voice pleaded. "She needs you! I need you!"

Rushing forward, I tackled Menlar as Bakal kicked the flowers away. He tried stomping them, but they didn't look to be damaged. So, he grabbed them all and stuffed them into the pockets of his robe. The black ooze then resumed its journey back into the wall.

Menlar was as strong as an ox. My surprised tackle had forced him to drop the dagger he used on Talia, but there was no way I would reach it in time. He scrambled away, got up, and kept kicking me over and over. My body hurt, but I couldn't stop. I tried grabbing his legs—or really anything I

could get a hold of. Nothing worked. I didn't know what else to do; I had never been in a fight before. Bloody and broken, I felt like crying, but the tears wouldn't come.

On the other side of the room, Bakal checked on Talia.

"Go!" she yelled. "Help your friend!"

When it was obvious that I was no longer a threat, Menlar moved away to grab his dagger. Bakal rushed over and helped me up, and we stood between both groups: Menlar on one side of the room and Talia and the skull on the other.

I knew we were in trouble. We were all just teens, and Menlar was a lot stronger than us. He drew another dagger from his robe and planted his feet. All I could see was the glint of death on the tips of both daggers pointed at us. We didn't have a chance. I tried to focus on what I could do, but the pain was too great. It was hard enough just to stand.

I looked behind me. A part of the ooze on the wall flowed over Talia, covering her legs and back. Her body shuddered as it repaired the damage to her body. It also created a semblance of clothing and then engulfed her head. Racked with spasms, her body gave one last convulsion before it collapsed.

"You can't stop me!" Menlar screamed. He then spoke in a softer yet more deadly voice. "These kids aren't strong enough to stop me. You know that. And I know that." Drawing another dagger out of his robe, he stalked forward.

"Yes...you are right," a female voice said. "However, they weren't meant to stop you. They were only meant to *delay* you."

We all turned towards the voice. Talia, standing near the wall, was covered in armor of the deepest black. On her left arm, the ooze flowed out of her hand and created a solid, round shield. Her right hand formed into a hammer with a wicked knife at its end.

“No!” Menlar yelled. “No! He has to die! He’s going to attack my church and our town with that monster! He lied to you!”

He rushed past us, racing toward Talia, but she just laughed. With one swing of her shield, she struck both of his arms, and his daggers crashed to the floor. Stunned, he tried to regain his balance, but it wasn’t enough. She swung her hammer into the left side of his head.

He collapsed into a pile on the floor.

Before she could strike a final blow, the familiar voice spoke once more. “No! It’s not his fault. He’s right. We must stop the beast, and his church may be the only way to do it. I felt the fell-beast stir during our fight. He’s moved down the mountainside. We have to stop him!”

“You’re too late,” a dark voice said, echoing within the chamber. “The town and its surrounding regions will be mine. Phalan, I was hoping to add your mind to my beast, but plans have a way of changing. The creature is strong enough without you. And I’ll have you soon enough anyway.”

## Chapter 6



“I need one of you to ingest me! Now!” the familiar voice—who must be Phalan—said. It sounded like the voice was coming from the wall. “Bakal! Sik! You both have a part of my essence inside of you. If one of you ingest me, I can help you navigate the shadows and get to the Church of Absolution. We must get there before the fell-beast does. And those flowers! If they have enough of them, they can absorb my essence already in the beast and stop it.”

Before I could say anything, Bakal walked up to the wall. “I’ll do it! What do I need to do?”

“Just lean against the wall, and I’ll take care of it.”

As he leaned on the wall, black ooze covered his body in the same manner it had to give Talia her armor. Once the ooze covered his body, it slowly worked its way into each pore, melding with Bakal. It stopped after a while.



“Well, that was weird,” Bakal said.

After pushing away from the wall, he turned back towards it and placed his hand in the ooze. Another pitch-black archway appeared.

He then turned to us. “Okay. Time is running out. We need to step through this and get over to that church. Grab Menlar. We’ll need him if we are going to survive this. Wait! Gotta do something first.”

He ran over to stand over Menlar’s collapsed body. As he placed a hand above Menlar’s mouth, a small ball of black ooze flowed out of Menlar’s mouth and into his hand.

“He’s like us. A host for Phalan’s essence.” Bakal looked at me. “I don’t know how he learned to travel in the shadows. Someone in his church probably taught him how to do it. But he’s clean now. We can go.”

This journey through the darkness took a lot longer than the first. What felt like an eternity probably took several minutes. I didn’t know. All I knew was that we walked out of the shadows and into a room full of soldiers.

Bakal fell to his knees and promptly threw up.

“God!” he cried. “That was awful! Phalan told me it would be a rough trip cause he wouldn’t have much strength once he left his tower. Didn’t realize it was going to be that hard. I need a sandwich...or at least one after I get this god-awful taste out of my mouth.”

Surrounding us, the soldiers waited and watched. They didn’t look surprised. A couple of them casually walked over and carried Menlar away before reforming the circle. They must be waiting for someone.

“Why are you here? You brought *him* with you, didn’t you?” a voice said from behind a couple of soldiers. Moving them aside, a short fat woman strode into the center of the room. Her bright white robes clashed with the stark look on her face. “Why are you *here*?”

Both Talia and Bakal looked at me. Guess I was the spokesperson for our little group.

“Your church and village are going to be attacked,” I said. “Someone has sent his beast down to eliminate all of you. Maybe the One Who Knows? Either way, he’s on his way now, and we’ve come to help you.”

“His name is Caleb,” Talia adds.

“Why should we believe you?” the short woman snapped. “You’re the one who created the beast.” Her eyes landed on Talia, and she smirked. “Yes. We know you contained the mind of the creator. You’re covered in his *foul* essence. And you.” Her eyes glared at me and Bakal. “You both carry his essence inside you. You’re all tainted and cannot be trusted.”

“Yes, we do all have his essence in one form or another. He is *not* the One Who Knows though. He fled years ago, and Caleb has been using his body to create a beast. We don’t have time for this argument anyway! He’s coming! Don’t you care?”

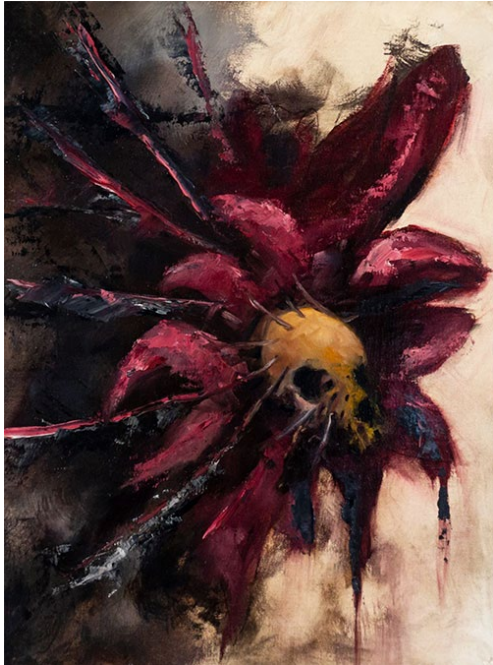
“We know about the beast coming down the mountain. Our spies already warned us. We also watched you travel here through the shadows. If you hadn’t been carrying Menlar, you wouldn’t have made it this far. However, the beast’s foul essence has been removed from Menlar, and we can only assume that you did that. That is the only reason why we are even talking.”

I couldn't think of anything to say. I had no idea how to convince those who appeared to already know everything.

"I'm tired of this!" Talia screamed, moving forward. "I'm going to destroy that monster *Caleb* created. It wasn't Phalan who did it. You can believe me or not. I don't care. Now, how do I get out of here?! You can tell me, or I can fight every bloody one of you!"

The two soldiers in front of her brought their weapons up in an instant. The air was tense as they looked at their priestess. Bakal and I just looked at one another and then joined Talia in front of the soldiers. After several strained minutes, the priestess spoke up. "Fine! You want to help? Go to the observation tower. There, you can make yourself useful. Just stay out of our way." She turned and left the room.

## Chapter 7



The Church of Absolution was a buzz of activity. Soldiers ran here and there, pushing everybody out of their way. Sacramancers showed younger mages how to activate their spell cards, and the clergy carried pots of small flowers—the same ones that Menlar had used in Phalan’s cavern.

Every so often, someone glanced at Talia and whispered to another person. But it was always brief.

“This isn’t going to work,” our escort said as we walked. “It’s too busy here. We’re not going to make it to the tower in time. Besides”—he pointed at Talia—“she’s not going to make it up there safely. Too many dark lotus plants are moving around. They’ll consume her armor before we get up there.” He looked around and then pointed at a door just down the hall. “There! We can move through the shadows to get to the observation tower. It’ll be safer. Let’s move!”

As we moved down the hall, we tried to keep Talia against the wall. Every time someone with a dark lotus walked by, the black ooze that covered her drifted toward it. Once the plant was out of range, the ooze returned to its original position.

We entered the room down the hall, and our escort made his way to the far wall. The wall was covered with an ornate stained-glass image of the church. He pulled a glowing green card out from his pouch and touched it to the image's center. The image then changed into a floor plan of the entire building with each level displayed separately.

"This will take us to the observation tower," our escort said. "Once I activate the location, we won't have much time. I know Shalas—the priestess you were talking to—doesn't trust you, but truthfully, we need the help. We saw the reports about that beast coming down the mountain. I don't think we can handle it."

"You can trust us," I said. "I don't know what we can do, but we'll try."

Once he touched the tower's location, the floor plan faded away, and a black doorway appeared next to him on the wall. We all stepped into the darkness and disappeared.

On the other side of the portal, we stood on a small landing with stairs going downward and a door on our right. Our escort opened the door, and we walked onto a large open platform at the top of the church. The wind whipped around us as if nature was screaming its last breath. Nothing was up here other than a guardrail and the small building we had just come from.

In the distance, a *massive* cloud-like thing cascaded down the mountain. I could only make out a semblance of a face and arms. Down below, in front of the church, were large fields of the dark lotus. Rows

upon rows of them were organized to stop the creature long before it ever got to the church.

“My god!” Bakal cried, turning to our escort. “I didn’t realize it was going to be that *huge*! You think those little plants are going to stop that thing? Have you lost your mind?”

“You saw what they did to Phalan in the cavern,” Talia said. “There are enough of them down there that they can absorb the fell-beast without a problem.”

“But not if they can’t get to the ooze! See how the creature is pushing away the trees in front of it? What about behind it? There’s nothing there! That means the cloud around it is *solid*, and the ooze is inside. How are they going to get to it?”

Our escort looked a bit sullen. “He’s right. We told Shalas and the other clergy the same thing. They said their spells and our weapons were enough to penetrate the outer shell so that the plants could do their work. We’re not so sure. However, they’re the bosses, and they told us to do our jobs. So, that’s what we’ll do.” He sighed. “I’ve got to get back down there to help my buddies. I don’t know what you can do, but I believe you want to help. I don’t think you guys will let us down. Good luck.”

As he left, we watched the fell-beast come down the mountain. My stomach twisted. There was no way we were going to survive this.

“What do you guys think?” I turned to Talia and Bakal. “I don’t think we have a chance. What does Phalan say? Any ideas?”

“Sorry.” Bakal looked just as depressed as our escort had. “He thinks Talia may be able to penetrate the thing’s outer shell with her weapons, but other than that, he has no other ideas.”

“I can try landing near its head,” Talia said. “Try to force it to swallow me, but I’m not sure that’s going to work. I don’t really see a mouth or anywhere I can go in. We’ll just have to see if the thing actually makes it to the church. No sense in worrying about it until it does.”

But when it did, it was all going to be up to Talia.

## Chapter 8



The fell-beast came down the mountain like an avalanche of death. I didn't know what to expect but I can definitely say that what came down was something I had never imagined. It was like a storm cloud had broken out of the Shadow Realm and taken form as a misshapen man. There were no parts of the creature you could focus on because the arms, legs, and head were constantly shifting in and out of darkness.

In front of it, trees were uprooted and or absorbed into its massive frame. Behind it was nothing. Just a large strip of dirt and rocks. Many forest animals scattered out of its way. Most didn't make it.

I turned to Bakal. "Is it me or...does that thing seem to be growing?"



"Yep. It definitely is growing," he said. "I thought it was just my imagination. But yeah... It's going to be pretty big when it gets here. There's no way Talia can fly up to its head." He turned to her. "What do you think? There might be room for you to land somewhere on it. It looks solid."

Stepping away from us, she stretched her arms and fingers out. The ooze flowed and created massive bat wings that stretched between her fingers and her feet. Folding her wings, she struggled against the wind to make her way back to the guardrail.

"I may be able to do it," she said. "The wind up here is pretty strong, and I can try to ride the currents and fly above it. At least I can get high enough so that thing's legs won't crush me." With her wings clutched around her, she jumped off the edge and fell.

This was not good.

I was so sure she would crash to the ground and wondered if she could survive that. Halfway down though, she spread wings and climbed the air away from the building.

"This is fantastic!" she yelled as her wings carried her higher and higher.

The fell-beast finally reached the edge of the church grounds. Each dark lotus flower turned its head toward it, but nothing happened. The monster just walked over them as if they weren't there. With every step, the flowers drew up into the cloud-like shell of a creature and dissolved into the mist.

Bolts of lightning and rays of fire streamed out of every church window. The lightning washed over the monster with no effect. The beams

of fire did nothing more than brighten up parts of it. It paid no heed to any magic thrown at it.

Soldiers streamed out of the building and into the churchyard, raising their swords toward the monster's shell. Nothing worked. It was as if they were attacking a solid wall. Every time the fell-beast stepped on a soldier, the soldier would be drawn up into its mist and absorbed. Soldiers screamed as their bodies dissolved.

The entire scene was so surreal. Was it just yesterday that I had so much hope for a new life? I thought being accepted by the One Who Knows would make everything better. Instead, I'm now in the middle of a hopeless battle and probably won't live to see the end of day. This wasn't supposed to happen!

Bakal looked over at me and put his hand on my shoulder. "It'll be okay. We've done the right thing."

I just nodded.

The fell-beast got closer and closer. It finally reached the building, and nothing—the clergy, the flowers, or the soldiers—had made any difference. It was going to destroy the entire building, and we were going down with it. I thought about running, but my mind was frozen in shock to do anything. I just hoped Talia could do something.

She couldn't glide high enough to land on the fell-beast's head, but she reached its shoulder. After landing, she transformed her wings into a large, sharp blade and plunged it into its shoulder. The blade sank in, and the fell-beast briefly turned its head toward her.

It felt it! It felt the blade going in!

Talia furiously cut more and more into the shoulder. The more she cut, the more ooze was exposed. But the creature ignored her, pounding on the church walls.

“I can break the surface!” she yelled toward us. “I’m just not causing enough damage to stop it! I’m going to try to get into it and see if I can destroy it from the inside!”

“Talia!” Bakal shouted. “Talia! Wait! I’ve got something for you!” He tore off the bottom of his robe and pulled out the three dark lotus that he had taken from Phalan’s cavern. He wrapped them up inside the torn robe. “Take this! Dump them into the creature!” He threw the bundle toward her, but it didn’t go far.

As the bundle fell, she stretched one of her arms toward it. But missed.

She flew off the beast to try again, secured the bundle, and brought it back to where she was. After she unwrapped the flowers, the ooze on her arms moved toward the flowers within. She quickly dropped them within the hole she had made.

As the flowers fell farther and farther into the creature, the black ooze dissolved, and the hard cloud shell of the fell-beast cracked and fell apart. No longer focused on the building, the fell-beast thrashed and dropped to its knees. More lightning bolts crashed into the creature, and the soldiers below made headway past the hard shell.

Using her wings again, Talia leaped off the falling fell-beast and glided toward the churchyard. Bakal and I ran down the stairs but had no idea where we were going.

“Follow the soldiers! They’ll lead us out!” I yelled as we scrambled through the hallways.

Everybody headed toward the churchyard, bringing as many spare dark lotus as they could.

Outside, a chaotic scene was unfolding. The soldiers and clergy tied dark lotus to small bags and threw them at the beast. The black ooze quickly dissolved. The monster was more of a mound of ooze and cloud shell than the fell-beast that had come down the mountain. Some soldiers carried their fallen ones away as others celebrated the beast’s destruction.

Bakal and I found Talia at the far end of the churchyard. We briefly hugged, but there was a coldness to her. She walked over to some dark lotus lying on the ground and picked one up. The black ooze surrounding her flowed toward the flower and evaporated into mist.

“Never again,” she said. With a smile, she came back and hugged us again. This time, the warmth of her smile seemed to light up the world around me.

Things were going to be okay.