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Kyri

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CHAPTER ONE

Dockside Flies

*Nemagorian*

“It will be allowed,” said arch dragon, Nemagorian. “He is a boy testing the boundaries, playing in the forest, plus, we have no quarrel with the elves, especially a child-elf.”

“Nothing good can come of this, children become adults, our kind belong in the mountains, not the forests with elves or humans,” answered Bardwith, a well-respected but traditional dragon of the council.

“He will return to the mountains, right now, he is just experimenting, seeing what’s out there. We teach the young dragons about elves, well, what better learning than firsthand. It will be a phase, you will see. But forbid it, and he may do just as you say, leave us or become reckless,” finished Nemagorian.

The dragons turned and left their meeting place, a chamber in a rocky crag in Mount Xon. Snowmelt dripped down the harsh rock walls of the dormant volcano. Muscles flexed and wings flapped as the council of five dragons departed into a sky that wasn’t quite raining yet. With each beat, they grew smaller, fragments in a swirling sky.

The vote was: Bardwith and Vecsop against; Quizsp and Mawren for allowing the baby dragon to continue his trips to the forest to play with his new elf friend, with Nemagorian casting the tie-breaking vote. Dockside, the baby dragon, was free to roam beyond the mountains now. No more sneaking. He had the blessings of his elders... or at least, some of them.

*Dockside*

Dockside lay his chin on Thistle’s lap. “You’re a little big for a pet,” joked the boy. Dockside sighed and closed his eyes. The elf boy stroked Dockside’s head where the scales gave way to leathery skin. “The council says my trips to the forest are allowed,” said Dockside. “Really?” replied Thistle.

“Yes, but somehow, it was more fun when I thought I was breaking the rules.”

“You’re a rebel Dockside, that’s why I like you.”

“What good is it living a thousand years if you just fly around in the mountains all day?”

“Hey, maybe I should tell my dad about you, I mean, it would be so cool to show you the elven bows and when the wind blows hard, the waterfall by the palace actually flows sideways, it’s amazing! My sister, Yarrow, would be smitten with you!”

“Tell King Dalymoor about me? No, I better not push my luck with your dad or the council, plus, I prefer to play in the forest,” and with that, Dockside breathed a short flame at Thistle’s boots. “Hey, watch it buddy, you’re messing with a future king.” Thistle tackled Dockside and began roughing him up, the spongy moss soft on their skin and scales.

**147 years later...**

*Mask*

*When the raiders came, hardly a word was spoken. The horses stopped and seemed to begin smelling the air. We all got out and my father drew his sword. I saw them first, shadows flitting in the trees then the thunderous sound of hooves. They cut down my mother and father as I cowered beneath the carriage clinging to the underside, propped up by the axle. Our stuff was looted and they rode off.*

*I must’ve walked off into the woods, building shelters, eating wild berries, roots and twigs like an animal. Days became months; my feet and hands hardened; I fashioned small hand tools out of specially shaped stones; I learned the paths and made some of my own; I knew the alarm calls of birds; my stomach wrenched from eating the wrong herbs until I found patches that were edible. I smelled them, blended them and boiled them into tinctures to heal my skin and make me feel full.*

Kyri was huddled in a small shelter on the side of a large oak tree when the theatre troupe passed by and an object fell from the cart. She walked forward to investigate the find. But as she knelt down to pick it up, a teenage boy scrambled down the path, from the direction of the cart, and also tried to snatch the object.

“Hey, I saw it first,” said Kyri with an air of complaint in her voice.

“But, it belongs to us, we need it for the show, who are you?” said the boy.

“I am Kyri, what is it anyway?”

“It’s a mask, we are going to play a surprise show for the monks; they say a good belly laugh helps them to meditate,” and he shrugged. “I tell ya what, take this one, Kyri,” and he handed her the mask. “I’ll paint a new one for the show, and remember the name Rene’, that’s me, I’ll be a famous lyrical poet one day!” As Kyri stood dumbfounded, Rene’ turned and sprinted after the cart.

Kyri stared into the mask. It was blood-red, the mask of a hunter, a warrior, perhaps the evildoer in the play, she thought. Curious, Kyri walked for some miles, following the cart trails. Kyri favored her left leg as a thorn had punctured her right heel and now ached and throbbed. She had tried breaking plants and pushing their wet cells into the wound, but it didn’t seem to help, until she found a gooey plant that was cooling. Still, the fresh spring she had stumbled upon four days ago, or was it three, was still the best medicine. But yesterday she had returned to it and found it wasn’t running. She didn’t know if it was linked to the rains or the pressure in the earth or what.

 After some time following her thoughts in this manner, she saw temples in the distance with farms surrounding. On the edge of the forest, she saw the theatre troupe’s cart overturned with arrows in the sides. A scuffle had ensued, she thought, by the markings in the dirt. People were dragged away; she looked inside the cart, but saw no one. Feeling helpless, but also fortunate to be alive, she strode down to the temples; the forest was too dangerous to stay, and everyone who entered seemed to disappear or die.

*Oren*

“What are we to make of this, a girl, 17-years old, she says, emerges from the forest alone with a warrior mask lashed to her pack?” said Rift, an old monk sitting on the white temple steps with Oren. The marble had cracked and yellowed leaving space for green algae to form.

“Maybe she was abandoned, or it could be a sign from the gods, she isn’t saying much, I asked her where she came from and all she said was over the mountains,” said Oren who seemed to be searching the sky for answers.

“We have never let a woman into the order, why make an exception for her?”

“Because Rift, you are getting old, and the Galbraith Kiln are unrelenting. Who will replace your staff?”

“Old, yes… so she is my understudy now, it’s up to me to train her?” asked Rift with a wry smile.

“Yes, professor,” said Oren, his eyes gray like a wolf, and the two monks laughed as old friends do. Though Rift was clearly an old man with his long white hair, there was a flash of youthfulness in his face.

They stared into the clouds—smoky tendrils reaching out then disintegrating, changing so gradually. So far, the monks had held Duke, the leader of the Galbraith Kiln, at bay, but how long could they hold?

*Rift*

“What is your story?” asked Rift, strolling along a pathway of crushed stone and pebble. A few monks in wool robes and leather boots carrying baskets passed by presumably on their way to the gardens. A grinding wheel could be heard in the distance. Symmetrical stone buildings where monks made their homes drifted by in the background.

Kyri looked blank. “My story is ever-changing, I guess, my parents were slaughtered by riders; we were fleeing war, berserkers and pagans in the north, but only found more war. I cowered.”

“You lived.”

“Yes, I lived…”

“What should we call you?”

“My name is Kyri.”

“Ah, yes, but no one will fear Kyri, your warrior name?”

“Uh, I don’t know...” Kyri looked down at her pack and saw the mask lashed to the outside... “The Mask,” she muttered, “call me, Mask.”

“So it is, come.” Rift walked to the temple, which was simple, unadorned. He lit a fire in the square at the base of the altar, closed his eyes and put his hand into the flame. The skin began to burn, then, blue light sprang from his fingers and the flames retreated. He removed his hand.

“But how?”

“Meditation, I have a book for you, read it, you won’t understand it all, but read every word. During meditation think of these passages and nothing else. Let the words tumble over and over in your mind. There is a passage in particular that I want you to read. It’s called *Fading*. If you learn this, I mean, really learn it, your power will be remarkable.”

“But if evil surrounds us, the Galbraith Kiln as you call them, how can I sit reading books and doing nothing?”

“You aren’t doing nothing, trust me, your meditations will be quite active. Still, during the night, you will join us for staff fighting and sparring. During the day, you will read and meditate. Yes?”

“Yes, thank you for taking me in.”

**2 years later**

*Yarrow*

A small entourage made their way on horseback to the temple steps where Oren and Rift were sitting. A silver haired elf at the lead dismounted his horse, gave him a rub on the nose, then turned to the monks. “I am Lokways, but you may call me Lock, ambassador to the elves,” he announced. “A moment of your time?”

Rift remained on the steps as Oren rose to greet the elf.

“Your soldiers can fill up there,” said Oren, pointing to a small stable beside a corn field.

“Thank you,” said Lock, who motioned to the group. A tall muscular elf in partial plate armor escorted Lock inside. “King Thistle Dalymoor II has requested that I inquire into the surrounding area. You see, his sister, Yarrow, went bow hunting in the wood and did not return two days ago. We begged her to take escorts, but she is a bit of a hardhead. We are fearing the worst though she is fierce and one of our best warriors. Have you seen her?”

“No, but as you know, war rages just outside our temples, we fear the Galbraith Kiln will sweep our lands. From what you say, it is unlikely that thugs in the forest could’ve caught her. With the speed and might of an elf, I just don’t see it. And the Hobs, or hobgoblins, they feast mainly on dead flesh though they are opportunistic hunters. The Galbraith Kiln, their marauders, well, they have laid siege to our temples and farmlands for two and a half years. They have pierced the woods and hold the outskirts of our land. Be careful with them Lock; we could use the help of the elves you know,” said Oren.

“Find Yarrow, and you will have our help,” stated Lock. “Your staff is known in these parts and respected.”

“Yes, but against an army, our aging order may not hold, we have minor magic, but if our mystic does not have time to meditate, even that disappears. The Galbraith Kiln have Veins, Veniel Fasiquitan, you’ve heard of him?”

“We have heard the Kiln have a mage, that is all, a trickster of sorts. Is the Kiln aligned with the Hobs or do the Hobs just want both sides to kill each other so they can feast on the dead soldiers?”

“It’s unclear, yes, the Hobgoblin king, Cax, wouldn’t mind if that happened, I’m sure, but they have a loose alliance with the Kiln, perhaps an alliance of convenience. But when two evil groups make an alliance, it’s really just a matter of time before one betrays.”

“Yes, but we are honorable people, take my word, find the elf princess and our warriors will march lockstep with you.”

“Thank you, I will tell our scouts,” finished Oren, clapping his hands into prayer and lighting the sage. The smoke wafted through the temple. “You will find hay beds here for your people, or do you ride on?”

“We ride on,” and Lock turned to leave.

*A Message*

Later that day, Mask was blending herbs in the temple. Mask had put the herbology she learned in the forest to use treating the injured monks returning from battle. She had also learned a few tricks from the gardener monks. Many homes were now empty; it seemed everyone had lost a brother or cousin to the war with the Kiln. Duke was becoming more brazen riding into battle with Veins in the background conjuring up mischief. It seemed the monks might fall and their lush farmlands would become ravaged. It would be shadow warriors living in their temples soon unless something could be done.

Mask had developed into a strong fighter. She had almost mastered *Fade* and used it often in battle, so much so that Rift began to caution her against it. “Spend too long in the shadow realm and you can become a ghost,” he said. When a sword was about to strike her, it was like her molecules became airborne--spreading like ocean mist, then, she would snap back to strike. It was more than an out-of-body experience, it was a transformation. And Veins was beginning to take notice of this witchery.

With Oren and Mask at the lead, they were holding the line. Mask looked up to see Oren kneeling in prayer. Soon after, a young monk appeared in the doorway: “A message for Oren,” he called, scampering forward. Mask looked on as Oren read.

“Where did you get this?” asked Mask, reading the message.

“An unarmed hobgoblin gave it to me at the border,” said the monk.

*Oren,*

*Too much blood has been spilled. Why sacrifice so many when this dispute is between you and I. Your best fighter against mine, very simple, win and we will retreat leaving your lands forever. Lose, and you turn over all of your land, temples and the sacred book, but you are free to disperse into the mountains or forest. If this agreement is amenable to you, meet me at the border of our two lands at the Hobgoblin’s Den. We will be waiting.*

*Duke*

“Let me go,” said Mask. “I have been training with the iron claw and metal whips. They are remarkable weapons.”

“I don’t trust Duke, I will do this myself, and if things go wrong, you will be at the ready. We have no choice. Either be slowly slaughtered or take this gambit.”

Rift appeared and read the note. “I will be meditating in the temple while you take this challenge. It is you and I, Oren, you are not alone. Call and I will be there.”

*The Hobgoblin’s Den*

The half-frozen ground crunched as Oren, Mask and a small group of monk fighters converged on the den. The wood hut was tucked behind two chestnut trees just inside of Kiln held land. Two hobgoblins stomped past, but most of the army had been pushed back in anticipation of the meeting.

It was as Oren expected. Outside of the hut, standing beside Duke, was Yargrath, a general who took great joy in the slaughter of monks. His gleaming two-handed sword spanned six feet. He smiled from beneath his war helmet. The cloaked figure behind him, she knew, was Veins, the mage.

Oren stepped forth with his quarterstaff, muscular and quick, he moved lightly and swiftly. The oak staff was like an extension of Oren’s own body. The weight of it, the feel, the thud it made when the strike was just right on bone.

“So glad you could join us,” sneered Duke, a vile shadow warrior who knew no remorse, only conquest. “And Mask, we’ve been admiring your abilities, rumor has it that you crawled out of the forest like a wild animal, yes?”

Mask gripped the iron claw and metal whips meeting his gaze.

“Stay calm, Mask, easy,” chided Duke. “Now that the niceties are out of the way, down to business.”

Cax, the Hobgoblin king, lumbered forward, his oversize lower jaw and pointy teeth flashing as he spoke. “A magical covenant,” said Cax, unfurling a scroll. “It states, two champions shall duel, at stake is the land of the Galbraith Kiln and the land of the monks. If the monk’s champion is killed, their land goes to the Galbraith Kiln; if the Kiln’s champion is killed, their land goes to the monks; the losing side will immediately retreat and never return to this land.” Duke and Oren both grasped the scroll, which began to glow and shimmer. “It is done,” said Cax, rolling up the scroll.

At that moment, Veniel Fasiquitan stepped in front of Yargrath, drawing his hood. Veins always seemed to have a manic expression and to be in a slight crouch. “Hello, friends.”

“What is this?” said Oren.

“It says the Kiln’s champion, but it doesn’t say who that is,” said Duke.

“Are we ready to begin?” said the evil mage.

Oren looked back at Mask, who had a worried look on her face.

“Ready,” said Oren, who began to circle with his staff behind him, along the forearm and up over his shoulder.

“That won’t be necessary,” snickered Veins, reaching into his robes and tossing a shiny black cube into the air. Oren tried to look away, but it was too late, he stood entranced, hypnotized by the object. Veins, too, locked eyes with the cube. An image of their bodies remained frozen in form, but their selves were transported to a shadow realm.

“What is this trickery?” challenged Mask.

“No trickery,” said Duke, “they will duel inside the cube, one champion will emerge.”

Meditating in the temple, Rift felt himself being sucked into something. At first he resisted, but then, he saw Oren’s face and followed. Rift was in the magical mechanics of the cube, an elaborate set of incantations, but also, a kind of prison.

Oren appeared on a path. A large keep stood in the distance. A wooded area could be seen to the east. Storm clouds swirled around him. The crack of thunder and lightning. It was desolate, like a desert only it was clay and rock instead of sand. So, the mage wants to surround himself with a castle, and perhaps monsters, that is how he fights, thought Oren. He started down the path toward the keep.

As the first storm cloud burst and cold rain fell from the sky, suddenly, a crevice appeared in the earth right underfoot. Oren lunged to the side, but it was to no avail; he plunged into the rocky crag. Quickly and nimbly, Oren turned his staff sideways to stop his fall and make a bar. The staff crunched into the sides of the crevice. He had fallen quite a ways and the bottom was nowhere in site. He shimmied across the staff to a ledge, then freed his staff.

The rain poured making the rocks slick. He began to spider climb. The jagged rocks cut into his hands. His feet slipped and he dangled by only his hands. Oren swung back to the side, his arms burning. It was becoming more vertical toward the top, sloping inward. Oren braced himself between the two sides to continue climbing. He could see the light, he was so close, but the rain was blurring his vision. Then, at the top, a hand appeared. Thinking it was Veins, he grabbed it and tried to pull him to his doom, but when he yanked, a female voice called, “What in the hell are you doing?”

A young elf appeared and helped pull him up. “Who are you?” asked Oren.

“I am Princess Yarrow, Veins captured me in the wood while hunting and stuck me in here, who are you?”

“I am Oren, leader of the monks, I have a compact with Veins, if I defeat him, my people go free and the Kiln will leave our lands forever.”

“Do you know a way out of here?”

“The only way out, I think, is to kill him.”

“We need shelter, fire, food, let’s get out of here,” and the elf slung her bow over one shoulder and started for a wooded area in the distance. Once under the cover of trees, she instructed, “you make a shelter and I will collect wood for a fire.”

Oren found some saplings which he bent into a dome; he then lashed them together with vines and began stuffing leaves and moss between the wood. So, this is where Yarrow disappeared to, he thought to himself. If I return with her, that could earn us the loyalty of the elves. When Yarrow came back, she was holding a dead rabbit and some kindling. “I got us some food,” she announced triumphantly. She built a fire and when the rabbit was roasted up nicely, Yarrow rubbed in some herbs and presented it to Oren. “Oh, does that ever look good,” said Oren, eating hungrily. But as he finished the last bite, Yarrow stood up and began walking backward toward the wood line. Veins appeared behind her and made a motion with his hands. Like a puppet, Yarrow raised her arms in front of her and let Veins bind her wrists with rope.

“You fool, this is my world, and yet, you weren’t suspicious in the least? Yarrow is in a trance; I gave her the nightshade to rub into the rabbit; you’ve been poisoned silly monk ‘warrior,’” he taunted. Oren felt queasy; his stomach wretched; it was over; I’ve failed.

*On the other side, Duke looked on in glee. He had watched Oren’s image seemingly fall from great heights, then later, begin clutching his stomach in agony. Mask stared at the illusion of Oren.*

Then, a voice in Oren’s head, it was Rift. “Elves can not be charmed; Veins doesn’t know this; Yarrow gave you a half dose; she has a plan; draw Veins in to give her the chance to strike.”

“You don’t have the guts to kill me; you hide behind your cheap tricks; never wanting to get your own hands dirty,” said Oren, now writhing, clutching his stomach. Veins approached, drawing a slender dagger from his belt almost salivating at the chance to slay the monk, when Yarrow charged forward behind him, leapt onto his back and wrapped the ropes tightly around his neck. She twisted, locking her hands around the back of his head, and her legs around his waist. He fell backwards and the impact almost made her lose hold, then Yarrow deftly yanked again until the air was choked off. Veins rolled to the ground.

“Yarrow, his pocket, look in his pocket for the black cube.”

“You need an antidote.”

“There’s no time; get us home and Mask will make the antidote.”

Yarrow grabbed Oren’s arm and found the cube in Veins’ pocket. They were transported back.

When Yarrow and Oren appeared in the flesh, and the images of Veins and Oren began to dim, gasps of surprise could be heard among the hobgoblins, shadow fighters and monks who had gathered. The cube fell from Yarrow’s hand.

“An elf, what is this?” proclaimed Duke. “The contest was between Oren and Veins, where is Veins?” demanded Duke.

“Dead,” said Yarrow, holding Oren up.

“Then why isn’t the scroll glowing; it would declare Oren the victor if this were true.”

“It’s over Duke,” said Mask, running over to Oren.

“No, this was a double cross, you were working with the elves, it’s not over, we’ve just begun!” and Duke motioned to Yargrath who drew his sword and charged Mask.

The monks, hobgoblins and shadow fighters converged into a melee of clanking swords and axes. Mask caught Yargrath’s sword with the iron claw, twisted and disarmed him swiftly. Then she drew her steel whips and began thrashing in a broad circle around Yarrow and Oren. Yarrow drew her bow and fired two arrows at close range. One clipped Cax, the hobgoblin king, in the shoulder and the other hit Yargrath in the chest, sinking through his breastplate. Mask *Faded* just in time as a shadow fighter charged from behind. Returning, she threw a cloak over Oren; crossbow bolts flashed off the cloak--glowing and repelling with each contact.

Rift seeped out of the cubic world and now took an aerial view of the battle while still in meditation. He telepathically reached King Dalymoor sending word that Yarrow had been recovered, that she was immersed in battle with the Galbraith Kiln at the Hobgoblin’s Den. In all of the fighting, no one noticed the cube on the ground. Long white fingers stretched from the cube and a mist filled with tiny black flies and eggs spiraled around the hobgoblins, monks and shadow fighters. Insects buzzed everywhere making it hard to see. Mask caught site of the cube and smashed her staff down on Veins’ fingers, then crushed the cube which splintered into shards. But the pestilence spread, rotting the flesh right off living fighting bodies. Worms and maggots formed on the fighters as they battled. Dropping their swords, they fled in horror. The hobgoblins were the only ones who seemed unphased by the mist, which barely affected them.

Rift took the form of a giant phoenix, sweeping down from the clouds and landing right in the thick of the hobgoblin horde. “Get under the cloak!” the phoenix shouted in a shrill voice. Oren, Yarrow and Mask dove underneath. The phoenix set itself ablaze, charring the hobgoblins then reconstituting. Rift shimmered blue in the temple while Oren, Yarrow and Mask emerged from the cloak and jumped the bird. They flew off as smoke swirled around them. The monk fighters fled back to their land.

The wounded were ushered to the healing temples where monks in pure white robes moved at a quickened pace. Monks meditated at the foot and head of the cots while others lay hands and whispered quiet incantations. Younger monks in yellow robes crushed woody things into powder in bowls and dripped liquids, some clear and some blue, onto the blends. Then the bowl was given to a healer for application. Tree sap to close wounds and garlic to make sure nothing grew from it.

Mask attended to Oren. She quickly harvested healing herbs from the monks’ gardens and made a tincture for him to swallow. The antidote worked slowly, but after a day of rest, Oren arose. The same day, the elf army arrived at the temples and Princess Yarrow was reunited with her family. There was great joy. Oren strolled and spoke with the elves as well as his fellow monks. The elves and monks threw a great party with bow competitions; staff twirling; cornbread; herbal drinks; dancing; and even a little fire magic by Rift. King Dalymoor was so grateful to the monks that he sent word to Nemagorian in the mountains and called in a favor:

*Nemagorian, we have forged a friendship over the years and you know of my special relationship with Dockside. I have known him since I was a boy. A scourge has entered this land—the Galbraith Kiln and the hobgoblin hordes. We have weakened them; defeated their mage; but still, Duke and his shadow fighters remain along with Cax and the hobgoblin army. I know the dragons usually don’t meddle in such affairs, but I wonder, if Dockside might join me for this final battle. Tell him an old friend from the forest calls; he will know who it is. If the council would be so willing to allow this, I am certain we will be victorious in battle. With the dragons in the mountains; the elves in the forest; and, the monks in the plains; we can return to some version of normalcy.*

*Yours,*

*King Dalymoor II*

When word came back, King Dalymoor was overjoyed.

*Dockside will fly with you into battle, but he says he wants one more wrestling match with you first, for old times’ sake.*

*Nemagorian*