

# THE GIRL WITH THE GREEN EYES

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FIRST DRAFT SAMPLE CHAPTER

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## FLOWERS OF THE DEAD

The Darkness comes for us all in the end. Esoch accepted that. He had stood in this cramped temple, beside this stone slab, mourning another lost piece of his life enough times to understand death was a condition of living.

But why did it have to come for her?

Esoch stared at the body laid out on the altar, a thin shroud concealing her perfect face and outlining the contours of her figure. Her long legs, her broad shoulders, her swollen belly. Inhaling sharply, he looked away, ashamed to let himself cry. Not here. Not in front of everyone in the village.

Not with Effian standing beside him.

Esoch glanced at his daughter, her little face like stone, her pale green eyes unblinking as she stared at her mother's corpse. If it weren't for the breeze tousling the curls spilling out of her braids, she would look like a statue. Three days and she hadn't shed a tear, hadn't looked away from her mother, hadn't responded to Esoch at all.

He was used to her silences—she hadn't spoken in all of her seven years—but this felt different. And worst of all, Esoch had no idea how to help her, where to even begin. Machara had

been Fe's entire world. The only person who understood this little girl's rigid and peculiar ways—

'Esoch?'

He blinked out of his grim thoughts and turned to find Sister Aida ap Iwan smiling at him. The worst sort of smile, one full of pity and concern. She must have finished her sermon, and Esoch realised he hadn't heard a word of it. Not that it mattered; he knew what came next.

'It's time,' the elderly cleric said, wiping away tears with her fingers.

Sister Aida had been fond of Machara. Everyone in Farlight had been fond of Machara. She was too good for this world, too gentle, too kind. She didn't deserve to die weeping in terror.

Esoch cleared his throat and wrapped his hand around Fe's limp one. She didn't resist as he led her to the altar, where a basket lay heaped with sad flowers, their colours drab and petals wilting. Flowers were hard to come by these days. Lilies impossible. Esoch had travelled all the way to Hightower to find Machara's favourite flower, but there were none in the whole of the Northern Cradle.

Even in death, he let her down.

With a deep sigh, he crouched by the basket and picked up a wilting iris. Far from blue, its petals shrivelled in shades of grey. A poor offering to so vibrant a woman. Esoch ground his teeth and tried to catch Fe's eye, but she stared at her mother's shrouded face, unmoving. Even when he pressed the flower into her palm, she made no effort to take it.

Someone stifled a cough in the congregation, and though Esoch knew the good people of Farlight would give a grieving child all the time she needed, the weight of their gazes crushed him. Desperate to get this over with, he wrapped his hand around his daughter's, crumpling the flower between their

fingers. Her feet shuffled across the stones as he moved her to stand in front of the altar.

A putrid smell emanated from the shroud, barely concealed by the overbearing musk of incense and dying flowers. Esoch hoped Fe didn't notice—or at the very least, didn't know where it was coming from. He wished he didn't, and his stomach roiled as he stared at the outline of his wife's slack face beneath the linen. He wasn't ready for this. So wholly unprepared, in fact, he almost laughed. What the fuck was he going to do now?

What was he going to do?

Feeling as if the ground had been ripped from under him, he sucked in a hoarse breath and lifted Fe's hand over her mother's arm. She didn't resist as he pried her grip open, letting the iris drop onto the thin linen. Translucent enough to make out the vibrant red of Machara's hair, her soft full lips, her striking cheekbones.

Gods, he couldn't do this. Esoch fought to keep himself upright, aching whole-bodily. He was no stranger to grief, but he hadn't known pain could feel like this, where even taking a breath felt too great a burden. Sweet Machara. She deserved so much more. Fuck the Darkness. This time it had come too soon.

For the last time, he touched his wife, resting his fingers on her round belly, no longer firm and full. Under the shroud, a tiny body lay cradled in Machara's arms. Esoch couldn't look at the child, couldn't think about a son who had never taken a breath, whose eyes might be brown or green, who didn't even have a name. There was only Machara and the darkness she left behind.

*I'm so sorry, my love. For everything. I won't let you down. Esoch closed his eyes. He had never been good at lying. Alright, I probably will. You're better off without me. Rest well, Machara.*

Tears threatened him again, and he forced a few trembling

breaths before wrapping his arm gently around Fe to move her away. She went rigid.

‘Fe.’ Esoch’s quiet voice echoed through the temple. ‘It’s time to say goodbye.’

No reaction. Behind them, the crowds shifted, their whispers barely audible but their sympathy deafening. Esoch crouched beside his daughter, his face level with hers. She didn’t look at him.

‘Effy, please. People are waiting to pay their respects. Come stand with me. We won’t go far.’

Again, no change in her expressionless face; so beautiful, like her mother. If it weren’t for her tanned skin and dark brown hair, Esoch would find none of himself in his daughter. An apt punishment for the distance he had allowed to fester between them. Since the day Fe was born, she and Machara had made their own world together. In the beginning, he hadn’t tried hard enough to find a way in. Now, Fe didn’t let him.

‘Effian, come,’ Esoch said, too wrung out to stop his frustration leaking into his voice.

Something brushed against his shoulder, and he turned to find Sister Aida behind him, smiling again.

‘Leave her, lad. The mourners won’t mind if she stays where she is. She’s too little to get in anyone’s way.’

With a wave of her arm, she gestured for Esoch to step aside. For a moment, he hesitated, feeling the congregation’s eyes boring into the back of his skull, worrying what they would make of him, of his failings.

But Nix, he’d already lost everything. What was one more defeat?

Bowing his head to the cleric, he walked away from his wife and daughter to stand at the foot of the altar, ready to receive the mourners. At last, he faced the congregation, making sure he didn’t meet anyone’s gaze. He couldn’t trust himself with the pity in their eyes. The small temple was full,

every seat along the pews taken, people standing in every spare inch of space and pouring out of the doors. Everyone had come. Friends, family members, neighbours, people Esoch had known his whole life. Except that young woman walking towards the altar on the arm of Emyr Rhosyn. She was a stranger to Farlight, newly arrived four days ago to attend her wedding feast.

Esoch balled his hands into fists as Emyr Rhosyn approached the basket of flowers. He was a tall man, broad-shouldered and well-built. Like most noblemen, a descendent of the ancient Medeans, endowed with their lust for power and their control over the ether. Eleven years had passed since Esoch last saw him, but for the most part, Emyr Rhosyn hadn't changed. He was a man grown then and a man in his middle years now; his face still plain and long, his eyes black as coal, and his wavy hair the colour of burnt wheat. Only one notable difference, made obvious by his smug expression and proud stance: Emyr Rhosyn was Lord of Highfall now following his father's death a month ago. And he wanted everyone to know it.

Esoch ground his teeth as Lord Rhosyn stopped in front of the basket of drab flowers. For a second, his lips turned down in a sneer, but only a second. As he rose from selecting a wilting chrysanthemum, his cordial expression was back in place.

Esoch closed his eyes, forcing calm. *Don't say anything. Not here.* His pulse thumped in his neck, speeding up with every ragged breath. He counted them to centre himself, and when he reached ten, he opened his eyes to find Lord Rhosyn laying the flower on the rounded mound of Machara's belly. A sound escaped him he hadn't thought he could make—part growl, part whimper, part trembling exhalation.

And when Lord Rhosyn leant down beside Fe and touched her shoulder, Esoch took a step towards them, his anger visceral, his need to tear those hands off his daughter's cloak as

irrational as it was dangerous. Before he could act on it, Rhosyn let Fe go and strode towards Esoch, stopping a few feet away.

Expectant silence swilled between them as Esoch's shoulders heaved up and down. *You are the reason my wife is dead*, he shouted in his mind as he stared into Lord Rhosyn's eyes, his jaw aching from keeping it clenched shut.

After a long moment, the Lord of Highfall raised his eyebrows, and the silence sharpened. What Esoch would do to stab him with it. It took all his self-control to incline his head in a jerky movement and mutter, 'My lord,' under his breath.

'I'm sorry for your loss.' Said with so little conviction he may as well have said nothing at all. And with those perfunctory condolences, Lord Rhosyn strode away.

Esoch buried his face in one hand, forcing deep breaths to smother his fury. He couldn't lose himself to it now. Gods, he needed a drink.

Shuffled footsteps neared, and Esoch dropped his hand to find Lord Rhosyn's young wife stood in front of him. Meek and drowning in an elaborate mourning gown, Esoch doubted she had been a woman long. Her wide-eyed expression made her seem younger still. Unlike her husband, her eyes were dirty green like the North Sea, but her hair was the same dark wheat. Another ether Sensitive, no doubt. Buried beneath her nervous posture were the broad shoulders and tall bearing of the Medeans. And her face was a map of angular features and hard lines, even crumpled in that expression of pity she wore so convincingly.

'I'm so terribly sorry for your loss, Mister Askari.' A lilting tone, soft vowels, and an emphasis on her Rs; Lord Rhosyn must have found his young bride in the far south of Denari. And she was either a better performer than her husband, or she felt genuine remorse for what they had done.

Fuck her remorse.

Esoch ground his teeth together, then said, 'Thank you, my



lady,' if only so she might join her husband and together take their leave.

When they did, a weight lifted from Esoch's shoulders, leaving him floating through the hours that followed as, one by one, each member of the congregation laid their flowers and swept him into their arms. Esoch bore their gentle words of kindness and condolence well, but as the last villagers shuffled out of the temple, he let out a deep sigh. Exhaustion struck like a rockslide. After three days of snatched sleep in those few moments where tiredness drowned out his grief, he was on his knees.

Would anyone notice if he slipped into the night and never came back? He might return to his old life, the only one that had ever made sense—

A small sniff to his right turned Esoch around, only to find Fe still staring at her mother in motionless silence. She hadn't made the noise. It was Sister Aida, hands pressed against her lips, eyes filled with tears.

'I'm sorry, lad.' The elderly woman pulled a folded handkerchief out of the voluminous sleeve of her cleric's robe. 'I was just remembering her Nameday. Every time I blink, you youngsters shoot up like weeds. Twenty-five years? It en't right. Feels like only yesterday I held her in my arms. She smiled through the whole service. Such a happy girl, from her first day till her last.'

Tears spilled over her lower lids, and Sister Aida buried her face in her kerchief. Grateful for the opportunity to swipe his hand across his eyes without the old woman seeing, Esoch tried to force his own tears away. By the time the cleric let out a juddering breath and shoved her handkerchief back into her sleeve, he'd regained control of himself. For now.

'Thank you, Aida,' he said, bowing his head. 'You've—'

Squeezing his arm, she cut him off with a warm smile that assured him his clumsy words were unnecessary. The corner of

Esoch's mouth twitched in response, but he could muster nothing more. Right now, he had nothing left to give. Nix, he could barely stand. Sighing, he turned to face the altar, where Machara and her baby lay buried in flowers, none of the pale shroud visible between the petals. Fe still stood beside it, unmoving even when Sister Aida rested her hand on her shoulder.

'Why don't you leave her with me, eh?' the elderly cleric said to Esoch. 'No one'll expect her at the wake, not with all that noise. It'd be a kindness to leave her here.'

A kindness to both of them. Esoch nodded in gratitude, but it felt wrong to walk away, and after only a few steps he backtracked and crouched beside Fe. Gently, he pulled her around by her arms, trying to catch her gaze, but her head turned to keep sight of her mother.

'Fe, can you hear me? Look at me, please.'

She blinked slowly but didn't turn.

'I'm going across the Green to *The Anvil*. I won't be long, alright?'

His voice sounded a quivering mess even to his own ears, and he couldn't allow Fe to hear that. He squeezed her shoulders, willing her to respond. Anything. He would take a half-cast glance in his direction, a tiny nod, a cough. Anything!

She drew her arms in, wriggling out of his grip, growing too tight in his desperation. Esoch let go, mouthing half a dozen words he would say if he thought she could understand.

He always knew what he *would* say.

'I'll be back soon,' he said gruffly, and brushed her cheek with the back of his fingers.

She shrunk away from his touch. So small a movement, but Esoch recoiled as if she'd struck him. Though Sister Aida tried to catch his eye, he turned and strode down the aisle, his boots clattering across the flagstones like thunderclaps. The gods watched him from their plinths, their carved faces lost in

shadow. Esoch ran from their judgement and stumbled through the doors into the temple narthex.

In a haze of pain and self-hatred, he retrieved his belt knife from the peace table. Still fumbling to reattach the sheath, he threw open the temple doors and sucked in the warm evening air. Tears burned his eyes, but he wiped his sleeve across his face. Forcing deep breaths, he turned his back on the Village Green and stared west, down the Stone Road to where sunset had set the sky on fire.

From up here, he could see clear across the Northern Cradle to the distant Shield Mountains. The Great Lakes glittered between them, dotted with the firefly-glow of villages and towns. Farlight enjoyed the best aspect of all the Lake Country villages, built high-up in the foothills of the Spear Mountains along the Stone Road. Perfectly positioned for mining and farming, Farlight had grown too large to be called a village, yet everyone did.

Around the Village Green, business thrived. None more so than *The Anvil*, the inn Esoch's mother had built ten years ago. Then, a single saloon—the first proper tavern in town—now, a three-storey overstatement of a building. It sprawled across the northern side of the Green, cobbled together from gabled wings, jettied window boxes, and a cluster of balconies. From within, lantern light and music broke the silent evening in an assault of lutes, fiddles, and song. Farlight was mourning one of its own in the only way it knew how.

Esoch longed to walk the other way, back down the hill to the house he had bought Machara seven years ago. To shut the door. To shut them all out. But duty demanded he show his face, and duty was the only thing Esoch had left. Nix, it was all he'd ever had.

Sighing, he straightened up and wiped his eyes again. He could manage one night. Besides, after the last three days, he'd run out of firewater.

