

A FATEFUL NIGHT

CHAPTER ZERO

The sky was cracked.

Storms spun in the sky like a living vortex of swirling darkness and unnatural lightning. The air crackled with raw energy. The very fabric of reality stretched thin. The valley was a hellscape made manifest on scorched earth. A cold wind tore across the ruined landscape. Ash danced in the air like fallen snow.

At the heart of this desolation stood two figures.

A man robed in indigo woven with silver threads. His staff was planted into the earth like a beacon against the dark. His face was aged, framed by long silver hair and beard. His storm-gray eyes sparked a reflection of the storm above. His name was Eamon the Wise, the last of the Eldritch Sorcerers.

If it could still be called a man, the other was wreathed in shadows darker than the abyss itself. His skeletal form was adorned in tattered black robes. Faint, arcane sigils pulsed along his bones. His face was an abomination of rotted flesh and bone. Where his eyes should be were empty sockets that swirled with an unnatural, deathly green. When he moved, the air itself recoiled from his presence.

Zharadim.

The Eternal Woe. Defiler of worlds. Architect of despair.

The name alone sent shudders through the earth. His existence was an infection that festered in the heart of creation.

The two stood silently for a time, the storm roaring around them. There was no army left to witness this battle. No banners to wave in defiance or cries to rally hope. The war had consumed an empire of men that now lay in piles of corpses across the horizon. Life rested to this moment. To these two.

Eamon raised his staff. Runes gleaned with celestial radiance. The light sliced through the shadows that threatened to consume the world.

"It ends tonight, lich," he declared.

Zharadim merely tilted his head as if amused. In a voice that was not just his own but thousands of voices woven into one, he whispered, "*Does it?*"

For just a breath, the battlefield froze. Zharadim grinned as he raised his hand. A wave of raw energy erupted, hurling toward Eamon. A force so ancient and vile that it sought to erase him from existence, to reduce him to nothing more than a forgotten whisper in time.

Eamon's staff struck the earth, and sigils of warding erupted from the ground to form a radiant barrier. The wave of darkness collided against the shield, sending out a blinding shockwave of white and black light. The force shattered the earth around him, sending molten rock and jagged shards of stone spiraling outward.

Zharadim laughed.

"*Pathetic.*"

He raised a skeletal hand, and the very air screamed. The ground below split apart. From the infinite below, shadows rose. Their forms writhed like a tide of living nightmares. Limbs that should not exist, too many fingers, too many mouths gaping with silent howls.

The creatures lurched forward. Their forms shifted between corporeal and spectral. They did not walk, but rather bled through reality itself, closing the distance between them and Eamon in mere heartbeats.

Eamon did not hesitate.

His fingers traced runes in the air, golden glyphs burning into existence. Each symbol weaved into the next that created a tapestry of power older than the gods themselves. With a thrust of his staff, a single word spoken in the celestial tongue. A word not meant for mortal ears.

"BEGONE."

The word did not echo. It resonated, a command written into the very fabric of the world. The air ignited, and a column of searing white fire erupted that incinerated the abyssal horrors where they stood. They screeched as their forms dissolved like ink in water. Their cries reverberated across the shattered ruins.

But Zharadim had not been idle.

The moment Eamon turned his power against the horde, the lich moved in a blur of unnatural speed, his form weaved through the remnants of fire and shadow. A hand of skeletal fingers burst through the flames to claw toward Eamon's heart.

Eamon twisted, barely dodging the strike. The air behind him ruptured, the mere proximity of Zharadim's grasp decaying reality itself. His cloak disintegrated into dust where it brushed the void-tainted fingers.

He countered.

With a swift incantation, golden chains of pure energy lashed out, wrapping around Zharadim's arm, binding it mid-air. The moment the chains touched him, they burned. A divine radiance seared against the lich's decayed flesh. For the first time, Zharadim snarled in pain.

"FOOL!" The sky shook with his fury. *"I AM BEYOND YOUR PITIFUL GODS!"*

With a twist of his will, the chains shattered, exploding into a thousand fading embers. The backlash sent Eamon skidding backward across the broken ground, his boots digging trenches into the earth.

He barely had time to recover before Zharadim countered.

With a single twist of his fingers, the battlefield shifted again. The stars above went out. One by one, the celestial bodies that had long watched over the world flickered and died. The light of the heavens was snuffed out. Only darkness remained.

And from that darkness, the dead began to rise. The world trembled as the battlefield twisted beneath their feet. The air grew thick, sluggish, as though existence resisted what was happening. A vast, suffocating stillness settled over the ruins, broken only by the distant echoes as the dead rose.

The corpses of long-forgotten warriors dragged themselves from the earth. Their eyes devoid of light. Their bones wrapped in the spectral

remains of armor. Their broken and rusted swords gleamed with a pale green fire that licked along their edges.

Eamon steadied his breath. He had seen necromantic resurrections before. But this... this was something far worse. These were not merely spirits recalled to their decayed vessels, but echoes of every soul Zharadim had ever devoured. Thousands. They stood, their skeletal faces turned toward the lich in silent reverence. Waiting.

"You cannot kill what has already been consumed, Eamon." Zharadim's voice was both a whisper and a roar, filling the battlefield from every direction. *"They belong to me."*

The dead turned, their hollow gazes locked onto Eamon as one and charged. A tidal wave of spectral warriors rushed forward with a thousand guttural war cries that shattered the silence. Their weapons screamed as they clashed against reality, the force of their charge causing the ground to fracture beneath them.

Eamon did not move. He simply closed his eyes and raised his staff. A single pulse of divine energy rippled outward. It was not an attack but a command.

A ring of blazing white runes erupted from the earth, formed a sacred circle around him. As the spectral warriors crossed the boundary, their bodies ignited in holy fire. Their souls were ripped from the lich's grip and scattered into the winds.

Zharadim raised both hands, fingers curling into a twisted incantation.

The sky cracked open more.

A deep, abyssal void tore across the heavens as if reality was being pulled apart at the seams. The battlefield bent, twisted. The ruins stretched in impossible ways. Distant mountains folded inward and warped into unnatural, spiraling landscapes that defied logic.

And from the massive wound in the sky, something moved. A shape too vast to comprehend. An immensity of shadow that seemed to pulse. Tendrils of pure blackness slithered downward as they stretched toward the battlefield. Their forms shifted and reshaped.

Even the storm recoiled at its presence. Zharadim lifted his skeletal face toward the chasm above, his voice a whisper laced with triumph.

“The veil is finally broken.”

The void seethed as it answered his call with a pressure that throbbed in the marrow of bones. This was a presence that should not be. Zharadim turned back to Eamon.

“You have already lost, sorcerer.”

Eamon breathed heavily, sweat beaded on his brow. His energy reserves were almost depleted. The warped reality interrupted the natural flow of magic in the land. This chaos prevented him from drawing from the land. He could feel the presence claw at the edges of his mind. This was not merely dark magic but the end of all things.

The Devourer stirred.

A cold realization settled in Eamon’s chest. Zharadim was not trying to win this battle. He was trying to end the world.

“No!”

Eamon clenched his fists, summoning every last ember of power within him. The sacred runes at his feet flared brighter, casting golden light against the abyss. The weight of the heavens pressed down upon his shoulders, but he held his ground. If Zharadim wanted to unmake existence itself, there was only one way to stop him. He had to break the lich’s tether to reality, even if it meant breaking himself along with it.

“Enough.”

Eamon slammed his staff into the earth, and the world exploded into fire and light. The battlefield erupted with a blinding explosion of golden light, a shockwave tore outward as Eamon unleashed everything he had left. The heavens and the abyss clashed, celestial radiance crashed against Zharadim’s eldritch darkness in a violent storm of pure, unrestrained power.

The world shook beneath the magnitude of their final clash. Eamon stood at the center of it with his staff buried deep into the ground. The sigils burned along its length with raw arcane force. His robes billowed out from the sheer magnitude of magic that surged from him. Divine fire coiled around his form, and light broke through the growing void overhead.

Zharadim raised his arms in defiance as shadows cascaded outward. In a deep, reverberating cascade of voices

“YOU CANNOT STOP THE INEVITABLE!”

The sky ripped open wider, and from within, the Devourer's abyssal tendrils reached downward, their edges warping in and out of existence as they sought to consume the last vestiges of light.

Eamon's fingers tightened around his staff. His heartbeat slowed. His breath steadied. And he finally understood. Zharadim had anchored himself to the abyss. His existence was no longer bound to this world alone. If Eamon struck him down as he was, the lich would simply reform, returning again and again.

This wasn't a battle of might. It was a battle of sacrifice. Eamon closed his eyes. The incantation came instinctively, an ancient spell, the first. One that had not been spoken aloud since the dawn of the world.

The sigils beneath him shifted, no longer mere barriers but chains.

Runes coiled outward, spiraling across the battlefield, carving themselves into the very bones of the earth. Celestial glyphs formed a cage, light lanced through the darkness, and sealed the cracks in reality that Zharadim had opened.

The abyss shrieked, recoiling as the runes took hold. Zharadim screamed.

His corporeal form snuffed out like a candle in a storm. He felt it. The pull. The weight. He tried to sever the tether and attempt to escape, but the sigils had already locked onto him.

Eamon lifted his gaze, eyes burned like twin stars. He spoke the final word.

"Begone."

The world imploded. The golden chains lashed outward to ensnare Zharadim's body, to bind him not just in this world but in every reality, he hoped. The lich shrieked, his screams echoed across time itself as he was ripped from existence. His essence dragged into the abyss he had sought to control.

The sky above sealed shut, and the rift collapsed in on itself with a final, deafening roar. The tendrils of the Devourer snapped, severed from the world, banished into the void once more. The ground quaked.

The last of Eamon's power poured into the spell, and as the light consumed the battlefield, he let go.

His body dissolved, not into dust, but into pure radiance. His name would not be forgotten. The chains that bound Zharadim would hold... for now.

Silence fell, and the storm vanished. All that remained was a single sigil burned into the earth, glowing faintly. It marked where the greatest battle in history had been fought... and won.



300 years later...

A cold wind howled across the ruins. The valley was nothing but dust and forgotten echoes. A dark brazier flared to life in the crumbled remains of a long-abandoned keep.

But inside the keep, the wind was afraid to move. Brittle bones littered the floor. Fractured pillars and stone thrown about from a long-ended battle. A figure cloaked in a tattered black robe knelt before a broken altar, at the heart of the ruined temple. His head bowed. Hands outstretched over a brazier. The air around them was wrong.

Heavy. Suffocating.

It was not just darkness that lingered here. It was something deeper, ancient. Something that did not belong. The figure's voice broke the silence. A whisper in a language that had not been spoken in over three hundred years. Each word scraped against reality. Such unnatural syllables twisted through the air like serrated knives.

"Latuin vex'khar... Varros el'thanal..."

The brazier flared to life, the fire within shifted from its natural orange glow to something... else. Something wrong.

A sickly green flame coiled upward. It twisted and writhed like a living thing. Its tendrils licked at the air. The ground shuddered. The keep groaned as though some unseen force pressed against its remains. The figure's voice grew louder. They did not waver or pause. The chant became a rhythmic pulse that clawed at the edges of existence.

"Your time is nigh..."

The air thickened. Something listened. A pulse of dark energy rippled outward from the brazier and crawled across the chamber like a living shadow. The very stones blackened and cracked beneath its touch. The brazier's flames surged higher as it shifted to deep violet, tendrils of black smoke curling upward like fingers stretching toward something unseen.

And they appeared through the smoke.

Figures... Twisted. Writhing. Grotesque.

Monstrous things with too many limbs, too many eyes, their forms shifting, flickering between shapes as though unable to decide what they were supposed to be.

The figure raised its skeletal hands toward the brazier. The flames cast a distorted glow beneath their hood.

"Come forth, Devourer of Light... Sovereign of the Abyss... Vael'Zharuun, Stir from your shadowed slumber and consume all."

The very air screamed. The ruins trembled, stones cracked under the immense pressure of something beyond comprehension.

From the darkness, a whisper—no, a breath. A presence that should not be. Something stirred. The brazier's fire turned black. The smoke thickened, coiling together, solidifying into something more.

The chanting stopped.

Silence fell over the ruins, a silence too deep, too absolute; the darkness absorbed the sound itself. Then, in the stillness, a voice emanated. It was not from the cloaked figure, not from the spectral horrors looming in the smoke, but from the void itself.

"It is not yet time."

The figure stiffened. The fire in the brazier crackled, sputtered, and then settled, still burning black but no longer reaching hungrily toward the sky.

The presence lingered, though unseen. It did not step into this world fully—not yet.

But it had marked the moment. It had seen. And it had chosen.

The cloaked figure slowly turned their hooded gaze toward the brazier. The dark flames reflected in the hollow depths beneath their hood.

"The herald is marked tonight."

Their voice was cold. Certain. Somewhere, far away, a child took their first breath. And in the abyss, something watched.



The birthing chamber trembled with the force of the storm outside, its walls shuddering beneath the weight of the howling winds. A deafening crack of thunder rolled through the castle, rattling the iron sconces on the stone walls. Candles flickered wildly, their flames bent and twisted by unseen hands, casting erratic shadows that slithered across the chamber like living things.

“ALDRIC!”

The cry was raw, torn from Alia’s throat, her voice laced with agony and desperation. She arched off the bed, her fingers clutching the wooden bedpost so tightly her knuckles had gone white. Sweat beaded along her forehead, trailing down her pale cheeks in shimmering streaks. Her other hand flailed in the air, grasping blindly seeking something, someone, anything to hold onto.

King Aldric was already there.

“I’m here, my love,” he said, rushing to her side, his voice strained but determined. His hands, usually so sure and steady, trembled as he wrapped them around hers, pulling her fingers into his grasp. “I’m right here.”

Her grip crushed his fingers, her body wracked by another unbearable wave of pain.

Aldric brushed damp strands of golden blonde hair from her face, whispering softly, his voice thick with emotion.

“You’re strong, Alia. You can do this. Just a little longer.”

Alia’s gasping breaths filled the chamber, but she barely seemed to hear him. She clenched her eyes shut, her face twisting in pain as another contraction racked her body.

“Something’s wrong.”

Her voice was barely a whisper, a tremor of fear woven into the pain. Aldric’s stomach clenched.

He tightened his grip, pressing his forehead to hers for a brief, fleeting moment. He didn't know what else to do. He was a warrior, a ruler, but here in this moment, he was powerless.

Aldric barely heard the storm anymore, not over the frantic activity inside the chamber.

But the castle did. A terrible wind shrieked through the stone corridors, finding its way through even the narrowest of cracks. The wooden shutters over the arched windows shuddered violently, their iron hinges straining under the force of the gale.

And the lightning came in rapid succession, not the usual silver streaks of a summer storm but something unnatural. Bolts of deep violet, crimson, and electric blue split the heavens, illuminating the chamber in horrifying, otherworldly hues.

The color of the sky was wrong. Not that Aldric saw it—but someone did.

One of the midwives had dared to glance out the window between tending to the water basins. She froze.

Aldric barely noticed her at first, not until she gasped and staggered backward, a hand clutching at her chest.

“My Lord...” she whispered, her voice trembling. “The sky...”

Aldric barely spared her a glance. His focus remained entirely on Alia, but something in her voice sent a chill down his spine.

The doctor, an older man with sharp features and weariness carved into his bones, frowned but did not turn. “Forget the damn sky!” he snapped. “Focus on the queen!”

Unbeknownst to all of them, the storm was not simply raging. It was reacting.

Its pulse... was tied to Alia's own.

Every contraction. Every wave of pain. Every step closer to the child's birth.

The sky answered.

And somewhere in the depths of the abyss, something stirred.

The chamber was chaos. Midwives bustled around the room, moving with a practiced urgency, their hands damp with sweat and stained with blood. Basins of warm water were overturned, cloths and linens piled high

and stained crimson. Another midwife tried to keep her hands steady as she wiped Alia's brow, her lips moving in silent prayer. But it wasn't enough.

"No... no, no, no! There's too much blood..."

The doctor's voice cut through the frenzy like a blade. Alia's labored breaths hitched, her body arching off the mattress. Tears pooled at the corners of her eyes, and her fingers, once so tightly wrapped around Aldric's hand, were weakening. Aldric's heart clenched.

"Stay with me, my queen!" the doctor urged.

The words should have been a command. Instead, they sounded like a plea. Alia's eyes fluttered, her lips trembling. Her breathing was slowing. And for the first time, true fear struck Aldric. Aldric felt his world crack. Alia's body shuddered, her breathing coming in shorter, sharper bursts.

She was slipping. Aldric tightened his grip on her hand, willing his strength into her.

The room felt smaller.

The chamber was filled with activity, movement, sound, but all of it seemed distant to Aldric. His world had narrowed to the bed before him, to the woman fading beneath his hands, to the tremors in her breath.

A low, guttural groan rumbled from Alia's throat, her body arching weakly against the mattress. Her skin was pale, too pale, her once-rosy lips taking on a sickly hue.

And her hands were cold.

Aldric's fingers wrapped tighter around hers, desperate, as if he could anchor her to this world by will alone.

"Alia..." His voice barely carried.

She didn't answer. Aldric turned to the doctor.

"Can you save her?" His voice was rough, barely above a whisper.

"I will try, Your Highness, but we have been at this for hours now."

Alia's body shuddered, her breathing coming in shorter, sharper bursts.

She was slipping.

Aldric tightened his grip on her hand, willing his strength into her.

"Do what you must to save her." His jaw clenched. "I don't care about the cost."

For a moment, no one spoke.

Then the doctor nodded solemnly and turned back to Alia.

The storm still raged beyond the castle walls, but Aldric barely heard it now. All he could hear was her breathing; shallow, broken, and slipping away.

His chest tightened. He had seen men cut down in war, gutted in the streets, bodies run through with spears and left for the crows. He had seen the light leave their eyes, seen the vacant, glassy stare of the dead.

But not her. He would not let this be her.

His breath came heavier, his heart hammering so violently against his ribs it drowned out the sound of the midwives' whispers.

Aldric felt it, the hesitation, the weight of something left unsaid.

Then, slowly, the doctor inhaled. He lifted his hands over Alia's body, fingers trembling ever so slightly. And then the air changed. Aldric felt it before he saw it.

A shift. A pulse. Something stirred. The doctor began the incantation, stumbling through the words. His hands began to glow.

It was faint at first, a dull golden aura, flickering, unstable, as if the magic itself refused to manifest. Aldric's stomach twisted.

When was the last time he had seen magic? He always thought it to be unnatural.

And yet now he needed it. His fingers twitched at his side, as if his own body recoiled at the hypocrisy.

A gust of unseen wind rushed through the chamber, snuffing out two of the candle flames. The glow of the spell strengthened. The doctor's hands pulsed with celestial energy, runes appeared just off the palms of his hands.

Alia gasped. Her back arched violently, her mouth opening as if to scream but no sound came out. For a heartbeat, her eyes glowed too.

Not the same golden hue as the doctor's magic. Something else.

A flash of violet. A shade too close to the storm.

Then lightning struck again.

A crack of thunder so loud it shook the walls of the chamber, rattling the iron candelabras and sending shadows skittering across the stone.

The doctor stumbled backward, the glow around his hands snuffing out like a candle in the wind. Alia's body collapsed back onto the mattress, her limbs suddenly limp. Too still. Aldric's breath stopped.

And then the storm stopped.

Not gradually. Not naturally.

One second, the rain pounded against the castle. The next, it was gone.

The wind, the thunder, the howling vanished, swallowed into some unnatural silence.

The absence of sound was deafening. And in that terrible stillness sounded a cry.

A single, sharp, newborn wail pierced the hush. For a moment, no one moved. No one spoke. The midwives breathed again, shifting, hands moving quickly as they pulled the child free, wrapping him in linens stained with his mother's blood.

Aldric was frozen. A strange, paralyzing weight sat on his chest. Then, slowly, he turned toward Alia. And his world collapsed. She was still. Too still.

The tension had left her limbs, the strain gone from her face. Aldric stared, waiting for the rise of her chest. Waiting. Nothing.

"No..."

His hands moved without thought, grabbing her shoulders. Shaking her gently, then harder.

"Alia. Alia!"

No response.

"No, no, no, no, no! Alia!"

He pulled her into him, clutching her against his chest, rocking slightly, as if desperation alone could will her back to him. His throat burned. His vision blurred. A king did not weep. But a husband did. His body trembled as he pressed his forehead to hers, feeling nothing but cold.

His voice broke as he whispered, "Come back to me..."

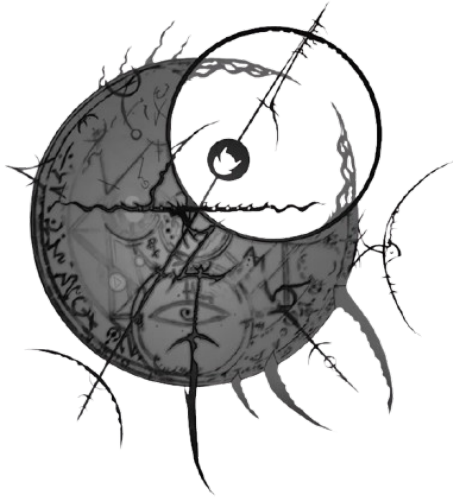
Another cry. A wail. The child.

King Aldric's heart shattered. He fell to his knees beside the bed, clutching at Alia's lifeless hand. "My love," he whimpered, his voice cracking. Tears streamed down his face as he felt the last of her warmth fade away.

At that moment, a deep, dark resentment took root in Aldric's heart, not just towards the magic that had failed to save his beloved wife but towards the child who had survived her.

ACT 1

THE DIVIDED KINGDOM



*There was no before. No when. No edge
to measure.*

*No death to fear. No shape to hold the
fear in.*

The void did not sleep. It did not wake.

It did not wonder.

It wasn't.

And then, it was.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CHILD AND CURSE

In the wake of the storm, an eerie silence fell onto Castle Dunmoh. It was as if the shadows themselves absorbed the sound. Besides faint whispers, no one dared to speak at a normal volume to avoid disturbing the king in his grief. The storm raging on the outside had subsided, leaving only a trickle of rainfall with fog clinging to the ground. Thunder could be heard in the distance, as if someone beat a drum out of sight in some asymmetric rhythm.

Queen Alia's now empty bed lay in the middle of the chamber. Hours had passed since her body was moved. A wooden crib stood nearby, holding a baby swaddled in a soft blanket. Glowing faintly as the embers burned, the hearth flickered light across the room while wisps of flame flew up in search of air.

A faintly glowing birthmark on the baby's chest illuminated his figure inside the crib. The birthmark appeared as an intricate crest with ancient sigils. The child was asleep; his peaceful expression seemed unbothered by the weather outside as the lightning flashed briefly, illuminating the rain-streaked windows. The flickering firelight made the shadows dance across the walls like tentacles reaching for something.

King Aldric Ravenmark stood at the foot of Alia's birthing bed. His stout form cast a grim shadow over the bedding, still stained with sweat

and blood. His face, usually etched with the years of age and experience, furrowed in pain and grief. Tears rushed down his face, past his hands, into his auburn beard as he attempted to cover his sorrowful weeping.

Shadows flickered with the lightning; his imagination still showed afterimages of Alia lying asleep in bed. He lowered his hands to the wood of the footboard, his grip almost digging into the wood with a strength that seemed to dent the oak. He glanced through tearful eyes at the wooden crib and the newborn child.

What is this glow? he wondered as he noticed a peculiar mark on the baby's chest. As he studied the birthmark briefly, the faint glow from it revealed a redness of anger inside him.

This child is cursed! The thought forced its way into his mind.

Waves of irrational fear and anger filled him as he continued to look upon the birthmark. It seemed reminiscent of an era long past, which struck Aldric as an ill omen. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but it stirred a dread and hatred he could not contain.

Something about this child had caused the death of his beloved Alia. It could not be his son. Grief twisted his memories and spurred on a dark conviction regarding the boy, the tiny being who had survived his wife.

This child is a harbinger of misfortune. KILL IT!

The shadows seemed to writhe, as if talking to Aldric with urgency.

Aldric grabbed the tail of his cloak to wipe his face and hands, then tossed it back as if it offended him. "Dispose of this!" he ordered coldly to the midwife, loud enough for the door guards to hear as well. His voice was devoid of warmth or sympathy.

"I'll not have that cursed abomination in my home."

He slammed his hand on the footrail of the bed again, turned, and started walking out of the room. His boots echoed through the chamber like a grandfather clock ticking. He was unable to bear the sight of the child any longer. He slammed his hand into the door to open it, hitting one of the guards standing outside in the arm. Aldric stormed out and down the corridor without acknowledging the guard having to shift his position.

The door slammed shut upon Aldric's departure from the chamber, leaving only the child and the midwife charged with looking after him. Clara Threadmoor sat in a chair at the edge of the room. She hadn't left

that chamber since the queen had gone into labor. Her heart plummeted at the king's harsh decree as the door slammed shut.

Clara was a compassionate young woman who had lost her own child years ago to illness. The memory of her lost child and the pain it had caused sparked a strength to save this child. Her mind raced with how. She knew someone who could help her, but she would have to get to her.

An hour or so later, Clara removed the newborn from the crib, still wrapped tightly in swaddling blankets. Her hands trembled with nervousness but were determined. She placed him gently into a wicker basket and gathered her things from the room. She walked toward the door and opened it.

"Where are you going?" one of the guards asked, staring at Clara and the basket.

"To dispose of the child," Clara stated, nodding toward the basket and hoping not to awaken the child. "The king's orders, to be carried out tonight. It 'never survived' the birth, same as our beloved queen. Gods rest her soul."

"Very well, carry on," stated the guard. "It's such a shame."

"The royal executioner will handle it," the other guard said. "He might still be awake at this hour."

Clara nodded toward the sentry and shuffled off down the corridor toward the servant's pathways. She wasn't going toward the executioner's chambers in the castle depths—quite the opposite entirely. She hoped the child would remain asleep through it all, as a crying baby would not aid her in escaping from the castle without raising alarm.

Each turn and doorway of the servant's corridors seemed winding and narrow. Each footstep echoed through the halls, almost in a match with the pounding of her heartbeat, reverberating from every surface. Clara pressed on; she had to get the child far away from this castle. Her heart pounded with adrenaline.

Keep moving! she thought, as if to motivate her sense of urgency.

A door to the outside! She could hear the drizzle upon the puddles outside and water running off the crevices of the castle, splashing onto the mud below. As she opened the door, dense fog hit her face as if to stop her from moving.

Perfect! Some cover.

Turning right out of the doorway, she crouched within the wall of fog and stayed as close to the wall as she could see it.

Quickly, or I'll get stuck, she argued with herself as she moved along, not wanting to linger too long in any spot for fear of sinking into the muddy path. She was following memory and sounds at this point. The fog at ground level seemed to be getting thicker. She could hear her next goal nearby: the stables.

Reaching the opening to the stable bay, the fog cleared up a little inside. She could see again. Inside the first stable she came to stood a bay mare with a streak of white along her nose. A sign that read 'Thistle' was etched into the door. She looked like a sturdy horse. Thistle neighed as Clara entered her stable, hoofing at the ground.

"Calm down, girl," Clara whispered, running her hand along the white streak. "We must hurry, and there is a long road ahead of us. Are you rested?" Clara asked Thistle as if carrying on a conversation.

She seemed to respond to her sense of urgency and whinnied softly as Clara secured a saddle and attached the basket.

"Ok, let's go, girl. Our life is in your hands."

Thistle neighed as she started to trot out of the stable.

"Who goes there?" shouted a voice from the shadowed stables.

The stable hand tried to light his lantern after being awakened by the noise. His light flickered to life, casting long, shifting beams of light. Panic surged through Clara as she held her breath but urged Thistle on.

"Yaw, girl! Let's go!" Clara urged as the crack of the reins hit the side of Thistle's neck.

The stable hand stepped closer to see who was in his stable. Clara flicked the reins, and Thistle bolted into the night, her hooves striking sparks against the cobblestones. Shouts echoed in the fog, and alarm bells began to toll. Shadows in the mist spilled out from the barracks and guard towers. Guards could be heard shouting,

"Horse thief!"

"Intruder!"

"Get 'em!"

Thistle surged forward, her powerful legs churning through the mud. Clara clung tightly to her reins, her cloak billowing behind her like a phantom in the storm. She urged the horse toward the western gate. Guards raced up the stairs to reach the battlements. The fog clung closely to the ground, obscuring all but Clara's outline. Arrows flew, with only one catching Clara's cloak.

"Move, girl!" she urged Thistle as they reached the gate.

Thunder clapped overhead as Thistle leaped over the gap in the drawbridge to the ground below, the basket jostling but remaining secure.

"Yes! Keep going, girl!" Clara urged Thistle on.

The next village along that road was Havenstead. They had to make it. She heard their pursuers in the distance behind them. She had a decent lead on them, but this was no time to slow down. The guards of Dunmoh were not known for relenting. Clara's saving grace was that the fog clung to the ground like a ghostly shroud. Visibility was obscured beyond twenty feet. Anything beyond that was left to the imagination. Mist droplets stung Clara's face as Thistle trudged through the muddy roadway with reckless abandon. She was on a mission. Her strength and endurance almost seemed unnatural.

They had to have been on the road for hours at this point. The guards pursuing her were far behind them; shouts could no longer be heard. Exhaustion weighed heavily on both Clara and Thistle.

I need to find a place to rest, Clara thought. The sun will be up soon!

No sooner than that thought crossed her mind, the faint outlines of Havenstead appeared through the thinning fog, and dawn was peering over the horizon.

Clara veered off a small pathway toward a barn near a cluster of cottages. The door was slightly open.

"Great, we can hide in here, hopefully," she said to herself, half talking to Thistle.

She dismounted at the door and led Thistle to a water trough inside the barn. A couple of dairy cows were in a small corral on the opposite side of the barn. As Thistle drank, Clara removed the basket and placed it on a small nestle of hay. She rushed back to the door to close it. Then she found

some gaps in the planks that allowed her to peek through without being seen.

Clara could almost see the central square. Remnants of smoke still wafted up from chimneys, and the last flickers of life in a couple of street lamps burned out.

Of course, they are farmers. They're up before the sun to tend the flocks and fields.

She watched as an older villager slowly made his way down a pathway. His lamp swung with each step, and he occasionally slid in the mud.

"Oof, damn mud," the old man muttered.

"You there! Halt!" a guard suddenly shouted toward the old man.

Clara was on high alert. She looked around. *One... two guards... where's the rest of them?*

"What do you want? Botherin' me on my mornin' chores," he spat back, as if annoyed by the guard interrupting his daily pattern.

"Have you seen a woman on horseback come through here recently?" questioned the guard.

The old farmer stopped to regard the guards.

"Not seen anyone tonight but you. Just getting' back from the fields, checkin' on the herd since the storms let up."

"If you see anyone suspicious, report it, ya hear?" the second guard spoke up. "The woman is a fugitive of the crown for stealing a horse. Anyone aiding her will be just as guilty."

The gruff old farmer nodded. "Yeah, yeah..." he mumbled. "I'll keep my eyes open. Now, let me be so I can get on with my morning chores. Cows don't care about your manhunt."

Clara breathed a sigh of relief as the guards walked away. Suddenly, the barn door creaked open.

Shit!

She slid down from the wall and attempted to hide, but was too slow. A young woman holding a pail walked inside, closed the door behind her, and froze, staring right at Clara in mid-lunge back to the hay.

"Already saw ya! Come on out, ma'am," the young lady stated.

Clara got back up from the hay, standing about fifteen feet in front of her.

"You ain't from around here... who are you?" she asked, setting down the pail near her feet, then looked over at the baby lying in a basket.

"Please don't tell anyone," Clara pleaded. "I need a place to hide myself and this baby. I'm no criminal, but I need to make it to Gladecross, and the guards won't stop until they catch me."

The young woman stared over at the baby, noticing a faint glow coming from something under the blanket. The child seemed peaceful, a newborn by the looks of it.

"This way," she whispered.

She motioned Clara toward an area in the back of the barn, enough to hide Thistle behind the hay bales. She moved a couple of planks in the floor, revealing a small crawlspace.

"You'll be safe in here for the day. Keep the babe quiet. The horse'll be fine up here, plenty to eat and drink."

Clara smiled and nodded, grateful for the generosity.

"Thank you so much," she said as she lowered herself and the basket into the cubby.

The hours seemed to drag on Clara as she fought off sleep, attempting to keep the child quiet. She would hear voices nearby occasionally, jolting her awake with anxiety. Some were just casual conversations among the villagers, mostly disdain for the sudden appearance of guards questioning about some woman.

They've been quiet for a while.

The baby got fussy. It had been a while since he'd had anything to eat.

The barn door opened.

"Can I help you?" Clara recognized the young woman's voice.

"What's in here? Anything unusual going on?" the guard asked.

"Nothin' in here but hay, milk cows, and some old tools. Got a nanny goat in the back nursin' her new kid," the woman replied.

About that time, the kid came hopping around a bale of hay.

Meehhhhh! it muttered as it hopped around in circles.

"Hmm... ok," the guard stated as he looked around from the door and walked back out.

Clara felt her muscles relax a bit. Her nerves were shot, though.

A few more hours passed as the daylight waned over the fields and dusk settled over Havenstead. The young woman returned to the barn and knocked at the planks.

"The guards are gone. It's safe to come out," she said as she helped Clara out of the hiding spot.

"If you take the west path through the wheat fields, it'll be harder to track you."

"I don't know how I could ever thank you!" Clara exclaimed as she launched a hug onto the woman.

"Just go," the woman urged. "There will be a pathway about four hours out that'll lead back to the main road into Gladecross. And take care of that child."

Clara grabbed the basket, reattached it to Thistle's saddle, gave Thistle a long pet along her nose, and mounted up. Thistle neighed in reaction, signaling that she'd rested up and was ready.

They left the barn and followed the pathway the woman told Clara about. It was treacherously muddy, but nothing was in sight but fields of wheat blowing in the wind. This wasn't a death sprint like last night, but they trotted along, making good time.

Several hours passed, and the path veered back toward the main roadway. As dawn crept up over the horizon, she saw the woodlands and the faint silhouette of Gladecross, nestled at the edge of the plainlands and the forest. The air was still thick with the scent of soggy earth and now the whiff of oak and cedar.

She trotted through the village until she approached a modest cottage nestled on the outskirts. The cottage belonged to Mother Elaria Mooncrest, a wise and kind-hearted middle-aged woman. She had once been a court healer under the previous king but left the service behind when King Aldric was coronated. She had known of Aldric's wariness of magic even then. She wanted to preserve her knowledge and ability to practice freely, away from any scrutiny.

Clara dismounted Thistle near the side of the house by the tie-post and trough, then tethered the reins securely.

"You can rest here, girl; you did well," she said as she brushed Thistle's mane while she shook her head up and down, neighing.

“Enjoy the rest of your days.”

Thistle nickered softly while stomping a hoof into the ground, nudging Clara’s hand as if she understood. Clara lifted the basket off the saddle and walked around to the front door. The baby was cooing, as if content with his current situation. She placed the basket gently on the doorstep and kissed the baby on the forehead.

“Be safe, child. We’ll meet again,” she whispered.

She stood up and started walking back around the cottage, heading toward the forest. The trees seemed to glow in the dawning light from their recent bath. Dew stuck to the grass, creating an almost reflective sheen. Clara pulled her cloak tight around her and hurried into the treeline.

Once she felt she was a safe distance away from the cottage, she stopped in a small clearing. The trees and brush seemed to form a natural circle of undergrowth. Kneeling down on the damp ground, she pulled out a small vial of glowing liquid from her pouch. This was a potion Elaria had given her years ago for emergencies. It was only good for a single person, or she would have used it in the castle.

She uncorked the vial and poured a few drops onto the ground below. The liquid seemed to shimmer as the morning dawn rays were caught in its droplets. She corked the vial and placed it back into her pouch. With trembling hands, she rubbed them together and placed them both on the earth, now slightly glowing from the liquid.

Clara recited an incantation softly, stumbling over the words at first, but it returned to her. It had been years since she last performed this one. Eventually, the words of the spell rolled off the tip of her tongue as naturally as breathing. The air around her thickened with energy. A faint hum vibrated through her fingertips.

As if rising from the earth itself, a swirl of light enveloped her, growing brighter with each word. Clara closed her eyes as she recited the last word of the incantation. Her body was immediately enveloped with light swirls as the world blurred around her. In an instant, the forest vanished and was replaced by an alleyway off the streets of Arden’s Wake.

“Well, well...” a voice said.

“A visitor perhaps?” another replied.

"Naw... not this one. She's not ready yet," the first voice stated matter-of-factly.

Clara staggered slightly, attempting to get her wits about her. She looked around for the source of the voices. The alleyway was empty, except for an odd shop displaying "Curiosities" on the sign and two imp-sized gargoyles perched above the doorway.

"Couldn't be..." she told herself while shaking her head. The spell had left her momentarily disoriented. She tried to steady herself against the nearby wall. The familiar sounds of the town grounded her in reality.

She stood up, straightened her cloak, and made her way out of the alleyway. Reaching the street, she turned back, and the alleyway was gone. It was replaced by a brick wall as if the alley had never existed.

"Weird..." she stated, then turned and continued down the street.



Faint cries of a baby cut through the remnants of Elaria's dreams, pulling her from her sleep. She sat up and looked around. The cries were coming from the door. She got up, grabbed her shawl from the chair, and wrapped it over her shoulders. She approached the door and looked through a peephole. She couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. The remnants of the rain were still filtering down from the treetops.

She unlatched the lock on her door and opened it. To her surprise, a basket was on the doorstep with a baby inside. The small child stared back at her with the wonder only a newborn could offer. She bent over and picked the child up from the basket. As she moved the swaddling around, she noticed the faintly glowing birthmark on the child's chest. She had seen this mark before... a long time ago.

"Hush, little one," she whispered as she turned around and headed back inside. "You're safe now."