



Headmaster

Looking out over the graveyard, the headmaster of the wizards' guild could not help but shake his head. The living conditions in Orphic Den over the last couple of years since the second Queen of the Elves, Khae Wys, had defeated his predecessor, in what could only be described as a mystic battle between two of the realm's most formidable magic users, had depleted their reserves to the point of impoverishment. If not for the odd dragon delivery of basic supplies from Highcliff, the Grim Duke's blockade of Gullveig might have proven fatal to everyone holed up in the high reaches of the Wizard's Sleeve.

Zarlyth Toyne stroked his short, grey beard as he watched the mountain winds tussle the hair of the rightful heir to the Willow Throne, and that of the red-headed Home Guard who forever stood by her side. Ouderling had made a point of frequenting the gravestone marking her mother's final resting place whenever she flew into Orphic Den. He wondered what had brought her this time. He cupped his bearded chin in thought. He would find out soon enough.

Stepping away from the railing, he walked across the open-aired balcony to the far side of the small keep where it overlooked the cobblestoned, town square. Sure enough, acolytes and wizards alike had gathered to witness the pair of dragons that had transported the visitors. Ouderling's green dragon had grown considerably in the intervening years—to the point that it matched the size of the red dragon who had flown the Home Guard, Jyllana.

If Zarlyth had been in the public eye, he would have scoffed openly at the need to employ such uncivilized beasts, but standing alone, many stories above the town square, he secretly admired the sleek ferocity of the wondrous creatures. Though no match against a highly-trained wizard, he appreciated the allure of counting dragonkind amongst Ouderling's supporters—if for no other reason than to travel the land swiftly and keep her from harm's way. If there was any truth to the rumour of the newly acquired spell generated by the high wizard's upstart apprentice, traversing great distances in moments of time would change the way battles were fought. The fact that the spell had been created outside the confines of the wizards' guild left even the most learned wizards of the guild envious of the latent power offered by the Crystal Cavern and the presiding high wizard. It did not augur well for his future aspirations that such groundbreaking spells were being perfected by someone not of Orphic Den.

The green dragon seemed to sense his presence. Its head turned to stare up at him—a crazed look in its amber eyes. Rumour had it that Ouderling's life companion wasn't like other dragons. Zarlyth frowned for a moment until the dragon's name came to him. Keaf.

It was as if an underlying lunacy was present in Keaf's intense gaze—a sensation that the dragon wished to do

nothing more than raze the village to the ground. Though not afraid of dragons, he didn't think it wise that the students of arcana and their trainers stood so close to the unpredictable beast.

A male chamberlain appeared in the doorway leading from the wide balcony into the keep. Not nearly as efficient as old Festyr had been during Headmaster Sagora's reign, Festyr's son, Pyndor, had proven himself capable of filling his father's position as the keep's head chamberlain. "The queen has arrived, Headmaster Zarlyth."

"Yes, I know. I'll receive her in my study."

The chamberlain bowed and disappeared into the keep.

Movement high above Orphic Den drew his attention skyward to where a purple dragon flew. It took him a moment to spot the accompanying dragon he knew would not be far away. Sure enough, a massive blue dragon crested the western hills overlooking Orphic Den at the head of the Wizard's Walk—a canyon that joined the Den to the city of Gullveig at the far end of the pass.

Sparing a last glance at Keaf and the red dragon known as Dagomar, Zarlyth rubbed at his chin and grunted his disgust. Queen indeed. Ouderling had lost the throne to her uncle. When the time came to appoint a new high wizard, for surely the goblin couldn't live much longer, he considered how he might enjoy having dragons watch over him. *If* he could find a way to dispose of King Orlythe's present wizard and the upstart hack known as Scale.

For now, he would have to bide his time and put up with the charade of the current false regime as decreed by Highcliff.



"Ah. Your Majesty." Zarlyth placed his goblet on an ornate table before him and rose to his feet from where he sat beside

a blazing hearth. He stepped around the table and bowed—not deeply, but enough to satisfy decorum in the face of the no-nonsense Highcliff Guardians who stood behind the one they still referred to as their queen. And, of course, the feisty redhead he had come to know as Jyllana Ordalf.

He accepted Ouderling’s raised hand and kissed it, a habit he had foolishly started when she had first revisited the Den after burying her mother. Every time he had grasped her hand since, Jyllana tensed, prepared to attack if need be. But it was the malevolent glare of the black clad Guardian behind Ouderling that unsettled him. Balewynd Tavn would not be easily subdued should she ever think someone threatened her so-called queen.

He swallowed his unease before straightening up—earnestly trying not to be mesmerized by Balewynd’s rugged beauty. A scar ran from her high cheekbone to under her left ear—the mark accentuating the bend of a broken nose she had suffered at the hands of the Grim Guard.

Ouderling’s smug smile informed him she didn’t miss the fact that her retainers caused him discomfort.

“Headmaster Zarlyth.” Ouderling dipped her chin. “A pleasure, as always.”

“Um yes. Yes!” Zarlyth motioned with open palms for Ouderling to sit in the lushly appointed settee across from his high-back chair. He cast a glance at several chamberlains waiting inconspicuously in the shadows around the perimeter of the room.

Three chairs—not as elaborate as the one he occupied—were brought forward, but no one made a move to sit in them.

Once Ouderling was seated, Jyllana sat down beside her, while Balewynd and the white-haired Guardian, Pecklyn Ors, separated to take up strategic positions within the room

to where Zarlyth imagined they deemed they could watch the door and him at the same time.

When Ouderling had first visited Orphic Den after her mother's demise, the actions of her keepers had rankled his senses, but he had grown used to their tendencies. Though their lack of trust was disconcerting, he appreciated the reason behind their vigilance. Orphic Den had not been kind to the late queen.

Nor had Ouderling's uncle. With Khae's death, Orlythe had usurped the Willow Throne; his position safeguarded by the young, but most capable wizard, Ryedyn. As formidable as the Grim Duke had proven to be, it was the underlying threat of who he associated with that kept Ouderling's forces at bay. Albeit, the Dragon Witch Wraith hadn't been heard from since the day he had reportedly taken down Highcliff's mightiest dragon and slain the realm's staunchest defender. It was rumoured that even in her advanced years, Xantha had seriously injured the wraith, though Zarlyth imagined the Highcliff Guardians would say just about anything to hide their embarrassment of not being able to come to Queen Khae's rescue in time.

Ouderling waited for a servant to place a goblet on the ornate table and fill it, before she hoisted it in the air between them. "To the wizards' guild."

Zarlyth acquiesced, hoisting his own. "The guild."

"How fares the Den?" Ouderling cut straight to the chase.

The young elf had matured far beyond what someone in her early twenties should have. He imagined life's hardships and the burden of her mother's legacy had delivered onto her the harsh reality of being the one entrusted to hold the ultimate seat in the land—even if her uncle's actions had waylaid her real tenure as queen.

He had to give Ouderling credit. If not for her youthful appearance—still an elfling in his estimation—her presence would have commanded more respect than it already did.

She reminded him of a young Nyxa. Perhaps not as fierce as the War Dragon had been, but Ouderling was still an infant in the annals of time. There was little doubt she had the wherewithal to present as every bit as intense as her grandmother had been if she was allowed the time to come into her own. Whatever the wayward queen had endured over the last few years, it had certainly made her someone not to be taken lightly.

He forced a smile. “As well as can be expected given the circumstances, Your Majesty, but recent times have become increasingly difficult for our citizens.”

Ouderling tilted her head. “Oh? Why’s that?”

You know damn well why, he thought, but kept it to himself. Putting his goblet down, he steepled his fingers against his chin. “As you know, Orlythe’s blockade of Gullveig has caused Orphic Den considerable hardship.”

“Do you need more food flown in?”

“That would be appreciated. We’ve been forced to tighten our belts since the duke ascended the throne and proclaimed himself king.”

“False king,” Jyllana growled.

“Of course, of course. Semantics aside, however, without the supplies we rely upon from Gullveig, Orphic Den has become little more than a ghost town.”

“Tell me what you need and I will do what I can to get it from Highcliff,” Ouderling assured him.

“We appreciate the food and other necessities you so graciously supply us with, but you cannot provide what we desperately require.”

“And that is?”

“Magic.”

Ouderling’s brow furrowed.

Zarlyth gave her a patient smile. “A wizards’ guild thrives by virtue of the magic inherent within its community. In order to learn and grow, we must acquire certain items that only specially trained artisans can create.”

“I don’t quite follow.”

“No offense, Your Majesty, but it’s hard to explain to someone like you.”

Ouderling’s blue eyes changed hue, darkening to a burnt orange.

Taken aback by the sudden transformation, Zarlyth mused that her eyes resembled the colour of Nyxa’s War Dragon banner. Not wishing to get on Ouderling’s bad side, at least not yet, he said, “Not all wizards have the use of inherent magic. Nor can our staves be just magically enhanced. It takes alchemy to instill our talismans with the spells they house. The Den requires the resources we used to procure from the merchants of Gullveig. Staff makers. Potion Makers. Herbs and minerals. You name it. When it comes right down to it, most wizards rely upon external forces to augment their power.”

Ouderling nodded and sipped at her goblet. “And you don’t think Aelfwynne or Scale or any of the Crystal Cavern caretakers can provide you with what you need?”

Zarlyth shrugged, but it was Pecklyn shaking his head who answered the question for her.

“I see.” Ouderling stared at the high ceiling as if searching for a solution. She looked back at Zarlyth. “Is there no other place in South March that can fashion what you need.”

“Oh, for sure. There are many artisans in, say, Urdanya, but I don’t see how that makes it any easier. With Orlythe’s

troops occupying every town, our supply chain has been severed.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

Zarlyth almost choked on her understatement. “I’ll say. It won’t be long until the duke or his wizard come to the realization that Orphic Den isn’t as powerful as it once was. When that happens, I fear Ryedyn will seize the opportunity to swoop in. Did you notice the lack of mist when you came through?”

Jyllana nodded emphatically beside Ouderling. “I thought there was something different when we arrived. Now that he’s mentioned it…”

“I did.” Ouderling imitated her protector’s bobbing head. “I always thought the shroud was natural to the area.”

“The fog, yes. To an extent, at least. I imagine that’s where Gullveig got his idea from when he enhanced the mist to make it ethereal-like. Unfortunately, it takes a vast amount of resources to keep it that way.”

“You can’t deny Orphic Den’s a nicer place without it,” Ouderling said.

“Oh, but it’s part of our mystique. And, it serves a greater purpose. It keeps troublemakers and lollygaggers from frequenting our town. Superstition breeds fear. That fear keeps unwanted individuals at bay so that we may be free to focus on what we do.”

“And what exactly is it that you do, headmaster?”

The impertinent question threw him. He sputtered as he tried to answer, but stopped—cheeks reddening as his patience with the displaced queen wore thin. She had a lot of nerve to speak in such a manner to one as wise and learned in the way of magic as he was. Were the Guardians not in the room with her, he might have thrown her over his knee and taught her a bit of respect.

Swallowing his pride, it took everything he had to keep a smile on his face. “We develop new magic-users with the intent of enhancing the realm with things that are not available to it otherwise.”

He half expected her to ask him to elaborate, but thankfully she appeared to accept his oversimplified explanation. Instead, she surprised him.

“What can we do to make life better for the guild?”

Zarlyth’s gaze flicked to Balewynd and Pecklyn as he entertained thoughts of what their dragons might be capable of. Turning his attention back to Ouderling, he said, “You can wrest Gullveig from Orlythe’s control.”



Setting down to rest the dragons in a clearing amid the thick forested area southeast of Urdanya, Ouderling accepted a waterskin from Pecklyn. She drank sparingly and handed it back. Turning to gaze over the small pond the dragons drank from, her mind was still leagues to the northeast. Back in the graveyard at Orphic Den.

It was getting closer to three years than two since her failure to save her mother from what she could only believe had been a horrific death battling the Soul’s influence over Headmaster Sagora while trapped in her mind, far apart from her body.

Ouderling chewed on her lower lip, memories of her mother already fading to brief glimpses of time. There was no doubt that Khae had not been the strong queen Nyxa had been. Perhaps it was because Khae’s rule had been relatively quiet in terms of dealing with the strife of bygone years. As far as she knew, except for the dark period surrounding her brother’s mysterious death, Khae Wys had never had to deal with anything more troubling than an early frost or an

overzealous mayor—at least until her brief encounter with the Dragon Witch Wraith beneath Borreraig Palace.

Not allowing her eyes to spill the tears that always accompanied thoughts of her failure to save her mother, and by association, her father, Ouderling vowed she would not be the complacent ruler her mother had been. She would strive to become more like her grandmother and rule with a no-nonsense attitude. Giving in to the small pockets of discontent just to appease the masses only served to disrupt them further.

She blinked at that, wondering where that had come from. A wry grin played at the corners of her lips. She had no doubt heard the irritable goblin high wizard grumble something to that effect at one time or another.

She took a deep breath as the enormity of what lie before her weighed upon her mind. Not only had her slow response to rally the northern dragons been ultimately responsible for her mother's demise, but it had also caused her to lose her place in the world and occupy the Willow Throne.

The irony of her dilemma made her want to laugh, cry, and scream all at the same time. She had never desired to follow in her mother's footsteps—nor that of her grandmother either, but it seemed as if fate had other ideas for her life. The power to rule the kingdom of South March was increasingly becoming a passion she could not deny. Her ancestors had sacrificed so much to bring the elven clans together. If left unchecked, it was only a matter of time before the kingdom tore itself apart under her uncle's rule.

Conscious that her companions watched her every move, she shook her head and stepped away from the water's edge. Walking in a slow circle to stretch her back, she recalled her conversation with Headmaster Zarlyth, and spit out a laugh.

“Tighten their belts? Ha! It’s a wonder there’s enough leather in all of South March to hold in their girth.”

Pecklyn exchanged looks with Jyllana. If Balewynd thought the remark funny, she never let on.

“Turning the place into a ghost town!” Ouderling scoffed. “I thought that’s what they desired it be.”

Jyllana took the waterskin from Pecklyn. As she raised it to her lips, she chuckled and lowered her voice, obviously imitating Headmaster Zarlyth. “Hard to explain to someone like you.”

Ouderling had wondered if she was the only one who had thought the headmaster’s statement an odd one.

Jyllana wiped her lips on the cuff of her tunic and handed the skin to Balewynd. “Does he not realize who he’s talking to?”

Ouderling shrugged. “I imagine he must. He’s not naïve.”

“Nor bright if you ask me. Especially if he thinks you don’t know what real magic is all about. You slew a rock troll!”

“Well, the Fae did, actually.”

“Because you were proficient enough with your gift to summon them. From what Master Aelfwynne said afterward, not even your mother could’ve done that without the aid of the ancient magic housed in Grim Watch Tower.”

The mention of the otherworldly edifice sent shivers along Ouderling’s skin. She tried not to think of the warlock tower—forever struggling to convince herself there was no reason for her to go there.

“You don’t really intend to do what he asked, do you?” Jyllana asked.

“What’s that?”

“Attack Gullveig in hopes of freeing up the blockade.”

Ouderling thought briefly about the ramifications of such an action. “No, that would put innocent lives in jeopardy. My

father's right. We can't afford to risk an all-out civil war." She raised her eyebrows. "Besides, what if Orphic Den did fall? Would it really be a great loss?"

Pecklyn cleared his throat, an unusual seriousness about him. "If control of the wizards' guild falls into Orlythe's hands, our days at Highcliff will be numbered."

Ouderling held his gaze. If she had learned nothing else during her time at Highcliff, she knew that whenever he offered an opinion on important matters, his advice was on point.

She sighed and whistled for Keaf. It wouldn't do for them to loiter in the woods too long while the kingdom fell deeper into Orlythe's grasp. The defenders of Highcliff had languished in an unhealthy stasis for the better part of three years, clinging to the faint hope that an answer might present itself to free them from the Grim Duke's yoke. As much as it terrified her, there was only one way forward if she wished to have any chance of regaining her rightful title of Queen of the Elves.

She shook her head at that last thought. She had never been officially proclaimed queen. Before she'd had a chance to return to Borreraig Palace and partake in her official coronation, Duke Orlythe had pronounced himself king.

In order to fully understand what she was up against, especially with the additional presence of the Dragon Witch Wraith added into the fray, she accepted the fact that she would have to attempt something she had vowed never to do. Even with her superior ability to channel nature's essence, something deep inside intimated that if she wanted to take back the Willow Throne, her journey must begin on Grim Ward Island.

A journey she was reluctant to make.