

Dragon Sect



Braen Wys looked up from where he read under the flickering glow of a solitary candle. Something wasn't right.

He gazed around his spacious sleeping quarters in search of the cause of the disturbance. Other than the storm raging outside the bay window beside him, he was met with tomb-like silence. As was to be expected. High in the western wing of Urdanya Castle, he wasn't likely to hear anything in the middle of the night, besides perhaps, the movement of the Sea Guard patrolling the grand hallways outside his royal chambers.

The only thing he could attribute to the unmistakable sense of foreboding gripping him was that his mother, Princess Odyne, was probably dabbling with her dark magic again.

He shook his head. Returning his attention to the old tome in his lap, he found he couldn't concentrate on the text. His mother would never change. What she thought to gain by disturbing forces she had no business delving into, he had no idea.

Unlike her discontented brother in the south, Odyne no longer cared for her place in the succession to the Willow Throne. By happenstance, her twin sister had been born a few moments before her, but ever since Odyne had discovered her gift for summoning things that were better left alone, she no longer desired that seat.

Odyne occupied the Sea Throne, presiding primarily over Urdanya—a great coastal city harbouring half the elven population of South March in and around its sprawling borders. That was good enough for her. Should banners ever be called, those loyal to Odyne's benevolent, if somewhat bizarre rule, would outnumber the troops of Khae and Orlythe combined.

Fortunately, Braen mused, his mother preferred to be left to her own devices. To pursue her own interests. *Unfortunately*, her activities left him feeling extremely uncomfortable more often than not. Someday, she would go too far. Cross one line too many. When that happened, he didn't want to be anywhere near her. Or Urdanya Castle for that matter. Though he would never wish her harm, he secretly hoped that someday soon, one of her spells would backfire badly enough to scare her away from unsettling dark things that should not be disturbed. Knowing she preferred to practice these rituals at night, often made sleep difficult to come by.

Tonight, was one of those nights. Accompanying the slashing rain battering the multi-paned bay window, a cold draft whistled through the imperfect molding, threatening to extinguish his candle yet again. He doubted sleep would come until the morn.

He sighed and opened the tome to where the frayed, golden ribbon marked his page. Allowing himself to be soothed by the lovely verse, thoughts of his mother eased from the forefront of his mind as the written words flowed softly past his lips,

*I write of stars,
and of the infinity behind mirrors,
and of the inconsequence of trifles.*

*I write in the sound of the sea in shells,
and of the crescendo of silence
in the light of an eye in the deep of sleep.*

*I write between a memory and a forget,
in the fading half-light at the end of days,
and upon the eve of every eve.*

*I write in the epilogues of myths,
of where the seaward runes once told
of when a never is born and a forever ends.*

He blinked and looked up, marvelling at the imagery the verse evoked. Always the dreamer, he frequently wondered of foreign lands and the adventures awaiting anyone brave

enough to put aside the notion that the elven kingdom of South March was superior to other realms. Oh, what wonders were there to be had in the infinity beyond the mirrors of society's reproach?

If only he had the fortitude to stand up to his mother and demand she reconsider the vow she had made him swear. A promise reluctantly entered into out of fear of reprisal should he not bow to her overbearing perception of the greater world.

Considering the text his pointer finger traced across the yellowed page, he found it hard to imagine that the kingdom of man was as callous as the elven people were led to believe. How could anyone capable of inking such thought-provoking words be as barbaric as he had been taught?

He closed the tome and ran a finger over the flaking, golden letters of the author's name carved into the leather cover. A *man's* name, no less!

Sir Stanley White, Zephyr Knight

Why, even the name was poetic.

He swallowed despite the fact he was alone. He would be well-advised not to let anyone know he possessed such a book.

The dark wood cabinetry in the bed chamber lit up as the lignite sky flashed several times in a row; the brilliance too bright to have been lightning unless it had struck the castle somewhere near by. He cringed in anticipation of the thunder that never came.

Almost afraid to get closer to the window, Braen put the tome on a table beside his chair and worked up the courage. Swallowing his unease, he leaned into the space provided by the bay window, searching the sullen night. Grey silhouettes of Urdanya Castle's ramparts were visible through the downpour far below the level of his quarters. Though unable to see them, he knew the Witch Watch would be huddled

around braziers inside the many wall towers carved into the natural stone of the keep.

A sudden flash made him jump. Even before he looked north to the pinnacle of a lone tower that rose stark against the sky in defiance of the storm, his worst fear was realized. It hadn't been lightning.

Partially obscured by a roiling mass of storm clouds, Sea Witch's Sceptre rose from the dark rock along the jagged shoreline to penetrate the sky's low ceiling.

Only visible when illuminated by unnatural bursts of light, the octagonal top of the highest tower of Urdanya Castle rested upon a spire of grey rock. Legend claimed the Sea Witch Sceptre had been carved out of the mountain peak that had once dominated the shoreline north of the Ors Spill. The daunting pillar connected to Urdanya Castle by an open-air, arched causeway, a few hundred feet above the crashing surf unseen below the sweep of the castle's thick ramparts.

Braen covered his face with an upraised arm as another series of flashes reflected off various, slick rock faces. He leaned back into the room—an eerie sensation turning his skin cold. His mother was conjuring something big. And that likely meant something dangerous.

Though he had no idea how he knew, know he did. If he didn't get up there fast and intervene, he had a sixth sense that she was about to summon her own demise. Grabbing his grease-smearred, leather slicker, he threw open the outer door of his chamber and charged through the labyrinth of granite-walled corridors. Several Witch Watch stationed along the hallways of the vast royal wing gave chase.

Not encumbered by the heavy armour of the Watch, Braen outdistanced the elven guard appointed with his well-being. He rolled his eyes at the thought. More likely they were assigned to ensure he didn't do anything without his mother's consent.

The arched causeway to Sea Witch Sceptre was accessed by a set of massive iron doors designed to be barred from the

outside. As high up the castle walls as the causeway stood, Braen had to descend several flights of steps hewn out of bedrock to access it from the royal wing.

Built from a lone mountain, Urdanya Castle was a marvel of dwarven ingenuity. Aside from decorative fountains and several walkways added after the fact, the colossal edifice had been sculpted out of the living rock—hammered, chiselled, and shaped by master craftsmen long before the seeds had been sewn to establish the sovereign realm of South March.

Luckily, Princess Odyne hadn't seen fit to bar the causeway doors—something she had been known to do in the past. That simple fact niggled at Braen as he took the full brunt of the storm ravaging the west coast full in the face. Perhaps tonight would be the night his mother went too far.

Soaked in an instant, despite the protection offered by his outer garments, he staggered against the eastern edge of the causeway—its stone bed arched over a seething torrent of water spilling around the castle's northern flank. He had to bend low to grab the knee-high bulwark lining the span to keep from being thrown over the brink and dashed against the rocks far below.

In a fit of stops and starts, Braen dashed across the causeway, fearing his next step might be his last. Upon reaching the wet stone pillar that comprised the Sea Witch Sceptre, he glanced back the way he had come. If the Witch Watch followed, there was no evidence of their presence.

Another metal door barred his passage, this one a singular entranceway, smaller than those exiting the castle. It resisted his push.

Worried he might inadvertently set off wards his mother was known to employ, he took several calming breaths to settle his hammering heart. Tapping into his elven magic, he examined the steel barrier and surrounding stone but found no such hindrances. With any luck, she had simply locked it.

A means to keep out most anyone but those possessing a magical aptitude.

He looked skyward, squinting against the persistent drizzle lashing sideways in the wind. It was hard to make out anything in the misty darkness, but as he stared, the clouds around the spire's summit flashed three times, illuminated by whatever magical forces were being unleashed up there.

Guided by an extension of his magic, he reached through the metal slab and manipulated the mechanism on the opposite side of the door. The lock opened without incident. A cursory glance across the causeway, its peaked midsection obscured by a sudden increase in the rainfall, informed him he was alone.

Faint light flicked from somewhere beyond the first bend in the steep steps ascending through the otherwise solid stone interior of the tower. A tunnel-like stairwell climbed in no apparent semblance of uniformity—as if following the path of a drunken artisan through the rock. Limited by the tight confines to only take one step at a time, he didn't relish a large person having to ascend the Sea Witch Sceptre.

The climb tonight took longer than usual. Whether due to his tiredness, or the fear of what he was about to walk in on, Braen couldn't say. His thighs screamed long before he reached what he had always referred to as, 'cloud level.'

Rounding the last bend, the dark stairwell flickered. The door to the octagonal chamber he had visited many times before stood ajar. Another peculiarity when it came to dealing with the summoning of whatever his mother was up to. If she *were* conjuring spirits from another plane, be they Fae or darker still, she would never have been so careless. The chamber walls acted as a containment field. According to Odyne's teachings, a breach of any kind could result in an unenviable creature escaping into the real world.

He slowed his advance, listening carefully as he snuck up to the door, hugging the inside curvature of the tunnel. Standing on the last two steps, he became aware of a deep

cold that wafted through the gap between the metal door and the granite doorjamb. It was like his mother had summoned an ice demon.

Braen swallowed. What if she had? And if so, why had she left the door open?

Beside him, a small, wooden door led off the tight landing—barring access to a storage closet carved into centre of the pillar. He had often retrieved items for his mother in there. Barely big enough to stand upright inside, the storage area held tallow, parchment, unguents, and other supplies used in the casting of spells. Witch’s spells! Elven magic didn’t require the aid of earthly materials.

Leaning forward he tried to see into the chamber, but aside from a tall window facing him from the other side of the room, nothing appeared to be out of the ordinary.

The room beyond the door flashed again. Once. Twice. Three times.

Unsure how to proceed, Braen covered his eyes and hesitated. To disturb her once she had begun a ritual was a dangerous proposition. If he threw off her concentration at a critical juncture in the spellcasting, there was a very real possibility that she would lose control of whatever she had summoned—not to mention the punishment he would receive as a result.

He had half a mind to ease the door closed, slink back down the steps, and leave well enough alone, but a deep-throated laugh stopped him. One that couldn’t have originated from his mother.

The ensuing shriek, however, did.

“Who are you?” Odyne Wys’ raspy voice inquired. “How did you get up here?”

Braen swallowed. Someone had snuck into the chamber with his mother. Someone she didn’t know.

He eased the door open a little further, absently berating himself for not bringing a weapon. Not the most physical of elves, without his rapier, he would be useless if he had to

defend her. He raised his eyebrows at that. He'd likely have to defend the intruder from her.

"You're ruining everything!" Odyne lamented from where she stood beside a slab of granite in the middle of the room; a large tome open between two thick candles on its surface. She raised sticklike arms; nondescript, red robes hanging from her slight form. "Stay away from me!"

Movement beyond his mother drew Braen's attention. Clad in long, black robes that appeared to hover just off the floor, a figure moved toward Odyne, seemingly unconcerned by her warning shout.

Energy crackled along Odyne's fingers and leapt across the space between them.

The figure hidden beneath a ratty cowl met Odyne's attack with raised fingers of his own—the skeletal hands making Braen shudder.

A voice sounding of metal grating on metal cackled back at her, "Or what, princess? You're but a puppet in the grand scheme of things. A means to an end."

Braen cowered on the threshold, crouching so as not to be seen. Had his mother summoned this...this creature? For surely it could not be an elf. At least not one that was alive.

Red pin pricks of light intensified from within the shadows of its cowl. "Your death will set into motion the downfall of South March and give rise to a power the world has never known."

Odyne's magical attack crackled and sparked as it crept up the intruder's sleeves, its effectiveness fizzling out before it reached the creature's shoulders.

Braen searched the room, looking for a weapon of opportunity, but other than books and small candleholders, there were none to be had. An odd tingling crept along his skin. A sensation he had fought against for as long as he could remember. He shook his head, struggling to subdue the curse of his birthright.

Odyne stepped around the stone table, putting it between herself and the creature—its back to the only door in the chamber.

Braen stepped into the room. Left with no other choice, he was going to have to physically subdue the creature.

His mother's eyes widened as they found his. She shook her head, warning him not to interfere. Emitting a loud shriek, she spoke words unintelligible to him and loosed another volley of energy, the blast so intense that blue arcs sizzled errantly around the chamber, striking tomes, and impacting the ground and stone ceiling.

Braen backstepped onto the landing, covering his head with his arms, afraid he was about to be hit by his mother's discharge. He stumbled onto his backside and tumbled a few steps before he arrested a potentially fatal fall down the steep flight.

"Your witchery is useless against me, Odyne," the intruder growled. "You should never have forsaken your brother. Together you two could have rid the realm of Nyxa's spawn corrupting the Willow Throne. Prepare to face the consequences of your short-sightedness."

Braen fought to right himself in the tight stairwell, his tangled limbs making it difficult to keep from falling farther.

"Your death is but the second of three. Soon, your brother will ascend the Willow Throne. When that happens, South March will fall into a chaos it hasn't known since the arrival of the great wyrm."

A high-pitched scream pierced Braen's skull and then everything went quiet.

"Give my regards to your niece," the creature rasped after a few moments of eerie silence.

A dull thud came from the chamber. Wild with fear and disbelief, Braen pulled himself upright. He wasn't a seasoned elf, but neither was he naïve. The significance of the thud could only mean one thing. The tingling beneath his skin intensified.

A soft chuckle emanated from beyond the doorway. “Now to deal with your sister.”

Too afraid to fight or run, Braen slipped into the storage cubby and pulled the door closed, trying hard to keep his limbs from trembling and his heavy breathing from giving him away. He examined his fingers, fearful that his latent magic might stir. Afraid it would give him away.

A waft of cold air slipped under the door. He shivered. Though not certain, he imagined his heart had stopped momentarily during the agonizing moments it took him to realize the creature had passed his hiding spot and departed the Sea Witch Sceptre.

A long while elapsed before he could gather the courage to leave the sanctuary the closet offered.

It was nearly dawn when he reached the bottom of the mystic tower—the body of his mother draped over his shoulder. He had to pause several times on the way down to step over corpses of the Witch Watch who had tried to come to their aid.