

# Windwalker



## *Headmaster*

**Looking** out over the graveyard, the headmaster of the wizard's guild could not help but shake his head. The living conditions in Orphic Den over the last two and a half 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 new queen's hair and that of the red-headed Home Guard who was forever by her side. Queen Ouderling 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

# Windwalker

time. He cupped his bearded chin in thought. He would find out soon enough.

Stepping away from the railing, he walked across the open-air 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 young queen and her protector. 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.

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 could certainly appreciate the allure of counting dragonkind amongst the queen's supporters—if for no other reason than to travel the land swiftly and keep her from harm's way. With the newly acquired spell created by the high wizard's upstart apprentice, traversing great distances in moments of time left even the most learned wizards at Orphic Den envious.

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

From Zarlyth's perspective, it was as if an underlying lunacy was present in Keaf's intense gaze—as if 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.

# Windwalker

A male chamberlain appeared in the doorway leading from the wide balcony into the keep. Though not nearly as efficient as old Festyr had been during Headmaster Sagora's reign, Festyr's son, Pyndor, had proven himself capable of taking his father's place 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 leading into Orphic Den from the length of the Wizard's Walk—a canyon that joined the Den to the city of Gullveig at the foot of the pass.

Sparing a last glance at Keaf, and the red dragon known as Dagomar, Zarlyth rubbed at his chin and nodded. 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 to watch over him.



"Ah. Your Majesty." Zarlyth put his goblet down 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 Queen Ouderling, and the one 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 they had buried her mother. Every time he grasped her hand since, Jyllana had tensed, prepared to attack, but it was

# Windwalker

the malevolent glare of the black clad Guardian behind the queen that unsettled him most. Balewynd Tayn would not be easily subdued should she ever think that someone even remotely threatened the 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 cheek bone 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 the queen was seated, Jyllana sat down beside her, while Balewynd and the white-haired, pleasant-faced 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 started visiting 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 unsettling, he appreciated the reason behind their vigilance. Orphic Den had not been kind to the late queen.

# Windwalker

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 queen had matured years far beyond what someone in her early twenties should have. He imagined life's hardships and responsibilities had delivered onto her the harsh realities of being the one who wields the ultimate power in the land—even if her uncle's actions had waylaid her real tenure as queen. He had to give her credit. If not for her youthful appearance—still an elfling in his estimation—her presence would command more respect than it already did.

Ouderling reminded him of a young Nyxa. Perhaps not as fierce as the War Dragon had been, but Ouderling presented as every bit as intense. Whatever she had gone through over the last few years had certainly shaped who she had become.

# Windwalker

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

Ouderling tilted her head and raised her eyebrows. “Oh? And why is 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 great hardship.”

“Do you need more food flown in?”

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

“A false king,” Jyllana growled, glaring at him.

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

“Tell me what you need, and I’ll get it for you from Highcliff,” Ouderling assured him.

“Oh, no, Your Majesty. Although we appreciate the food and other necessities you have so graciously supplied us with, you cannot provide us with what we really 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 walls. In order to learn and to 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.”

# Windwalker

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

Zarlyth mused that her eyes resembled the colour of Nyxa's War Dragon banner. Not wishing to get on the queen's bad side, he said, "Not all wizards have the use of inherent magic. Nor are our staves 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 in 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 looked to 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 anything easier. With Orlythe's troops occupying every town, our supply chain has been severed."

"That's unfortunate."

Zarlyth almost choked on the queen's 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?"

# Windwalker

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

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

“The fog, yes. To an extent. 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. It also 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 do what we do.”

“And what exactly do you do, headmaster?”

The question threw him. He sputtered as he tried to answer but stopped. He felt his cheeks redden—darkening further as his patience with the elfling queen wore thin. She had a lot of nerve to speak to one as wise and learned as he was the way she did. 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 would not be available to it otherwise.”

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

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



# Windwalker

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. Shaking her head as she walked in a slow circle to stretch her back, she said to no one in particular. "Tighten their belts? Ha! It's a wonder there's enough leather in all of South March to hold in their girth."

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

"Turning the place into a ghost town!" Ouderling scoffed. "I thought that's what they wanted it to be like."

Jyllana took the waterskin from Pecklyn. As she raised it to her lips, she chuckled, "'Hard to explain to someone like you,' he said."

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. "Did he not realize who he was talking to?"

Ouderling shrugged. "I imagine he must have. He's not naïve."

"Not bright, if you ask me. Especially if he thinks you don't appreciate what real magic is all about. You slew a rock troll!"

"Well, the Fae did, actually."

# Windwalker

“But you summoned them. From what Master Aelfwynne said afterward, not even your mother could have done what you did without the aid of Grim Watch Tower.”

The mention of the otherworldly edifice sent shivers along Ouderling’s skin. She had been trying hard not to think of the warlock tower—struggling to convince herself there was no need 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 just such an action. “No, that would put more innocent lives in jeopardy. My father is right in his view that we can’t afford to enter into an all-out civil war.” She raised her eyebrows. “Besides, even if Orphic Den were to fall, would that really be such a great loss?”

Pecklyn cleared his throat, an unusual serious look on his face. “If 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 serious matters, his advice was not only to the point, but very accurate.

She sighed and whistled for Keaf. It wouldn’t do them good to loiter in the woods while the kingdom fell deeper into Orlythe’s grasp. They had languished in an unhealthy stasis for the better part of three years with the faintest of hope that an answer would present itself to deliver them from the Grim Duke’s yoke—she refused to refer to him as king.

As much as it terrified her, there was only one way forward if she wished to have any chance of regaining her rightful place in South March.

# Windwalker

She shook her head at that. She had never been 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 when it came to the presence of the Dragon Witch Wraith, 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 her intimated that if she were to take back the Willow Throne, her journey must begin on Grim Ward Island.

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