

# The Etymology of Fize



*Keith d. Jones*

Copyright © 2004 by Keith D. Jones  
All rights reserved

Except as permitted by the Copyright Act of 1976, this work  
may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any manner.

Stormsdream PDF Edition, version 8.18.3.18

**While this PDF of *The Etymology of Fire* is freely  
available to anyone who would like to read it, please  
support the author and purchase a copy of the book.  
Thank you**

## **Table of Contents**

---

The Fire That Burns. . . . .	4
A Long and Winding Road. . . . .	42
The Edge of Forever . . . . .	77
Hunters of the Dark . . . . .	104
Daughter of the Ancients . . . . .	132
The Passing of Strangers . . . . .	173
Secrets of Smoke and Flame. . . . .	215
The Forgotten Road. . . . .	242

*Chapter One*  
**The Fire That Burns**

*Wrath had fallen on the small town of Edgewood. Descending out of the wilderness and half-light of dawn, it had come. Its voice pulling at the townsfolk, shattering them with a scream like thunder and despair. The people ran, fleeing from destruction, scattering like leaves before the storm even as the soldiers gathered. Waiting and long suffering, they faced the creature as it ripped at the town. As it fell among splintered wood and broken homes. As the storm was silenced. Wrath was memory made flesh; a sliver of nightmare torn from ancient history and half-forgotten story. Even its name was only a whispered shadow. Nothing more than a fragment of language. Wrath had once possessed a name. Dragon. A dragon had fallen in the town of Edgewood. Its rage silenced by soldiers wielding iron and great hooks that could rend even a monster's wing.*

The dragon had fallen among fractured wood and shattered stone. Unable to fly on tattered wings, it had crashed through a ruin of broken houses and homes, snapping at the soldiers even as it fell. Sounding as if it was the death of storms, the dragon had screamed with a roar that pulled at the heart and tore at the soul. It had given one last gurgling cry and then fallen; wood splintering beneath its weight. The soldiers had stood around it, waiting. Not wanting to blink. Not wanting to breathe or hold out hope that the creature was dead. They stood around the body, holding spears and hooks and swords ready to strike. They waited. Watching for sound, listening for movement, they watched and they waited.

A soldier slipped, standing too long on tired feet, and the soldiers roared, surging forward as if the dragon had moved. As if the nightmare monstrosity really was a Wraith out of forgotten time that could not be stopped or killed. Pike and spear struck the dragon, driving into flesh that did not move, binding Wrath to the earth so that it could not rise again. Shouting wordless challenges grown hoarse under the weight of the morning, they struck and burned

## **The Etymology of Fire**

and stomped and kicked, and finally they stopped, drifting into silence. One by one, they let their weapons grow still, and they stood, watching the dragon, wiping blood and sweat from their eyes.

The soldiers stood around the grotesque and mangled corpse, saying nothing, watching the dragon; blind to the morning sun as it drifted over the town beneath the sky. The soldiers stood as still as guardian statues, and they would not let anyone near the dragon. None were allowed to approach the place where it had died. The people could not search the shattered buildings and broken homes, looking for the injured, searching for the dead. None wanted to. A dragon had devoured the town, desecrating all that it touched, leaving the people nothing.

It became a blank spot in their world that they would not approach. They would not think. They would not touch. As shock and fear faded with the passing of the Wrath, the townspeople tended to those who had been hurt and finished burying the dead. The Wrath was ignored. The Wrath was forgotten. Looking to that blind spot, knowing that such a thing had attacked the town, they would know that other Wraths lived in the mountains. The townsfolk tried to forget or risk looking forever to the sky to see where the next nightmare would fall.

Tahrl could look only to the blind spot, seeing the shapeless monstrosity that was the Wrath, forgetting that it had once possessed a name. Dragons had lived long ago and far away. This thing that had attacked Edgewood was an abomination. It was a shadow. A Wraith of long neglected memory. No dragon lived. A Wrath had attacked the town. Tahrl could find nothing beyond its corpse. There was nothing. He could not look away.

“Morgan? Tahrl Morgan? I thought you were dead.”

It was dark. Blinking numb eyes, Tahrl remembered that there had once been light and the warmth of day. He tried to focus on the voice, realizing that someone stood before him demanding his attention.

“I would not have recognized you,” the man said. “To think that you, Morgan. Yes, even you should fall so far.”

Light played at Tahrl’s eyes. There was someone before him; the man who had addressed him, and beyond this stranger was one of the soldiers standing some little way away with a crude lantern. Holding a hand as if the light burned him, Tahrl looked to the man who stood before him blocking his view of the Wrath.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

“Hello, Vemarian,” Tahrl said surprised to hear his own voice as if words began somewhere in the distant past and required a journey of more than a thousand years before they could pass his lips. “I heard you were at Windvale.”

“I was until I learned what happened here. I could not stay away,” the man who was Cavan Luc Vemarian said. “This is only the beginning.”

“So soon?”

“What do you mean, so soon? Do you jest? Do you mock me? Is it too soon for a beginning? Do you know something I should expect, Morgan? Four days have passed since that abomination attacked. How long before it happens again? How much time do we have?”

“I don’t know.”

“You were always the expert. Never let anyone forget how much you knew about them. Wraths and Wraiths. Always so smart. As for myself, I only know troglodytes. The paths of the mountains. How to hold those creatures in check. Never expected this. Wraths and Wraiths.” Vemarian looked to the dark and the night. Somewhere between the surviving houses and homes of Edgewood, a Wrath had fallen. “Tell me, Morgan, what do you think of your precious Wraiths now?”

“I don’t know.” Tahrl felt the words like a weight trying to drag him to the ground. “I don’t know what to think anymore. The dragons would never- I don’t know what that thing is.”

“Maybe, it is the truth.”

“How can it be?”

“You are blind, Morgan. Unwilling to see with your eyes. You had everything, Morgan. You were an advisor to the King. And, you lost it all because you looked only to the past. Never trust the past. We remember only what people tell us. Never the past, Morgan. Look to that monster and see the future.”

“No.”

“That is why you are here. Without friends. Without family. Without a future. Why did you do it, Morgan? Why did you say that Wraths and Wraiths were good? Who whispered such words in your ear?”

“The Montmorin.”

“Montmorin?”

“Yes, the DiKena legends and the Montmorin. Have you ever heard them? Really listened to the ancient legends of the DiKena?”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“No more than anybody else. Legends say the Wraths slaughtered the DiKena.”

Tahrl laughed with a dry rasp of a sound that was little more than a mumbled whisper.

“No,” he said. “No, they didn’t. Those common stories you quote are from after the Crusade. After we, the Kianan, slaughtered the dragons.”

“Really, Morgan, you would lecture me.”

“It is true!” Tahrl said, almost choking on the words. “You need only open your ears and listen. My parents lived with the Montmorin because of the trade agreements. I was born there. In the mountains. I heard the legends of the DiKena long before I ever learned these Kianan stories.”

“From the Montmorin?”

“It didn’t matter. It doesn’t make sense. The dragons wanted to protect us. They sought only to help the DiKena and to end the Age of Chaos.”

“They failed.”

“And, this is how we repay them?”

“No, Morgan, we haven’t even begun to repay them.” Vemarian looked only to the dark and the night. Somewhere out there, the soldiers were preparing the funeral pyre. With Cavan Luc Vemarian’s arrival in Edgewood, the Wrath would be burned. Its body would be consumed by flame, and a black splotch of a hole would remain in the heart of the town forevermore. “I believe what I have seen with mine own eyes, Morgan, and I have seen the future. Open your eyes, Tahrl Morgan, or the past will consume you.”

With that, Cavan Luc Vemarian left him, turning, walking into the dark and into the night. When Vemarian reached his soldiers, the fire would be set, and the flames would engulf the world.

Tahrl folded in upon himself, finding the ground beneath his feet, not knowing where he was. He sat and watched the flames take the night. The dragon was burned while the soldiers and the townsfolk watched. It wasn’t a dragon. Dragons were protectors. They were defenders of the earth and the sky. The soldiers burned an abomination. They burned vengeance for dragon blood that had been shed almost one thousand years long forgotten. They consumed Wrath.

In the heart of Edgewood, the Wrath had fallen, and in the heart of Edgewood, it had died, contaminating the land. It was said that nothing would grow there. The black spot at the heart of Edgewood

## **The Etymology of Fire**

was despoiled. Poisoned. Nothing would grow. It would remain forever dark. The heart of Edgewood was corrupted, and the people would never be the same.

Tahrl rose, wandering, not knowing where he was, not caring where he went. It was dark. He looked to the stars. He saw the moon shrouded by clouds looking as next to blood. It was the fire. Dark smoke smeared with flames flickered and filled the sky. It was quiet. As he wandered between the houses and homes that were yet standing, there was no sound. Everybody was watching the pyre. Townsfolk, soldiers and even Cavan Luc Vemarian watched the blaze in silence. Watching the monster be consumed by flames. Leaving a dark and dank stain in their world where nothing could grow. Only the shattered remains of burnt wood and blackened stone. Nothing more than the skeletal ghost of a lost house or home. The rain might wash away the muck and the darkness, but the spot would always remain. Nothing would grow there. None would rebuild on that one spot. It would remain the contamination at the heart of the world.

The forest called to him. Edgewood rested between the forest and the river far from the center of Kianan government to the south where the Ivory Tower rested and the King held court. Far to the north were the Earlinstien Mountains where he had been born. To the west was the forest and the Graystone Mountains, which were home to nothing more than troglodytes and cavern trolls. The dragons were gone.

The forest lived. In the shadow of such mountains, the forest thrived and survived. There was life in the shadow of death. Tahrl went to the forest, thinking of the pyre at the heart of Edgewood, thinking of land where nothing would grow. In the forest, he would find life. In the forest, he would find roots and leaves and seeds and twigs. He would find pine cones and seed pods, and he would take them back to the fire. He would wait for the flames to die down and the smoke to drift away. Then, he would take his branches and twigs and pine cones and seed pods, and he would cast them over the dark.

Tahrl stopped. He stood frozen in place in the forest in the dark. He did not know where he was. Somewhere behind him was the small town of Edgewood. Before him and all around him was the forest. The forest that they never entered because it rested in the shadow of the mountains. They did not hunt in the forest. They took



## **The Etymology of Fire**

only what little they needed to build and maintain their small town and that only from the edge of the wood.

People did not return from the forest. There were forest trolls, and there were Dryn. Forest trolls could cloud the mind, depriving a person of thought, holding them helpless. It was how they hunted and how they took their prey. The Dryn took children. They stole babies and children and the careless man who wandered into the wood.

Tahlr was in the forest. Edgewood was somewhere lost behind him in the dark. He could not see. The moon and the stars could be so bright that you never needed a light out of doors at night but not in the forest. The branches and the trees blocked the light. Everything was gray and black and white. He could see to the tips of his fingers if he stretched his arm out as far as he could reach but no farther. Everything was a shadow.

He was a fool. The forest had claimed him. In his grief and despair, he had been called into the wood. To gather fruits and nuts. It was stupid. A fool's errand. He turned, looking this way and that, not knowing where he was. He turned, stumbling, looking to a branch, watching a tree, wondering if it had moved. If it was a forest troll. He would not survive; he could not escape. The forest troll would muddle his thoughts, turning him around and around and around in his head. He would not know left from right or up from down.

Tahlr turned, trying to run, stumbling over roots and brush, finding himself on hands and knees. Looking up, he saw that a tree did move. There was no breeze. It was not the wind. Branches turned and twisted, moving slowly toward him. A forest troll did not need to be quick. There was no need for speed. Forest trolls were remnants of the Age of Chaos. They were carnivorous trees, scavengers and carrion eaters. The troll would trap him. It would hold him with roots and smother him with branches. There was no hurry. It would wait until he stopped thrashing and screaming. When he had suffocated, the forest troll would sink roots into his flesh. It would feast on his blood and take the minerals from his skin.

Something touched his leg. He cried out, kicking, but the root only tightened around his ankle until there was nothing but pain. He screamed, fearing the end of the world in the sound. There was light, burning, blinding. He could not see. A scream filled the air, clouding his mind. It was not his own. He clamped his hands to his

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

ears, doing nothing to block the sound. His eyes burned from the light.

There was a woman draped in gray and black shadow standing above him, attacking the tree with an ax. The ax was huge with a great blade like a crescent moon. She struck the forest troll again and again and again. A branch fell. Leaves fluttered all around them. Fragments of bark and broken wood touched him. The scream was everywhere. She didn't care. The ax swung, slicing the air, smashing the trunk. The forest troll fell back, releasing Tahrl's foot. Its scream filled his mind and flooded his body, bypassing his ears.

The woman did not stop. The ax flew, severing a branch, striking the tree, splitting the trunk. She struck again and again, ignoring the scream, smashing the forest troll. Tahrl curled in upon himself, trying to shut out the scream. Numb to everything. The light was gone. If there had ever been one. Shapes swam before his eyes, red and green and gray. He did not know if they were light or sound. The cry of the forest troll faded as it died as the woman reduced it to broken pieces and fragments of wood.

The scream had stopped. In the darkness and in the night, he had not noticed when it had stopped. The forest troll's scream had carried on long after it had been silenced, echoing and reechoing in his mind. The world was pain. The wood was pain, and the forest burned him with each moment that he touched it. He tried to sit up, feeling his whole body ache. He tried to look through gray shadows and the dark to the woman with the ax and the remnants of the forest troll all around her.

He found his nameless protector in the dark with one hand on the ax, which was buried in the fractured stump of the tree. She was leaning against the handle, letting the ax support her for one moment but no more, and then she turned, looking to him. She pulled the ax free, turning toward him. The ax was huge. It may have held many uses, but first among them was not cutting down trees. It was as much bludgeon as blade. A battleax. It was a war ax for slicing enemies in two.

The woman sat on the ground before him, resting the ax next to her, holding it with one hand, and she looked at him. Without any need for light, she studied him. Tahrl felt the wind rush through his chest, sparking a fire that burned and burned. He tried to crawl away. Scuttling backward, he was stopped by a tree, bumping his head against the trunk.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“Dryn,” he said before he could think, trying to move, trying to scuttle backward up the tree that he rested against.

The Dryn moved closer, resting almost on top of him, straddling his legs, watching him with eyes that he could not see because of the dark. The Dryn’s face was sharp and slender like a knife. It had sleek and muscular shoulders as if it had spent many hours practicing with the ax. It moved like a dancer with alien grace as it drew closer, squatting over him with its hips almost touching his own. Its hair was so short as to be almost non-existent as if it didn’t so much cut as shave its head with a knife. The Dryn was so much like a woman he doubted his own senses in the dark.

Tahrl couldn’t move. He couldn’t breathe. His heart burned, racing so fast he thought it might burst. He didn’t know; he couldn’t think. A Dryn was hovering over him, almost touching him. It had saved him from the forest troll, but he did not know what it wanted. Dryn stole babies. They took children. Men who wandered into the forest were never seen or heard from again. For all he knew, this Dryn would steal his soul.

The Dryn moved ever closer; their faces almost touching, and it sniffed him. He cried out, biting down on his fear half-voiced, shying away from it, trying to fall through the tree. It raised a hand, touching his hair, brushing the side of his face, and he trembled beneath its touch, trying not to flinch, expecting each fingertip to be death. And, then it licked him. Its tongue dragging over his cheek, feeling rough and slimy against his skin. He cried out in disgust and uncontrollable horror. He pushed at it, forcing his hands against the Dryn, trying to crawl away.

It held him, grasping his hand and holding him still, and it raised his hand to its chest. It wore clothes. The tunic was hard and leathery almost to the point of being armor, but he could still feel it through the garment. He could feel soft flesh so much like a real woman’s breast. He could almost believe that this creature was really a Montmorin or Kianan woman and not some monstrous Dryn. Struggling against it, trying to pull his hand away from the Dryn, he fell back and away, slumping to the forest floor.

The Dryn cocked its head almost as if it had heard something, and Tahrl strained his ears, hoping that it was Cavan Luc Vemarian, hoping that the townsfolk had come in search of him. He held his breath and listened, but the forest was quiet. Nobody searched the dark wood for lost souls.

## The Etymology of Fire

“I’m not supposed to talk to you,” the Dryn said, and this shocked Tahrl more than anything else, listening to its voice so much like that of a Kianan or Montmorin woman. There was an edge to it almost like birdsong.

The Dryn released his hand, but he did not move. His fingers lingering almost to the point of touching its skin, and then it pulled back and away, standing, leaving a void that almost dragged him to his feet. His fingers hovering as if they longed for the Dryn’s touch or did not realize they no longer graced its skin. The Dryn took the ax, balancing the handle over its shoulder, and looked down at him. Tahrl could not move, looking up at it as if all the strength had left him, and he would never be able to lift another finger for as long as he should live. The Dryn tossed him something, a stone that glowed. It did not yield much light, but it would be more than enough to help him find his way from the forest in the dark.

“Delan only wanted you looked after.”

“What?” Tahrl said, standing without knowing where he had found the strength to move. “How do you know that name?”

But there was no answer. The Dryn was gone.



*The Wrath burned. It was morning, and the Wrath’s funeral pyre was still alive with flame, having lasted throughout the long night. The townsfolk had remained around the fire as if the flickering play of light and shadow held them captive or as if they were feeding the flames with their grief and their rage. The soldiers watched so that the fire would not spread beyond the corpse of the dark monstrosity and take the rest of the town. Tahrl ignored them all, looking away from the Wraith for the first time since it had savaged the town, and he wandered to his own door which had been spared from the attack. It had taken him all the long night to find his way from the depths of the forest, and he wanted only to rest. He didn’t think or wonder at the time or know how he had become so completely lost in the forest. He knew only that he was free of the wood and could rest, not even bothering with his shoes as he sank into the confines of his bed, curling tightly among the blankets.*

He dreamed of the dragon. Its scream had shattered the sky. People looking up, this way and that. Nobody knowing or understand the sound. Nothing more than a blur to smear the sky, it descended, moving so quickly that none could follow it, smashing rooftops

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

at random. Wood splintering. Fragments flying. People screaming as houses disintegrated. It roared, shattering eardrums, knocking townsfolk to the ground with the violence of the sound. Fingers gripped to ears dripping blood to ward off the violence. Soldiers ran, gathering weapons, shouting to one another. Like a streak of chaos or blind destruction, the Wrath leapt from house to home. In the sky. On the ground. Perched on a rooftop. In its wake, half a person stood in a fine mist of blood. Gripping the edge of a building; wood fractured with a crack that was lost beneath the creature's roar.

Tahl screamed, sitting up, doubling over, feeling the food that he had not eaten make a run for his mouth. He twisted, curling among the covers, retching on nothing more than air. His body shook, trembling with cold and sweat, and he fell, having slipped too close to the edge of the bed. The floor hit him. Pain took him hard in the shoulder and in the leg. His arm hurt. Tripped and falling, the blankets tumbled over him, smothering him. He tried to move, almost suffocating, finding a path, tasting stale air. The blankets enveloped him, and he tried to breathe with deep ragged breaths to quiet the fire burning in his wounded heart. He did not move, lying curled on the floor, trembling. He had not slept since the Wrath had struck the town; he had only moved, wandering like a shadow among the surviving houses and homes. The impossible had happened. A dragon out of some long lost and forgotten memory had attacked the town. It was the end of belief. Nothing mattered anymore.

Except a Dryn had spoken to him, giving a name that she could not have known. It could have been a dream or demented fantasy. He had only just awoken from a nightmare memory of the Wrath attacking the town. Everything could have been part of that feverish dream. From the first moment he had heard the Wrath scream, the world had twisted sideways as if he had slipped into some kind of twilight delirium. The forest troll and even the Dryn could have been nothing more than aspects of the nightmare from which he had only just awakened. The Wrath had attacked the town; he did not doubt that. Everything since that moment could have been a hallucination.

Except a Dryn had spoken to him, giving him a stone that glowed with a faint but magic light, and there was the stone where he had dropped it in the middle of the room. He had let it fall from his fingers as he had slumped his way across the room. It still glowed with a distant flicker that was almost invisible in the damp and dark

## **The Etymology of Fire**

of the room. Pulling himself from among the tumbled blankets, he stumbled, crawling to the stone, looking at it, watching it with eyes that suddenly did not want to focus on the light.

It burned, and tears slipped down his cheeks. While the Wrath that had savaged Edgewood was unforgivable, the stone was something new and wholly alien to everything that he knew. The Dryn were a sundered and broken people. Nobody had spoken with them since time out of mind when the DiKena had ruled the world, which was not the right word for it. In the beginning, there had been the DiKena, and they had been the undisputed masters of all the earth and the heavens, the oceans, and the cleansing flames. In the end, the DiKena had been shattered, splintering into three people, the Kianan, Montmorin, and the Dryn. Believing that the dragons were responsible for the fall of the DiKena, the Kianan slaughtered the creatures. When nothing remained of the dragons except their memory and blood, the Kianan had broken all ties with the Montmorin and taken the few surviving Dryn as slaves.

The Dryn had died. One thousand years after the end of the Crusade almost nothing was remembered of them. Dryn stole children. It was said that some Dryn still lived in scattered clumps and odd numbers in the deepest forests and darkest woods as little more than savages and monsters. They kidnapped husbands, farmers and hunters. They stole children. Tahrl touched the stone with one trembling hand, brushing the flickering light with his fingers. Savages and monsters did not know delicate magic. They were not sent to protect people, and they did not know Delan's name.

Tahrl stood, regretting it, almost toppling from his feet and retching on air. In his youth, he had lived among the Montmorin, learning much from them, but he had learned nothing of the Dryn. Breathing deep, he moved without knowing how he managed it. That Dryn had spoken to him, and he could almost believe that she had been a Kianan or Montmorin woman who had protected him from the forest troll. He staggered about his small home, finding water, splashing it against his face and rubbing it into his hair. Tahrl found bread and dry fruit, touching the food to his lips without tasting it. Once upon a time, there had been the DiKena, and their children had been the Kianan, Montmorin and the Dryn. He looked back to the stone, pulsing and flickering quietly to itself where he had left it on the floor.

There was a dagger somewhere in his small house. He used it

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

mostly for slicing the odd piece of bread or hunk of cheese, but it had been a gift. It was one of the few things he had taken with him from the Ivory Tower, and it had once possessed a name for it was magic. He found the dagger, which was named Quicksilver, on the counter where it had last been used for nothing more interesting than the preparation of some long forgotten dinner, and then he took the stone from the floor.

He wavered in the doorway, tasting smoke on his tongue, knowing that it carried the stench of the lost dragon. The sun was about; even though, he did not know how much of the day had passed him in his sleep and fitful dreams. He looked to the wood, touching the dagger that he now carried at his side, and thought turned to action. He entered the forest never looking back and knew that it could be another forest troll calling to him as one had tried to claim him only the night before.

He did not think or wonder for how long or how far he walked only stopping finally with the half-light filtered by the trees falling all around him. There was half a clearing where a great old tree had fallen. Its branches lying twisted and broken, and Tahrl studied it for a long time fascinated by the color, scent and texture of the wood. The trunk had cracked, breaking almost at the base, and the stump with all of its jagged edges and fragments of wood still rested with roots gripping deep into the ground.

He wanted to laugh, pulling away from the tree, turning around and around, trying to look every which way at once. His breath pulled at him, burning his lungs, and he felt his heart like a hammer pounding helplessly at the walls of his chest. There was nothing. Nobody waited for him, not Dryn or even a forest troll. The wood was quiet so he tried to speak, finding gravel in his throat, and he wished he had remembered to bring water.

“Why?” he managed to say and then laughed with a harsh giggle of a sound that degenerated into a cough. The forest did not answer; even though, he listened and waited, holding his breath so that he might not mistake a word for the rustling of the leaves in the wind. “You want to answer me or else you would not have said that you cannot speak. I knew a Delan; though, he never used that name to my face. I knew him as Alexander, and he was much older than he looked.” Tahrl stopped, turning about, looking to the forest and the trees, and wondered at the silence and the slip of the wind through the leaves. “He was a wizard. The greatest who ever

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

lived. They called him the Avatar. But, he gave it up. Disappeared. Nobody knew what became of him. Which is why I knew him as Alexander.” Tahrl felt a shiver take him, knowing he spoke to the empty air, wanting to stop, and he realized that he could not even as he bit at his teeth to quench the flow of words. “The wizards never called him Delan, of course. They took that name from him. Called him Dalin.”

“You talk too much.”

Tahrl cried out, spinning around, stumbling backward, almost falling. The Dryn was seated on the fallen trunk of the tree as if she had always been there and his eyes had simply slipped from her whenever he had glanced that way. Fumbling at his belt, he grasped Quicksilver and pointed it toward her with shaky fingers. The Dryn said nothing, only looking at him as if she might find him amusing if he should somehow manage to slip and fall on the blade. Tahrl fought with his voice and breath, trying to hold the dagger with waver- ing fingers, trying to hold her gaze.

“Why are you working for Alexander?” Tahrl said. “It’s not your choice or else you wouldn’t have disobeyed him to speak.” The Dryn did not answer, watching him as if his wavering hand and unsteady voice were amusing. “Do you work for him? If Alexander knew where I was, why would he not speak to me?”

“Because you were running away. If we had approached you, saying that you had fled the Ivory Tower only to land at our doorstep, you would have kept running.”

“You know so much about me, do you?”

The Dryn did not answer, and this made Tahrl’s breath run ragged through his skin. Holding the dagger with a death grip, he wanted only to throw it at her and run.

“Why?” he managed to say, but the Dryn did not answer. “How do you know Delan’s name?”

“How do you? You said yourself that he never told you.”

“He told me what he had been. The name I learned from the magicians. Not from them. They gave me access to the old records of the wizards because I was an advisor to the King and sought answers to the riddle of the dragons. There were private records that the magicians did not think I would be able to read. I learned many things.”

“Good for you.”

“Good for- what do you want of me?”



## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“Only to protect you.”

“From what? Should I thank you that my home yet stands while all around me is ruined? Why couldn’t you protect them?”

“From what?”

“From the Wrath! It is true then. You protected me while letting my neighbors burn.”

“You Kianan raped and murdered my grandmother.”

Tahrl said nothing, letting his heart race, feeling his skin burn. The Dryn said nothing, watching him from her perch on the back of the broken tree as if daring him to speak so that she could strike him down. After the Crusade and with the dragons gone, the Kianan had taken the mountains, searching for gold, and they had taken the Dryn with them to keep them warm at night.

“You want to kill me,” Tahrl finally said. “The rage burns in you that you must protect me. That Alexander has some hold over you. Forcing you to do his bidding.” The Dryn said nothing. “The only thing that keeps you going is the knowledge that your captor was once a prisoner himself.”

The Dryn screamed with a roar that shook Tahrl almost dropping him from his feet. The Dryn’s eyes burned; its mouth gaped wide as great as a yawn except it was a roar showing lots of teeth, and Tahrl saw a creature sitting on the fallen tree as alien as anything he had ever seen. Its passing fancy to a Kianan or Montmorin woman slipping away, and Tahrl saw a wild thing pulling at its chains, smashing its fits at the bars of its cage, wanting to be free.

He did not run. Tahrl stepped backward and away from the Dryn, never taking his eyes off the thing, and he stepped backward over brush and between trees until they blocked his sight of her. He turned, walking quickly, never looking back and trying to trace his way through the forest for Edgewood and home. He held the dagger Quicksilver so tightly in his fist that his fingers burned. The blade had done him no good even for a magic dagger; the Dryn had not given it a second thought. The dagger could protect him almost with a will of its own, sensing danger, and it could fly through the air, striking targets with but a thought. He had seen it demonstrated. Alexander had shown him. The dagger could protect him but had done nothing against the Dryn.

Tahrl slackened his pace; the forest forgotten. The dagger had done nothing. He had not been in danger. The Dryn had protected, wielding a great ax to save him from a forest troll. The Dryn had

## **The Etymology of Fire**

spoken to him. She had tempted him with words that had pulled him back into the forest, and he had come, seeking her. The Dryn had been cautious if not kind, and he had abused her, accusing her of being a slave. Tahrl stood still, feeling his thoughts burn, trying to touch the edge of his breath. He had run. The Dryn was right. He had fled the Ivory Tower. If Alexander or this Dryn had approached him, he would have run away again. He had to stop. Using the Dryn, Alexander was trying to regain contact with him. The Dryn wanted only to help him; tell him something.

Tahrl turned; began to walk back toward the clearing. She blocked his path. Appearing out of the wilderness, the Dryn was in his face as if she had been following him. He tried to raise Quicksilver. The Dryn pushed him, grabbing him, shoving him against a tree. Towering over him, she thrust her face a mere breath away from his own, holding him hard against the tree, and he cried at the pain of fingers pressed into his skin.

“You are lost,” she whispered the words with such anger that he thought she was hissing them into his eyes. “Your faith broken by the dragon’s attack on Edgewood.” He held his eyes closed as hard as he could; face turned away from the creature’s breath. “Let me say words that might help you find the path once more. The dragons are not evil. That one was forced to attack your home. I have been in the mountains. If you had ever seen a dragon there, you would know that they do not rage.”

She released him, and he fell, tumbling to the earth and the dust. Tahrl scrambled to his hands and knees, looking at the wood and the deep forest green, but he could not bring his eyes to gaze at her. He tried to speak, finding nothing, not words, not breath, not even thought.

“I remember Quicksilver,” she said, and Tahrl realized that the Dryn was holding his dagger. “It was a gift to you from my mother.”

Quicksilver struck the dirt before his eyes; flung so hard the blade was buried almost to the hilt. He could not touch it. Tahrl shivered, folding around his hands and knees, and found that he could not move or look to where the Dryn had been standing. She was gone, leaving him to words that ripped at his mind. A dragon had attacked Edgewood, destroying all his dreams. They could not be as she described them. It defied the knowledge of his eyes. The forest burned at his mind. He found strength in numb fingers at last

## The Etymology of Fire

to reach for Quicksilver and tried not to wonder what it could mean if the Dryn had spoken true.



*The dragon roared. It had attacked Edgewood, falling upon the town and slaughtering the people who had called the place home. The townsfolk had not even known its name, calling it Wrath or Wraith. It had destroyed the town but not by ravaging the buildings. The dragon had savaged their souls, driving the life from them, and making the survivors look forever to the sky. He had watched it from the edge of the forest, hiding behind branches and trees. Tahrl had watched the monstrous creature devour the town. The creature had ripped at everything he had known and believed. The dragons had once been the protectors. The thing that had struck Edgewood was not a protector. It had attacked. It had ravaged. It had raged. The soldiers had barely been strong enough to stop it. They could not have summoned it or wished it to attack the town. The Dryn could not have spoken true. The dragon's cries still echoed and reverberated in the depths and confines of his mind.*

“Tahrl?”

The word pulled at him, and he looked, finding nobody and then a figure. Tahrl sighed deep in his heart, feeling the weight of all creation sink slowly down through his skin like drops of frozen rain slipping from his shoulders. Rubbing at his eyes and saying nothing, he looked, expecting one of Cavan Luc Vemarian's men, and found only Aaron.

“Are you well?” Aaron said. “You have been so distant. So quiet. Nobody knows you.”

“I am a shadow,” he replied, picking at the words, finding them between his toes. “Nobody knows? I have been hiding. Befuddled by contradiction. My eyes lie to me, did you know?”

“I meant that nobody knows where you are. At any given time, I look and ask around. Nobody knows where to find you. We worry.”

“Don't. I am lost.”

“We are all lost. In this place. Look about you. What has been left to us? You are with us. One of us. Do not cast us out.”

“No, you are not one of- I mean that I am not one- You would not like my thoughts.”

“Could they be any worse than what I have heard? The soldiers speak of you. The Lord Vemarian knows you. I saw him speak with

## The Etymology of Fire

you. How could he know you? The soldiers say many things. We listen. We can do nothing else.”

Tahrl said nothing, breathing slowly and feeling the air like frost in his lungs.

“Is it true?”

Tahrl found nothing, looking to where the fire had burned and the dragon had died.

“What they say? Is it true?” Aaron said as if brandishing the question like a club would force the answer to be what he wished of it.

“Is what true?”

“You were once a great man. Adviser to the King. Stood at the foot of the Ivory Tower.”

“It is cold,” Tahrl said, raising his hand, touching memory. “The Ivory Tower is cool to the touch and feels like. Like glass.”

“You touched it?” Aaron looked to the south; he could not help himself. Against the far horizon and almost invisible to the eye was a single strand of white thread reaching forever into the sky. “How could you touch it? How? How could you say those things about the Wraiths?”

“I was not alone, Aaron,” Tahrl said, and his hand drifted back to his side, touching the dagger Quicksilver. “I had support. Did the soldiers mention that? The Lady Amalthea defended my research. Gave me a gift.”

“For defending the Wraiths?”

“For speaking for the dead? Yes. For defending those who could no longer defend themselves. No dragon lives who could give voice to his family. I always wondered at the Lady Amalthea. I understood she was related to the Lady Amalthea Li Dirae who lived before the time of the Crusade. I figured our Lady Amalthea was trying to lay claim to her ancestor’s lands. That includes where we are standing. All these lands before the mountains and for as far as the eye can see once belonged to Amalthea Li Dirae. I intended to look for her.”

“What?”

“When I left- when I fled the Ivory Tower. I was going to search for a familiar face. Descendant of Amalthea Li Dirae. I never found her. They must have found her. For supporting me. All I have left is her gift. Without it, she could have been nothing more than a dream.”

“Look around you, Tahrl. I hope they burned your lady’s house to the ground. How could you speak for the Wraiths?”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“Because nobody remembers the legends.”

“Legend says the Wraiths attacked the Kianan. We stopped them, crying never again. Remember the Crusade.”

“Memories are short, and we remember only what the man with the biggest stick tells us is true. The stories you quote are from after the Crusade. Remember the old stories and ancient legends. Remember the DiKena.”

“The DiKena made the earth and the Kianan to rule it. The Montmorin to serve us and the Dryn to give us sport. The Dryn seduced the Montmorin, giving birth to evil.”

“Enough! I will not stomach lies spoken of the Montmorin!”

“Lies?”

“Yes, lies! Do you know nothing? Do you care at all for the affairs of the world? I am Tahrl Morgan ap Morin, and I will not hear you speak so of family!”

“Morgan ap Morin? You lied to me! Lied to my face! Denied that you were Morgan ap Morin. It means friend of the Montmorin, does it not?”

“Close enough.”

“Your family- family Morgan- Morgan ap Morin. Renewed our ties with the Montmorin. Reopened the trade routes that had been closed since the Dryn seduced them.”

“You know nothing!”

“I know nothing,” Aaron said, faltering, falling away from him. “I don’t know you. I don’t know your lies, and I won’t listen to your insanity. When you remember that you are Kianan, you will find us here.” With that, Aaron turned and all but ran from Tahrl’s sight, looking back once or twice, slipping between broken houses and burned homes before he finally disappeared.



*Tahrl could not find the fallen tree in the long neglected clearing. There were no paths through the wood. There was no way to tell which direction he had taken the last time he had wandered the forest so he only walked until he was tired and knew that he would not find the one tree among all of the others where he had spoken with the Dryn. He chose a tree and rested upon its exposed roots, taking Quicksilver from his side and admiring the blade. It was a magical dagger, and he let it float in the air before his eyes, allowing it to turn slowly one way and then another.*

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“I remember when the Lady Amalthea gave this to me,” he said, knowing without really thinking about it that his strange companion of the wood had joined him beside the tree. “It was presented to me in the court. Before the King. Alexander was there. I was still- if not respected- at least I was still accepted in the court.”

“I was there,” the Dryn said. “Don’t try to remember me, but I was there.”

Tahrl reached for Quicksilver.

“The King protected me. It was a long time before I realized how much. There were threats. Attempts at poisoning. Those were to be expected simply because of my position in the court. But worse because I stood and said the Crusade had been wrong. We slaughtered innocence.”

“I remember.”

“There were threats and open challenges. Beatings in the dark. And then my family. They had to do what they did. I understand that. They had to protect their trade standing and protect the Montmorin. Then I realized that the King might fall if he continued to support me. Why did I do it?”

The Dryn said nothing.

“Why did I stand and say that the dragons had only sought to protect us?” He stabbed the tree, feeling Quicksilver bite bark and wood. “All too recently, I have been reminded how much the Kianan hate. The Dryn for example. I can’t help but wonder what came first. Did we hate you so much that we abused you? Or did we abuse you and hide that abuse with hate?”

“Fear came first and then hate.”

“You think so?” With effort, he freed Quicksilver from the root and held the blade before his eyes, watching the play of light and shadow down its length. At last, he put the dagger away. “Why are you spoon-feeding me information?”

“Would you have heard me all at once?”

“No, I don’t know. I thought you weren’t supposed to talk to me.”

“I will not hide.”

“I wasn’t running away. I realized that too. I was looking for you.”

“No, you were running. If you had been looking, you would have gone to the Montmorin, but you did not.”

“I could not endanger them.”

“They do not fear the Kianan.”

“What are you suggesting? That I was ashamed?”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“I have said nothing. You accuse others of suggesting that which you think for yourself. It was felt best to let you be.”

“Where is Alexander?”

“To the north looking for answers. We don’t know enough.”

“Why the dragons rage?”

“It is poison or magic or something wholly unique. I do not know. Only that the Kianan Vemarian is responsible. Delan says Vemarian continues to play upon the Kianan King’s weakness for having supported you.”

“No.”

“I fear for my family.”

“Tell me about them.”

“No, I’m not supposed to talk.”

“Really? Have I been imagining your voice?”

There was no answer. Tahrl turned, looking, but could find no trace of the Dryn as if he really had been talking to the empty air. He tried to laugh, choking on the sound as it stuck in his throat. He looked and looked, wandering all about the tree, finding no trace of his mysterious companion of the forsaken wood.

“I cannot go back,” he finally said. “Who am I talking to? I know you haven’t gone far. Dryn. Amalthea’s daughter. I know you are listening. The soldiers are talking about me. Spreading stories. The people have started looking at me. They- they accepted me. Once upon a time. Asking no questions of someone who sought only to find a new path. Now? I expect to wake up dead. My home burned to the ground.”

“Sure, you can,” the Dryn said, but he could not find her.

“Why do you mock me?”

There was silence in the wood. Tahrl turning this way and that. Looking for one face among the trees, he slipped, almost falling, catching himself on a branch and fighting for breath that would not sooth his heart or quench the fires that beat at the inside of his breast.

“Because you play the part of the fool so well,” the Dryn finally said, and there she was, standing among branches and under leaves. Their eyes met, and then she moved sideways, disappearing between trees. “Go home, Kianan. Your family will not burn you in your sleep.”

“So I am dismissed? But you have not yet tempted me. Given me cause to return to the wood and continue our musings.” He looked,

## The Etymology of Fire

seeing nothing, feeling the erratic beat of his own heart. “Dryn steal children.”

“That is true,” she said, standing before him, leaning against a tree. “I cannot dispute that.”

“Why?”

“I do not like to answer questions.”

“That is true. You’re not supposed to talk to me. Yet, you do. You do not agree that I should be kept in the dark.”

“We are going to need your help.”

“My help?”

“Eventually. What good does keeping you ignorant do?”

“I was not ready for the truth. You said yourself.” Tahrl froze, watching the Dryn watching him with patient eyes, feeling the hair rise on the back of his neck and tears prick the back of his eyes. “That question wasn’t for me, was it?”

“We have to protect ourselves. There is some disagreement over what is to become of you. Eventually, we shall have need of you to confront this Vemarian for us. If you should fail, how much should you know of us?”

He knew nothing of the Dryn. They were scattered and broken, living in small and shattered groups. Such small circles and clusters would not care what he learned. There was something more than disassociated groups in the forest. He wanted to run. Let his feet carry him to the secret home of the Dryn.

“What does Alexander say?”

“When Delan traveled north, you were not ready. You needed to be hit over the head. The dragon or something like that.”

“He’s your father.”

The Dryn laughed with a sharp bark of a sound that made him flinch raising one hand to protect his face. When he looked back to her, the Dryn had not moved, resting against the tree as if nothing had happened.

“We don’t speak of such things,” she said and was gone, leaving Tahrl alone in the forest with nothing to keep him company but the rustling of the leaves in the tall branches of the trees.



*The townsfolk were watching him. Tahrl could feel their gaze like sandpaper on his back, making his skin crawl. He would turn, looking, searching them out, and they would falter unable to stand be-*



## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

fore his eye. There were whispers. The soldiers talked, and word spread like a shadow cast across the town blocking the sun. Tahrl took to his home so the others would not have to look away when he caught them watching him. The forest forgotten; he had explored the wood, waiting for the Dryn, talking to the trees in the hopes of yielding a response, which never came.

The dragons filled too much of his time, pushing at the walls and ceiling of his little home; he was surprised that the place did not explode or catch fire from a flash of misplaced anger. He had seen only the one creature as it had attacked Edgewood, and he could not see them at peace. They were monstrous, and they were wild. Records of the gentle protectors were so old and neglected that the magicians and Montmorin were the only people who remembered that such things existed. The magicians gave no notice to records that had been kept by the wizards they had replaced, and the Montmorin said nothing, fearing the wrath of the Kianan more than the loss of truth.

Confronting the Kianan would be dangerous. It would be foolhardy. Tahrl knew it would not be enough to stand before the Kianan King and accuse Cavan Luc Vemarian of butchery. The people would never admit their own complicity in the slaughter of the dragons; never admit they were wrong. If Tahrl held proof, the people would rise up to squash it, shouting so they need not listen, screaming so that words would not sink in. The truth would have to be big enough and great enough to cowl the Kianan into submission.

Rae was there, closing the door, standing just inside the single room that was his home. Tahrl said nothing, watching her, feeling his trail of thought pulled from between his fingers, and he could not remember the last time he had seen her. Time being more often still a jumbled blur than not.

“What are they saying about you?” Rae said, whispering as if such a voice made the words less real, and he could not answer, struggling with threads and fragments of thoughts and sound.

“I don’t know,” he finally said with a voice that ached for silence. “They haven’t been talking to me. I think it’s true. Without having heard what is said. I don’t know why they need speak lies.”

“No.”

“With only the truth of mine eyes to contradict me, I can say that the Wraths and Wraiths are not evil. Misguided. Misdirected. Controlled. I do not know which. They may in fact be seeking justice for

## **The Etymology of Fire**

what we did to them. I cannot neglect that possibility. But, they are not evil.”

“How can you say- do not joke- how can you think such things?”

“I wish I could laugh.”

“They say we harbor a monster. Nobody can find you. They say you have gone into the forest.”

“Yes, more than once.”

“Do not joke about such things.” She stepped into the room, leaving the shadow of the door behind her, holding her arms to her chest, facing him. “The forest is dangerous. It will corrupt you. They say there are Dryn.”

“May the Dryn feast on my soul. No, I wish I could laugh. Do not look at me so. I am lost. Confused. Deluded. Torn. Call it what you will. The dragons are not what we see. I am starting to believe.”

“Do not say such things. Fight it. Do not believe. If the others.”

“Yes, I hear their voices. I know the danger. I faced it once before at the Ivory Tower. Did the soldiers tell you that? I stood before the King and his court and said that the dragons were not monsters, Wrath or Wraith.”

“It’s true.”

“There will be anger and threats. There will be violence.”

“Save yourself! Leave this place. I’ve always wanted to see the Montmorin. They would protect us, wouldn’t they?”

“Us?”

“Away from this place. The stink and smell of death. It’s everywhere. There’s nothing left. The Montmorin are clever. They say you have family there. The Montmorin tampered with you. It’s why you can say that black is white. But, anything would be better than this place.”

“No, I cannot. I do not wish to run. Besides, I am waiting for an old friend.”

“Who?”

“The greatest wizard to ever walk the earth.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

He tried to smile as if this might somehow remake the world and leave them without monsters of fear and hate. Rae moved, standing still, as if she might reach for him, dragging him from this place to find safety among the Montmorin she must have imagined behind her eyes. Watching her, he did not move. He could not move, but

## The Etymology of Fire

he did. From that day and until the end of time, Tahrl would never understand why he took Rae in his arms. She was so young; just old enough to be married but too young to have children, and he wondered who her father had promised her to before the dragon had killed him. She returned his embrace, wrapping her arms around him so tight that he feared she would never let go.

“I wish I could send you to Earlinstien,” he finally said. “Urtha Malor would take you in if I asked. *What is one more daughter*, she would say. The Montmorin are like that. They really are.” He loosened his hold, taking her by the shoulders and looking into her eyes. “You do not hate me?”

“How could I?”

“You must hate me. If they think otherwise, they will hurt you. Believe what they say. You do not know me anymore.”

She tried to kiss him, awkwardly, like a child, catching him on the cheek. It was a strange moment lost to time as if a variation of the world where there was peace had replaced their own, and then he was escorting her to the door without another word having passed between them. He had known too many such displaced moments since Wrath had fallen on the town of Edgewood. Something would give soon enough and the whole of the world would fall apart. Closing the door, leaning against it, listening to Rae walk away, feeling warm tears burn his cheek, he wondered if he would wake one morning to smoke and flame before there was an answer to satisfy the dragons.



*Alexander found him.*

“You are in danger. We must go.”

“What?” Tahrl said, losing his voice to the dark, looking at his friend who he had not seen since before he had fled the Ivory Tower.

“Vemarian has sent soldiers south from Windvale to take you. I am sorry. They will be here soon. We must go.”

“So quickly. He only just left for Windvale himself. I thought I had more time. Why did he not take me then if he wants the pleasure of my company again?”

“I doubt he wants to see you. In spite of everything, your family would be most displeased if Vemarian were connected too closely to your disappearance.” The world left Tahrl, trailing after the distant whispers of Alexander’s voice, and he found that he could not

## **The Etymology of Fire**

move as if Alexander's words had bound him to the door even as his friend tried pushing past him to gain access to the house. "Really, we must hurry. Only what we can carry. Do you have a pack or a bag or something? Tahrl? I am sorry. I wish things had happened differently. That I had made better plans for contacting you. But, we must hurry. Tahrl!"

"What? Yes, I am sorry." He came free of the door. "I keep half a bag prepared. Things being what they are. I never expected to get far if I needed to run."

He found the bag, clothing, food, his dagger Quicksilver. There was nothing else. His home was small, being little more than a lopsided rectangle, and he remembered repairing it when he had first come to Edgewood. The cottage had required much work, having been left empty and abandoned for years prior to his arrival. The townspeople had helped him rebuild, never speaking of the previous owner, never asking why he had chosen Edgewood. They had simply accepted him as another of the displaced and unwanted who found their way to the small town at the edge of the cursed wood.

"We will go south in case anyone is watching," Alexander said, and then they left Tahrl's home, walking through the town in silence.

Tahrl stopped once, looking back with the morning sun in his eyes; everything bathed in light. Edgewood was so far away; nothing more than a spec of dust to rub against the side of the forest. He turned to Alexander, saying nothing and trying to feel the breath that should have been burning in his heart and the hunger that should have been gnawing at his stomach.

"The soldiers will be on horseback," Alexander said, walking again. "We'll be able to stop soon enough."

"You never told me you had a daughter."

"Yeah, I know."

"Why?"

For the longest time, there was silence as they followed the road with Edgewood always at their backs, and Tahrl lifted his gaze from the dirt and sparse grass that made up the road that could take them all the way to the Ivory Tower.

"I don't know," Alexander finally said. "For the same reason I don't tell people I used to be a wizard, I guess."

"You told me."

"Yes, that- that surprised even me. It was everything happening

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

at the Ivory Tower, I guess. You were conflicted- being torn apart. I couldn't do nothing. I wanted you to know what I had been through. Hoping that it would help. Give you strength."

"It did if you can call running away from everything strength."

"You were protecting your family."

"They can take care of themselves."

"Don't underestimate your own actions. You'll tear yourself apart. I could give you more of my own life. Why I fled from the wizards. Why only magicians remain. But, I won't. No, it is my life no more."

"Things still tear at your heart, I take it? Gives me great confidence for my own conscience," he said, expecting no answer from Alexander, hearing nothing from him, and Tahrl looked once more back toward Edgewood. "I thought you said they would be on horseback?"

"Yes, they are," Alexander said. "We will leave the path soon enough."

"Why are we even on the road? They'll be able to follow us."

"We are laying a false trail. Have patience."

He looked once more to the friend he had not seen in years. Alexander was short, and he would have been stocky if he had not spent more years than Tahrl could count on the road. He walked with a simple grace and light touch of foot to earth as if he was both gentle as the playful breeze and as devastating as the hurricane. Tahrl tried to imagine his friend in robes of white gold and spider silk with a beard and long hair the color of the sky past midnight and holding a carved staff of dark wood instead of a silver flute that shimmered like the moon beneath the stars.

"You could have told me you had a daughter," Tahrl finally said. "You travel to the ends of the earth, playing that flute for your supper. It would not have surprised me to learn that you were a father. I often imagined it."

Alexander stopped, turning, looking to Tahrl.

"Alexander is a wandering minstrel without title, name or family," he said. "That is important. Beholden to none. It is the only way he can travel the world so freely. Do you think everyone yields to the Kianan King?"

"You said that almost as if Alexander was someone else," Tahrl said. "Or a mask. Or a disguise. Or a lie."

"Not a lie. Nor even a mask. I am Alexander, but Alexander is not

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

all of me. I am- you look at me betrayed, Tahrl. Do not think so of me. Remember that I am a wizard.”

“You were a wizard. You told me that you renounced your power.”

Alexander tried to laugh, sounding as next to tears.

“If only things were that simple, Tahrl. There is so much I have not told you. For your own safety and sanity, there is so much that you do not know. I am a wizard, Tahrl. It’s kind of like being a dam in a river. I leak. If the pressure builds, I will burst, and you would not want to be in the path of that flood.”

Tahrl said nothing, looking to his friend, seeing a drowning man clinging desperately to a raft.

“I am sorry, Alex,” he said. “I am distracted. Distraught. Overwhelmed. So much has happened under this moon.”

“I know.”

“So can you do anything wondrous?”

“What?”

“Forgive me if I offend, but I understood that you had surrendered all of your power.”

“A belief I fostered in you. Well, I can live for a very long time without the years piling up on me.”

“I noticed that right off.”

“I raced horses to Edgewood and got there first.”

“I actually noticed that one, too, but I figured sleeping horses had more to do with it.”

“We left Windvale yesterday. No, I am not going to tell you how. Let us just say that I can fly like the wind when I have need to. Speaking of horses,” Alexander said, looking north. “It will soon be time to leave this road behind.”

They turned once more to the south and walked for a short while before turning for the forest that had been forever to their right; entering the wood. The warm air turning cool as they passed under branches and between trees, and a hush of lost silence falling over them as if they had crossed from one world and entered into another. They traveled for a time beneath a canopy of leaves and tall branches that filtered the light and cast everything in shades of twilight, and then they rested for the first time since Alexander had pulled Tahrl from sleep and home, drinking water and eating liarscake that Alexander took from his pack. Tahrl looked through the wood and between trees, seeking sign of anything familiar, looking

## **The Etymology of Fire**

for paths he had followed while searching for the Dryn, recognizing nothing. Somewhere was the edge of the forest and the small town of Edgewood. The soldiers would come, looking for him, asking the others what had become of him. They would find nothing, and Tahrl felt cold take him to think how the townsfolk would help with the search.

“Where are we going?”

“Greenhaven,” Alexander said with his mouth full, chewing, swallowing. “You will be safe there. It is a Dryn city. The only one.”

Tahrl remembered the Dryn standing over him in the forest in the dark with the giant red ax in her hands, and he tried to picture many such Dryn in a city among the trees. He remembered the touch of her tongue as she licked him. He remembered the rage as she screamed. He remembered how she had slipped between the trees. Behind his eyes, he saw hundreds of angular faces framed with red hair flitting silently through the forest like mist.

“A city,” he whispered, knowing that they kidnapped children. “I had not imagined such a thing.”

“It is unique in all the world. To the best of my knowledge, anyway, and I have searched for others. Oh, it is true that in the long forgotten past there were many such cities. They were gone even before the Crusade. I do not know what happened. They do not remember.”

“A broken people. Like the DiKena? I do not recall anything in the legends.”

“I can only imagine that the Kianan dislike for the Dryn predates even the Crusade.”

“Fear came first,” Tahrl said. “It’s what your daughter said. Like the dragons, fear turned to hate. Hate turned to rage. She didn’t say that about the dragons. Those are my musings.”

“My daughter,” Alexander said, looking to the forest and the dark green of the leaves, letting his voice trail away.

“She said she wasn’t supposed to talk to me. That you told her to say nothing.”

“Must have been Armada.”

“What? You say that as if there is more than one.”

“There are four- did she tell you she was my daughter?”

“I guessed. It shocked her so badly that I knew it had to be true. Four? Really, Alex, when were you going to tell me?”

“I don’t know. I had not thought that far. Not about this. There

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

is so much I must hide from the world. What would happen if the Kianan knew a Dryn city thrived in these woods?”

“They would burn it.”

“Oh, I know they believe that Dryn live here infesting the wood. So they fear the forest. Shun it. Edgewood could be a thriving city providing rich lumber for both the Montmorin and the Kianan. If only they did not fear the Dryn. If they learned of Greenhaven, anger would overcome fear. Greenhaven would be lost.”

“Your daughter- Armada? Armada said there was some debate as to what was to become of me.”

“Yes, that is true. The Dryn are fiercely independent. There is leadership. They have a governess but not like the Kianan King or a Montmorin Matriarch. Greenhaven is fragile. If the Dryn should ever doubt the city’s value, they will simply leave.”

“What is to become of me?”

“It is possible that you will not be allowed to leave.”

“What?”

“I am sorry.”

“Why?”

“Kianan men are a most precious and rare commodity.”

“And, yet, you move freely. If the Dryn are wary of rules and law as you say, they will not stop me.”

“Because the Dryn are wary, you must first prove that you will not betray them to the Kianan.”

“That’s not what you said. Precious and rare. You- four daughters? Was that the price of freedom?”

“Oh, don’t be a fool. I proved my worth. When I met them, I was still the wizard’s avatar.”

“Why are you doing this to me?” Tahrl stood, stumbling to his feet, almost falling on his face. His arms and fingers spread wide.

“Because I want you safe,” Alexander said, watching him, “and I am going to need your help.”

“My help?”

“Yes.”

Tahrl said nothing, wanting to stand yet already on his feet, facing the friend he had not seen since before he had fled the Ivory Tower.

“Cavan Luc Vemarian is enraging the dragons,” Alexander said. “I do not know how, and I do not know why. It is a most dangerous game he is playing. What I do know is that it is only a matter of time



## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

before his soldiers discover Greenhaven. That cannot happen.” Alexander said nothing more as if he had to bite down on the next words he might speak so that they would not come screaming out of his throat. He tried to smile, saying nothing, and seemed to catch his breath. “So we must stop him. It was why the Dryn were eager to back you in the first place. In the hope that someday they could be more like the Montmorin. Accepted by the Kianan.”

“And my family has strong ties to the Montmorin.”

“That is true. It was your family who reunited the Kianan and the Montmorin. It is your family who stands the best chance of gaining acceptance for the Dryn. They need- we need you, Tahrl. Your connections.”

“You don’t need me.”

“Yes, we do.”

“I am not my connections.”

“You misunderstand. You are the only one who has spoken for the dragons in time out of mind. Yes, the dragons. If you sponsor the dragons- get your family and the Montmorin to listen- we can turn the Kianan. Stop Vemarian.”

“I tried once before.”

“That is why it must be you. Listen to me. We are not looking to convert the Kianan. There are many who still speak with venom about the Montmorin. We only need to stop Vemarian. We will not move until we have proof of his actions. His crimes.”

“What proof? You know how well my research and findings were taken. What proof will turn the Kianan? For that matter, why do you deny the truth of your eyes? Edgewood was attacked. So let us assume that everything I know is wrong. Why do you believe the dragons are innocent?”

“Because I have seen them.”

“Seen who?”

“Dragons. In the mountains. The deep mountains. They are there. Flying far overhead. I have never been close to them. Never spoken with them. But they are there. Ignoring us. Allowing us passage. They do not harm us. Do not attack. Do not rage. In the deep mountains, the dragons are peaceful.”

“In the mountains,” Tahrl whispered the words, sliding to the forest floor, leaning against a tree, watching his friend. There was a smile both timid and blissful touching the edge of Alexander’s lips, and there was a spark of sunshine and starlight in his dark eyes as if

## **The Etymology of Fire**

he had seen the forest at the end of time. Tahrl saw the mountains, imagining the forest was not all around them, looking all the way to the deep mountains past Dryn and troglodytes and cavern trolls. He imagined birds only believing that they were not. They were too big, looking as small as feathered stones because of the distance. He saw dragons flying gracefully between clouds and over tall peaks behind his eyes.

“I don’t know why they rage,” Alexander said quiet as a whisper. “Vemarian is responsible. Somehow. It is poison or charm or magic. I do not know. Locked in the tip of an arrow. Of that, I am almost certain, but I need more.”

“The Dryn said you were seeking answers in Windvale.”

“The Dryn? You must mean Armada.”

“Yes, if that is her name. She never bothered me with such trivial details. You could not find such an arrow? Take such a one as keeper of the arrows?”

“No, they are well hidden. I am not certain of their existence. They are very well protected.”

“That is a problem. What is to be done then?”

“That is why you are here.”

“I see,” Tahrl said, having to bite down on his lip so that the blood would not gush from his mouth. He tried to breathe, feeling the flames in his throat, and he heard the memory and echo of laughter following him through the halls of the Ivory Tower. He remembered the touch of the cold past midnight as he had followed a path that few knew that took him to the edge of the castle and then he had been out beneath the stars, walking through the dark, listening to the passage of his feet over stone streets.

“Tahrl, you know more than anyone about the dragons. You can help me. We must understand them. Approach them. Reach them. Turn the Kianan.”

“Reach them? Who? The Kianan will not listen. My family will be destroyed if they stand against Vemarian, saying that the dragons do not rage. Everything we have gained from the Montmorin gone.”

“There is a way.”

“Except you don’t know what it is.”

“I have an idea. The beginnings of a way.” Alexander leaned away from the tree, talking with his fingers, moving as if he knew that he was crazy. “To reach the Kianan, we must first reach the dragons.”

“Are you mad!” Tahrl was standing without knowing how he

## **The Etymology of Fire**

had reached his feet, standing before Alexander who did not flinch away from him, matching his eyes. He felt dizzy, wanting to sit, but he could not move as words and ideas turned and swirled before his eyes desperate to avoid capture or be pinned down. “After we contact the dragons, you want to bring more members of my family into the mountains. My family and the Montmorin to meet our dragons. Let the rumors of an alliance spread.” Tahrl tried to laugh as the words refused to take shape on his tongue, and he felt the wind shake and toss him through the sky. Alexander said nothing. “Such an insane idea might work if only we had the time. If only Vemarian’s soldiers did not patrol the mountains, infecting dragons with rage. If only there were no troglodytes or cavern trolls. Yes, it might work. What am I saying? It would never work.”

“The dragons themselves may be the only proof we have.”

“The dragons themselves are the only proof we can never use. If we can discredit Vemarian, we might delay the Crusade. We will not change any minds.”

“I am not hoping to change minds. I want only time. Give me time enough and I will change the world.”

“So,” Tahrl said, trying to laugh, choking on the sound even as it tried to escape from between his lips, feeling the world rush beneath his feet and the storm take the forest in a fury of smoke and flame. He sat back before his friend, feeling his legs quake, leaning against the tree so that he would not fall. “This is too much.” It had only been that morning that a sound at his door had pulled him from sleep and he had found Alexander standing there. It had only been that morning that he had left what little remained of the world he knew behind. “What are we waiting for? The mountains will grow bored and leave us before nightfall.”

“You are right, Tahrl, it is so much to take in all at once. For that I am sorry. To leave you naked before the ravaging dragon, I am sorry. I did not plan for this. Did not expect Vemarian’s play. We are waiting for the others to join us. Speaking of which. How long were you going to hang back and listen? You may as well join us, Armada.”

Tahrl stood, backing away from Alexander, looking all about the forest and dark trees, and found two Dryn standing there, walking toward them, appearing from between trees as if they had not been hidden. He recognized the one Dryn from their encounters in the wood and the red ax she held once more. The other was a mystery,

## **The Etymology of Fire**

standing much taller than Alexander's daughter, and Tahrl had thought Armada to be tall. The stranger was a giant with red hair to match Alexander's daughter, but they did not have the look of sisters. They were infinitely quiet as they came to stand beside Alexander, disturbing the forest and the trees not at all as they passed.

"We did not wish to intrude," Alexander's daughter said, lowering the ax, touching it to the earth and resting her hands upon it. "I know you have not seen this Kianan in years."

"Your words are thoughtfully said," Alexander replied. "I might even believe them if I did not know that you had been listening this whole time. Privacy indeed." She said nothing. Alexander took his time, climbing to his feet, standing so small before his daughter. "I understand that you have already introduced yourself."

"I did nothing of the kind."

"Of course, you only spoke with Tahrl. Did not say who you were. How thoughtless of me. Armada," he said this last to Tahrl, touching his hand to his daughter's shoulder. "And Juliana. Chrystal would be in the mountains if I remember correctly."

Tahrl said nothing, taking another slow step away from the Dryn, feeling his heart race, watching the two tall women look his way as if he were a child. He remembered the shadow of the Dryn pressing over him in the dark of the wood with the faint echoes of the forest troll's screams fading from his mind, and he remembered how lush the wood had smelled as she had touched him, sniffing his face, brushing against him. He raised a hand to his cheek, feeling it tingle from the memory of her tongue, and he could not move, trying to step away. The Dryn only watched him, saying nothing as Alexander moved between them as if he would continue the trek to Greenhaven without looking back to see if he was followed.

"Do not worry, Tahrl," Alexander said, turning, walking back to his side. "They are next to harmless as long as you are with me."

He looked to Alexander, watching him hard as if he were seeing his friend for the first time.

"You said they might not let me leave."

"That is a possibility. No, it will not come to that. I see I am disturbing you. You are among friends, Tahrl. We need you. Nothing bad will happen to you."

"How can you," he tried to say, losing his breath on the last word.

"I warned you," Alexander's daughter said.

"Yes, thank you, Armada," Alexander said, turning to look at her.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“I remember your thoughts on the subject. It could not be helped. We shall muddle along as best we can. We should go, Tahrl, and continue our journey to Greenhaven.”

“Where I will be left behind.” He remembered how Armada had touched him; sitting astride him with her hips resting against his in the dark. “What is to become of me while you are off chasing dragons?”

“You will be safe.”

“Until you have need of me.”

“It’s not like that. I don’t use people. Out among the Kianan, they will begin to remember what you said about the dragons. They will blame you for the attack on Edgewood. Maybe if they kill you, there will be no more violence.”

“What reason do I have to believe that I will be safe?”

“Enough of this,” Armada said. “Listen to me, Kianan. Who said you have a choice?”

“Armada,” Alexander said but quietly.

“You entered the forest, knowing there was danger, knowing there were Dryn. You entered my forest. You are mine.”

Dryn took children; it was the only thing he knew, and this one, Armada, had confirmed it, standing before him without a trace of guilt or regret in her voice. Anyone who entered the forest was their prey, and speaking to him, she had seemed almost proud of the grief she had caused for the wives who no longer had husbands and the children who would never more see their fathers. The Dryn probably did not see it that way. There was no way to know what they thought or know what was done with the lost men and children. They were made slaves, as the Dryn had once been slaves.

After the end of the Crusade against the dragons, the Kianan had entered the forest and the mountains beyond. These heroes of the Crusade took the Dryn as their prize and reward. The Kianan had raised camps and towers so that they might search for precious metals and gold in the far hills and deep mountains, and they discovered other creatures that had been kept in check by the fallen protectors of the Kianan. Troglodytes and cavern trolls grew bold, harassing the Kianan, taking the camps slowly and toppling the towers. The mountains were lost. The last Kianan surrendered the mountains with nothing more than the ragged clothes on their backs, and the abandoned Dryn found their way back to the forest.

Kianan soldiers held to the edge of the mountains, watching for

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

monsters, troglodytes, graths and cavern trolls. The dragons forgotten until a fragment of nightmare had fallen from the sky, and the town of Edgewood had been ravaged and all but destroyed. The soldiers watched. The townsfolk cowered, and then they learned what Tahrl had once been.

Reaching Edgewood, the soldiers would ask for him, wanting him as Vemarian had ordered them to take him, and the townsfolk would search. They would hunt, and they would look for him. They would go to his small house at the very edge of the forest, and they would search, savaging his home as the town had been savaged, knowing he was guilty because he had once spoken kind words of the Wraths and Wraiths.

“What choice do I have?” Tahrl said, feeling the Kianan take him, feeling the rope cut and his wrists burn, and finding peace, as the land grew dark and the world died.

“There, you see?” Armada said, turning, walking, lifting the red ax once more to her shoulder. “We should begin.”

Alexander said nothing, watching Tahrl, stretching out fingers as if he might touch him or rest a comforting hand on his shoulder. There was no pain. There was no touch of cords to bind his wrists or feet; blade to touch his skin or lash to scar his back. There was nothing. He followed Alexander when his friend turned and began to walk through the wood. The leaves and branches reached for him, touching him, but he did not feel them.

They stopped at last, preparing to camp when the forest grew dark, and the Dryn Armada created a fire, which cast its red and flickering light all about them and teased them with its edge of shadow. Armada and Juliana produced smoked featherhare and hearth bread from their packs, and sour apples were heated before the flames.

Putting aside food at last, Alexander took his flute from his pack, pulling it from among its wrappings and coverings, and the flute flashed silver as the moon or soft stars in Alexander’s hands, returning the glow of the flames. The Dryn grew still; food forgotten, and Tahrl had eyes only for the silver flute as Alexander raised it to his lips. The song was bittersweet as Alexander began to play, touching at the heart with mournful melodies that graced the wind and turned long fingers that reached achingly for the glittering stars in the soft sky.

It had been some three years since he had last heard such music,

## **The Etymology of Fire**

and he remembered the long hall of the Ivory Tower, standing at the far back half hidden by a curtain. The time had long since passed that he could have stood openly in that hall even with the King's protection. He remembered gentle music that soared to his ear as if no distance separated him from the music maker, and he remembered how all trouble and care had been lifted from his shoulders as long as that sound should last. Alexander had found him later; the last strands and echoes still whispered through the halls as if Alexander had only just lowered the flute from his lips. They had talked so long into the night that it could almost be called morning, and Alexander had been much concerned that Tahrl no longer had a place at the King's ear. Alexander had told him that he was much older than he looked, and Tahrl had remembered the first time he had heard his friend perform.

Tahrl remembered the feasting halls of the Montmorin when he had been little more than a child sitting with his parents. He remembered a musician accompanying the Montmorin music makers and playing a flute all of silver instead of wood. It had fascinated him how the flute had sparkled and glowed so much like a star in the musician's hands. The music had been quick and fast, pulling the Montmorin from their tables and benches so that they would spin and dance, and the music had been full of life and love and hope. Sitting with Alexander in the Ivory Tower, he had remembered that long ago hall with the Montmorin, and he had remembered the silver flute as if it had been tucked away in some special corner of his memory from which it could be savored without fear of being stolen.

In the secret halls of the Ivory Tower long after the concert had drifted into the dark, Alexander had told him how he had once fled from the halls of the great wizards. They had found Alexander's words and ideas no longer to their liking, and they had wanted him to conform to their ways and to behave in a manner befitting his wizardly stature. Alexander had left him then with the morning growing all around them, and Tahrl had not seen him again until he had found the minstrel standing at his door in the small town of Edgewood. It had been some three years since he had last heard such music as Alexander could coax from the sliver of starlight in his hands, and he felt the swirl of soft echoes take him, pulling at him with their melancholy mystery.

Tahrl was on his feet, having stood so quickly that he had for-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

gotten to breathe, and the chill night air burned, flashing through his chest. There was silence; the music falling away all at once as if the last surprised and half-finished note had been sliced from the root of the sky. He stood with the fire at his back, and then he was walking, moving through the wood and the dark as if his only purpose in life was to leave the light and warmth of the silver music far behind him. He stumbled, seeing nothing in the dark, hearing the whispers of soft music echo behind his ears and heart and mind. He stumbled again and fell, feeling the world lurch, feeling the forest pull at him, and then he was on his knees with the breath locked in his throat. Holding his arms to his chest as if he had been split down the middle and he was struggling desperately to prevent the blood from spilling upon the forest's floor, he shivered, and then he tried to scream. No words fled from his mouth to leap from tree to tree until they had escaped the forest to find refuge beneath the stars. He tried to bite through words that would not form but only flood his mouth as if they hoped to drown him with their stubbornness and refusal to yield voice or sound.

He could not move, shivering in the dark with his arms wrapped to his chest, resting against the forest's floor, and he remembered leaving the music behind. There was a touch to his shoulder in the forest in the dark, and he did not need to look to know that Alexander was beside him. He could not find the strength to raise his face from his hands and look through the dark for the friend he had not seen in some three years and maybe never known.

“Armada would say that I waited too long,” Alexander said. “That I should have approached you as soon as you found your way to Edgewood. I disagree. I think that I did not wait long enough or give you time enough to grieve. It is a point that my daughter and I could argue from here until the end of time never divining the right answer.”

Tahlr felt the breath explode from his chest as if his heart had been ripped from him, and he was surprised that blood did not flow freely between his fingers or warm his hands.

“When I fled from the wizards, renouncing my power, I did not know what I was forsaking. Everything was gone. Everything was left behind. All that I had ever been and all that I had ever known were gone. I didn't even know it. I mean I knew that I had abandoned my past. I did not realize what that meant. It took a very long time to accept what I had done, striking in both odd and little ways.



## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

The students would laugh. I would sit in the autumn and listen to the students laugh. Nevermore. It was strange; waking one morning looking forward to autumn laughter and realizing that there was only silence.”

Tahlr felt his arms uncurl, and he tried to sit back, finding Alexander resting against a tree before him with his eyes closed as if he walked through the distant past.

“I came here. When I fled from the wizards, I did not know where to go so I came here. Teresa found me. You will remember her as Amalthea. She is the governess of Greenhaven. She found me wandering lost in the wood. I was afraid to face her, you see. I told her what I had done, and she said it was enough for a beginning. She did not laugh. I didn’t think it was funny so I was glad that she did not laugh.”

“And then what?” Tahlr said, feeling the words crack and burn in his throat even as they passed his lips.

“I learned of the world that existed beyond the doors of wizardry and magic. Oh, not all at once. There was much that needed healing, and there were many false starts. I couldn’t tell you when I first took up this flute. I couldn’t tell you when Teresa and I- when we found- when friendship became more than simple friendship. I could not tell you. Do not ask.”

“I will not be a prisoner.”

“No, you will not be. I want you safe. If I could, I would send you to Hath Malor and the Earlinstien Mountains, but there is not the time or the means to get you there. Teresa will keep an eye on you. You will speak with dragons.”

“That is a thought which renders all grief bearable.”

“Good.”

## *Chapter Two*

# **A Long and Winding Road**

*There was no transition as if the city had always been there and Tahrl had simply been blind to the wonders of the world. Stepping between trees, placing one foot in front of another, Tahrl brushed aside a branch like a vale hanging rich and twined with leaves and saw what had not been there only a moment before. Trees to dwarf the world. The largest that he had ever seen. Tahrl stood still; his feet unwilling to carry him another step. Before him were trees as tall as the sky and great enough to swallow whole the mansions of the aristocracy that surrounded the Ivory Tower, and unlike the wood and cold stone of the homes of the Kianan, the trees of Greenhaven were alive and thriving with life. Draped and surrounded by the houses and homes of the Dryn. There were great bubbles and domes of earth and wood built into the very fabric of the trees as if the shells of giant seedpods rested against the vast trunks. Tahrl could not tell where the trees ended and the houses began as if the homes of the Dryn were simply part of the root system bubbling up from beneath the earth.*

He stood as if he had been struck blind; unable to imagine how such a place could have escaped his notice until the moment he had stumbled upon it. There had been no warning, no transition. One moment, the forest had been empty save the passage of two Kianan and two Dryn through the wood, and in the next, the city of Greenhaven had been all around them. Alexander had said nothing, giving no hint or warning as if he had wanted Tahrl's reaction as if he had wanted Tahrl to stumble upon this city of green and be spellbound by the sight of it.

"Welcome," was all that his friend said.

Tahrl shivered, feeling warm, feeling cold, feeling the breath and life of the city brush against him. The smells of smoke and distant cooking fires wash around him. The twist of voices and vibrant activity teasing his ears and crackling against his skin. The world

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

rushed against him, almost lifting him from his toes, and he would have fallen, stumbling on numb legs, if Alexander had not been standing there.

His friend smiled, saying nothing, and Tahrl found that he could move, crawling forward on hands and knees except he was standing, shuffling step by step and inch by inch into the city of Greenhaven. There were Dryn. They were everywhere. Like people in a city. Not savages. The Dryn moved like the Kianan at Edgewood or before the Ivory Tower. They went about their business and affairs like the Montmorin at Earlinstien or Tyraig.

Tahrl tried to laugh, unable to breathe, and almost choked on the wind in his throat. The world flashed before his eyes, spinning and swirling, and he saw a city where there were only trees. The Kianan built great towers and mansions. They built monuments out of wood and stone, surrounding them with their houses and homes spread outward in circles and patterns so that all would know who lived there. The Dryn city had not been built; it had grown from out of the roots of the earth fully formed. If Tahrl closed his eyes and spun in a circle, he saw only the rich forest and dark earth. The world vanishing before his eyes. Except he saw it. He heard it. The Dryn lived here.

Alexander said nothing, watching him, waiting for him to remember his feet and move, and Tahrl found that Armada watched him, too. He felt the world grow hot against his skin, feeling Armada watched him to see how he would falter and to learn if he would fall. He stood tall, looking to the forest beyond her, daring her to watch him break his neck, and he stumbled forward, tripping over his own feet, finding his footing after all.

They descended, stepping into a great wilderness except that they were passing into the heart of the city. There were always the grand trees with their bubbling houses and mansions for the Dryn. There was always a veil of soft branches and bright leaves to cover the sky. Surround by the grand trees and at the center of the city was a lake of crystal water with a single tree growing from its depths. Branches and leaves of saffron and gold reached, twisting and twined together, forever for the sky as if the tree had not so much grown as exploded from the dark waters that had born it.

The scent of the crisp and crystal air of the deep mountains where the snow never truly melted could be touched and tasted on the waters of the lake, and Tahrl could feel the wind biting like

## **The Etymology of Fire**

ice even from the edge with the water at his toes. He would have stayed at the edge of that lake watching the saffron tree forever if Alexander had not touched him. Armada was before them, tracing the perimeter of the lake, and they followed her until they found the river. Water slipped into the lake through the river, gathering from parts unimagined and wholly unknown. Even here, swirling around the saffron tree, the river did not rest, lingering only long enough for the Dryn to take what they should need before disappearing once more in the wood. Tahrl remembered the river that flowed out of the forest so close to Edgewood that it was almost part of the town, and he remembered how the cool and crystal water felt rushing between his fingers and dancing around his toes. Standing at the river's edge, he knew without wondering how that the waters of Greenhaven were also the waters of Edgewood.

He could look to the river, standing among Dryn, and see Edgewood. He could feel smoke and fire and soldiers and a black stain that would never heal. He heard people whispering behind fingers and watched them as they noticed he was listening, but they did not stop, knowing that he heard every word. They would look for him. When the soldiers came, the townsfolk would act shocked and surprised, and then they would look for him. Gathering, they would search and search, and they would grow harsh and angry when they would not find him. The people of Edgewood would not rest, searching, looking, hunting. They need only follow the river, and he would be lost. Greenhaven would burn.

Alexander said nothing; there were no words. Armada was quiet, watching Tahrl, waiting for him to turn from the lake, and he did at last find strength to turn, placing his back to the small town at the edge of the forest. They traced the river where it flowed into the lake, following it backward, walking away from the saffron tree as if the river would lead them into the heart of the mountains, and Tahrl saw something that almost made him laugh. Dryn had gathered, standing around a young tree that had slipped from its hold on the river's edge. Branches and roots had half-fallen into the river, muddying the stream, and hindering the flow of water. The Dryn were working to free the tree from the mud and pull it from the riverbank. The Dryn shouted one to another as they worked, using shovels and axes and pulleys and ropes to work on the tree, and Tahrl understood not a word. The Dryn could have been singing; they could have been crying nonsense to each other.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

Standing beside Juliana and Armada, Tahlr watched the Dryn work, and then he saw the Lady Amalthea, recognizing her even from a distance, knowing her even though he had not seen her since before he had fled the Ivory Tower. Amalthea was standing waist deep in the river; water rushing cold and fast all around her, and she had her hands on the fallen tree, helping to free it from mud and earth even as the others hauled on the ropes around her. She called to the others, and they pulled in time with her voice until roots and branches left the riverbank behind. The tree sank into the river; the water rising in a rush. The Dryn pulled on their ropes, listening to Amalthea, moving as she directed them, and then the fallen tree was on the far bank of the river, lying dripping and damp on the shore.

Before a moment could pass, the Dryn were stripping the tree, gathering up the ropes, and then there were Dryn with axes, separating the branches and dismantling the trunk. All the while, the Dryn sang as they worked with voices like magic or simply spoke one to another. It made no difference to Tahlr's ears.

The Lady Amalthea stood apart from the others, watching them as they worked the fallen tree, and Tahlr could not take his eyes away from her. The rhythm and poetry of the Dryn forgotten. There was only Amalthea as she climbed from the river. She had stood waist deep, but Tahlr realized that if he had stood in the same spot he would have had to fight to keep his head above water. The Lady Amalthea was tall; among Kianan, among Montmorin and even among her fellow Dryn, the Lady Amalthea was tall.

Tahlr remembered her from his long neglected days at the Ivory Tower. He remembered looking up into her eyes as he had taken her hand, but she had not towered above him. He remembered her grip, quiet but strong. Touching her fingers, he had felt strength and power tempered with kindness. Remembering her touch like the breath of firelight against his palm, he had felt comforted and protected. He remembered a smile that had filled him, and a quiet look of mischief that he had not tried to understand.

The Lady Amalthea was tall like the greatest and strongest of trees with fair branches that might bend with the wind but would never break. Leaving the others to their work, she turned, looking for the first time to match Tahlr's eyes. He turned away, closing his eyes, feeling the blood rush to his face, wondering why he did not burst into flame beneath her gaze. His heart beat fire as he looked to

## **The Etymology of Fire**

the ground, and he wondered madly how he had managed to stand in her presence before.

A giant approached him, dripping water; soaked to the skin and half-covered in mud from the tree and the river. He could feel her stepping closer. All the world growing distant except for the pad of her bare feet against the forest floor. Memory said he need only stand tall to match her gaze. If he raised his eyes now, he would see her hands and her waits. Looking up, he would see her shoulder. Looking up, craning his neck, he might catch a glimpse of her eyes if she should choose to glance down.

“Hello, Tahrl,” she said with a voice like music and song. “Welcome to Greenhaven.”

“Lady,” he said, stammering, fighting for breath, trying not to slip from his feet in a world where the ground tried to touch the sky. “Lady Amalthea, you are so tall.”

“Yes, Tahrl, I am. Much taller than memory. My name is Teresa. The Lady Amalthea was a disguise. Much more than a name. Much more than skin deep. If I had gone to the Ivory Tower as I am, they would not have listened. Not that they listened but we had to try. If they had listened. If they did believe there were those among the Kianan who believed you, we could have accomplished so much. I am sorry, Tahrl. We underestimated their hatred.”

“Lady.”

“Teresa, please, Tahrl. The Lady Amalthea was part of the disguise. More than a name. More than flesh. It is not me. I am Teresa. And, you do not have to keep looking at my toes. You are going to embarrass me.”

“I am sorry,” he said, looking up and up and up, and she stood before him, leaning forward, almost kneeling so that the distance was not so grand. “I do not know- I am drowning.”

“It is so much to take in. There’s no need for sorry. We left you alone. Kept you ignorant. Gave you nothing.” She touched his chin, and he felt cool damp earth through her fingertips and then the warmth of fires that lived at the heart of the world. “I will not let you drown.”

She pulled her hand away slowly, tracing the outline of his face, looking at her fingers as if noticing the mud and the earth for the first time, and Tahrl raised a hand, feeling the smudges and dirt she had left on his chin.

“I am sorry, Tahrl,” she said, holding the hand dripping water

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

before her eyes. “I do not know how much you like mud. I should do something about this. And, you must be tired. Exhausted and hungry, I am sure. We should speak of no consequence until you have rested. This way.”

The woman he had always known as the Lady Amalthea turned from him and began to walk away from the river and toward the great trees. Tahrl felt a touch at his shoulder, finding it to be Alexander, and he remembered to move. He remembered to walk, and they followed the Lady Amalthea and her daughter Armada toward one of the houses that rested like a great dome of earth against the trees.

It dwarfed him. The tree was as tall as the world and reminded him of nothing so much as the Ivory Tower, which climbed forever never stopping never resting but always reaching for the sky. The tree was not so grand but was itself tall with a mansion of the Dryn to surround and envelop it. The bubbling dome so much like half a seedpod surround the tree. It did not look as if it had been built. It had been formed, growing out of the wood and the earth, and it dwarfed even the Dryn.

Tahrl stopped, facing a great round opening in the face of the mansion; the Lady Amalthea standing just inside the door without a door to block the way as if the Dryn feared nothing. The lady smiled, watching him, standing without needing to stoop. The room beyond the door was grand; even what little Tahrl could see of it. The room was all soft wood and dark earth. The Dryn lived here. Looking up, he saw Alexander standing next to his lady, watching him and saying nothing.

Gathering his breath, feeling it catch in his throat, Tahrl stepped forward, expecting to stumble, expecting the earth to catch him and bind him struggling with roots and branches so much like a forest troll. Nothing happened, and he opened his eyes, feeling the breath flow from his lungs and escape from his chest.

The room was grand, sweeping away from him in all directions. The floor curled upward and away forming eddies and currents and becoming the walls. The walls turned inward becoming the ceiling. There were no hard edges as if the room had been sculpted and molded and left in the sun to dry, and there were Dryn. Not many but they were there. Moving, sitting, working, doing whatever it might be that the Dryn might do.

The Lady Amalthea passed through the room, leading Tahrl, and

## **The Etymology of Fire**

they reached another room, passing beneath a curtain of soft and rustling fabric that he could not describe. This room was much like the first with its flowing shapes and currents, and there were more Dryn. There was a large hearth fire, and smoke drifted and collected near the ceiling, following patterns and currents that only smoke understood. There was laughter and voices, and there was music of drum and wood and string to stir the life of the room.

They did not stay, passing through another room and then another, and then they found a smaller room and then another which was smaller still. They found a room, pulling a curtain aside, with cushions surrounding a sunken fire pit, and a Dryn to tend the fire. Noticing her, Tahrl thought instantly of Armada and Amalthea; they looked so much alike except Amalthea's hair was white and silver and sand. Armada and this other Dryn both had dark red hair like the redwood tree in the misty mornings of the springtime.

"This is Ede," the Lady Amalthea said, "my daughter. Armada, you know. I will leave you in their good company while I do something about the earth and the mud I have collected this morning. I hope you can forgive me. Food has been requested. In the meantime, you should rest."

Tahrl said nothing, standing just inside the door, looking to Amalthea with her hand holding the curtain open, and then he turned back to the room, wanting to slump where he stood, wanting to lean against the wall and close his eyes. He stepped farther into the room, looking to the cushions, knowing everybody watched him, and he stopped beside one, looking back. The Lady Amalthea was gone. The curtain shivering, hiding her disappearance.

"Hello, Tahrl," Amalthea's other daughter, Ede, said from where she knelt before the fire. "It is good to finally meet you. I have heard so much about you I feel I already know you."

Tahrl sank into one of the cushions, letting it take his weight, letting the pull of the world seep out of him and empty through the floor. He held his eyes closed, listening to the fire, feeling its warmth against his skin, taking slow breaths tasting of smoke and warm earth.

"Thank you," he finally said without opening his eyes, feeling the words like a whisper against his skin. "I wish I could say the same. I wish I could say anything."

"No, you don't," Armada said, and he squeezed his eyes closed, feeling them burn, feeling them sting with unfamiliar smoke.



## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“Armada,” Ede said, whispering as if she thought he could not hear her.

“He wants to hide. He wants to forget. Pretend that he cannot speak.”

“You are unkind.”

“Yes, I am.”

“That’s enough, Armada,” Alexander said, and Tahrl opened his eyes, looking, finding his friend.

“Alex,” he said, “I thought you had gone with Amalthea.”

“I had considered it.”

“What stayed you? Do I look so lost and helpless? I have wandered the halls and far chambers of the Montmorin. I have stood at the very foot of the Ivory Tower and looked up. I am not easily lost.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“Yes,” Tahrl said, looking to Armada, letting his eyes slide from her unable to watch her watching him. He fought for words, feeling them slip from his tongue unspoken. “Yes, I must admit the Lady Amalthea.” Stumbling, looking again to Armada, he sought her eyes and found he could not hold her gaze. “I found the Lady Amalthea much to my surprise.”

“She has that effect on people,” Alexander said. “I should know.”

“So you think me struck dumb and in need of care?”

“You gave us that impression, yes.”

“You could have warned me. Told me the Lady Amalthea had grown since last I saw her. Mentioned that we might reach this place- Greenhaven, today.”

“Are you dumb?” Armada said.

“What?”

“Are you thick in the head? Slow? Stupid? Three fagots shy of a bonfire?”

“Thank you, Armada,” Alexander said.

“The Lady Amalthea was a disguise,” she said. “Stop calling her that.”

“I am sorry,” Tahrl said. “She left such an impression on me. The Lady Amalthea.” Before the King, she had taken Tahrl’s hand. The touch had been warm, and the smile had been kind. “Nobody knew who she was. Not for certain. Forgotten descendant of a once noble house with a mage’s tutoring or study among the Montmorin. Seeking to make a name for herself at court by supporting me. I figured

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

her for one of the merchant families myself. Taking the name Amalthea so that she could claim lineage to Amalthea Li Dirae.”

“Oh, she has every right to that name,” Alexander said.

“But you just said it was a disguise.”

“That is true.”

“The Kianan have claimed Amalthea Li Dirae,” Ede said from her perch beside the fire, “but that has not always been the case.”

“While it is true that Teresa cannot claim any direct connection to Amalthea Li Dirae, she has as much right to the name as any among the Dryn.”

“How?”

“Really, Tahrl, you have forgotten everything the Montmorin taught you,” Alexander said. “Think like one of them.”

“You think I haven’t considered it? Li Dirae does not translate to *of the Dryn*.”

“Which is how we learn that language can be perverted and history shaped to fit desire.”

“You are saying that all this land from the mountains to the sea once belonged to the Dryn?”

“Well, maybe not that far. But, yes, all these lands once belonged to the Dryn.”

“Taken from us even before the Crusade,” Armada said.

“You told me that hate came first,” Tahrl said, looking to Armada, finding her standing like a tall tree bathed in fire’s light. “No, I am wrong. You said that first there was fear, and then we learned to hate. I wonder when we took everything? Is that why we fear you? Or do we fear the same of what we had done?”

“It matters not,” she said, and Tahrl saw that she was both the fire and the lightning slumbering patiently but fitfully in the woods waiting only for the moment to strike the towns of the Kianan. “The Kianan take. They smother. They destroy. They will assail the mountains because they can. They will seek the blood of dragons because it is there. They will enter the forest.”

“I am sorry.”

For a long moment, there was silence with only the fitful grumble and sleep of the wood catching flame in the fire pit to remind them that the world had not passed away.

“I should take you to where your kind butchered my grandmother and left her bones to rot in the sun so that you may speak

## **The Etymology of Fire**

those words again. Tell me, Tahrl, do you think she will care for your sorrow?"

"No."

"You could choose to be kind, Armada," Ede said. "How do your words help our grandmother's bones?"

"This one cares not for sorrow," Armada said, pointing a finger like a jagged branch or dark blade dripping fire at Tahrl. "He would rather run. He would rather hide than face his own kind."

"That's not true!"

"He shelters himself in fear. Cloaks himself in the numbing bliss of ignorance. It is easier to hide. It is easier to remain muddled, confused, overwhelmed, surprised than it is to stand. He does not want to face who he is or what he has done."

"I am here to fight!"

Nobody spoke. Tahrl was shaking. He was standing, and he did not remember how he had found his feet. The cushion he had left abandoned almost underfoot as if he might trip as if he might fall if he should attempt to move. The breath was running ragged, burning his chest and scalding his heart.

Armada only looked at him, lowering her arm so much like a branch trailing leaves, and she took one step toward him as if there was no distance between them.

"We came for you," she said.

Tahrl found no answer, feeling his body quake, feeling the words unspoken drip from his chin like blood. In the deep forest in the dark in the night, her tongue had felt rough and poisonous against his cheek.

"Do not mind Armada, Tahrl," Ede said, making him jump, making him jerk around and look at Amalthea's other daughter on her perch beside the fire; he almost fell. "There is something you must understand. We know you." Ede turned to the fire, teasing it, prodding the burning wood with a brand, ignoring them all. "Delan told us so much. We all know you. Like family. The brother I never had."

The brand grew still with its tip in flame as if Amalthea's daughter had caught her own words as they filled the air too late to stop on her tongue. The brand teased fire while Ede held as still as a statute as if she were fighting not to look at him, and then the brand struck wood, sending sparks fluttering this way and that above the flames.

"Family," Ede said, prodding the wood even more, teasing sparks like fireflies to dance with the smoke spinning for the ceiling. "For

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

my little sister over there, it was something more. An obsession, if you will. She studied you. From the edge of the forest. Watching you. Even when she had no need to. Fascinated by you. Always fascinated by you. She is trying to hide that now. Now that you are here. Now that you are face to face with her. She brushes you with anger so that she will not stumble over words or fall flat on her face.”

There were the traces of a smile on Ede’s lips where she sat before the fire ignoring them. Armada looked as if she would lash out as if she would consume them all with the fire and the flame in her heart. She did nothing, rumbling like a bell that had been rung and only echoes were left to fade into the night. Without warning, Armada sat, taking a cushion, saying nothing, looking only to the fire.

“Tahrl?” Ede said with shy eyes watching him from the edge of the flames, and he found that he had forgotten how to breathe.

He returned awkwardly to his cushion feeling his breath flow once more beneath his skin, feeling the frozen fire soften and crack shedding ice. His eyes drifted from sister to sister ignoring him with eyes turned only for the fire.

“I am not paper to be handled with delicate fingers,” he said, catching a soft glance from Ede. “I am not torn.”

“Others may disagree.”

“I am watched?”

“Kept safe.”

“Kept ignorant, I think. You say you know me, sister? Know that I grew-up among the Montmorin? Know what family means?”

Ede said nothing; the light of the fire licking and caressing her face as she looked at him. The brand forgotten in her hands.

“I know what family means to you, Tahrl,” Alexander said. “To the Montmorin.” He grew quiet, looking to his hands, unable to hold Tahrl’s gaze. “And, you are among family here. Though you may not know it. Though we have kept secrets. We may be able to do something about that.” A smile flickered across Alexander’s lips as if he had forgotten all words as if the hidden secrets of the universe had slipped into his hands and he did not know how to share them without ceasing to exist. “Teresa and I did not meet under the best of circumstances.” He let the words slip from between his fingers like wisps and whispers of forgotten verse without a beginning and without an end. His eye was caught by the flicker and flow of flame dancing with smoke in the fire, and he said no more.

“When they first met, he was still the wizard’s avatar,” Ede said,

## **The Etymology of Fire**

looking to her father, watching him shift on his cushion as if stuck, watching him hold himself as if the fire burned. “Drawn here because he had heard rumor of the Dryn.”

“Not exactly.”

“Not exactly, of course.” Ede said, turning from her father; her eyes drifting from him so that she might hold Tahrl with her gaze. “It wasn’t as if the Kianan were spreading rumors about us. About the Dryn, I mean. About Greenhaven. All before my time. I had not yet been born.”

“Not even a gleam in your mother’s eye.”

“No, that happened later. Why did you enter the forest, I wonder, if not rumor?”

“The wizards knew. After a fashion. Not what was happening, but something was. The forest was buzzing. Excited. Different. The trees gossiped, wondering how it would turn out. I became curious.”

“You frightened mother.”

“I know. She hid it well.”

“She hated you.”

“I was fascinated.”

“Because she hated you? Stood up to you? Challenged you?”

“It was exhilarating. Intoxicating. Daring. The wizards did not like it.”

“Saying you were being seduced, I am sure. Corrupted.”

“Something like that. I did not care. It made me realize. Things. I’m sorry, Tahrl, to keep secrets from you. There are some things I do not say.”

“Which is when mother found him wandering in the forest having abandoned the wizards. The avatar nevermore.”

“Nevermore.”

Tahrl remembered the cold and the dark as he looked to the friend he had not seen in some three years and quite possibly had never seen before. The friend was a stranger, resting on a cushion, saying nothing as if the voices of the fire alight on the branches and twigs were all the sound in the world. Tahrl remembered the cold as he had stepped from a little known and never used doorway into the dark and into the night. With the city all around him, the Ivory Tower had already been at his back. He had passed between houses bigger than mansions; he had followed narrow alleyways, staying off the streets, looking to be sure he was not followed. Wrapped in a thin cloak and with only a meager pack, he had not stopped until he

## The Etymology of Fire

had left the city and the Ivory Tower far behind him. It had felt so strange with the dawn; it had been so quiet as he had crept through the city without challenge as if he had been expelled.

Walking with a caravan of tinkers and tradesmen who would not have recognized him even if they had known he was the banished son of the house of Morgan, he had kept the Ivory Tower always behind him. He had wandered at last into the small town at the edge of the forest without really knowing where he was, and he had looked to the sun, shivering as it dipped below the horizon. Stumbling, he had faltered, finding the dirt and gravel of the road beneath him. The townsfolk had found him there covered in dust and dark earth too sick to talk. The townsfolk had asked no questions only giving him food and water and a place to rest. They had found him lost, alone and bewildered beyond reason, and they had accepted him without question without thought.

Tahlr looked up from the fire that Ede ignored as words found him suddenly in the dark.

“Enough for a beginning,” he said, whispering, breaking a silence he had not even known was there until his voice had cracked it.

Alexander looked from his hands to hear Tahlr speak but said nothing himself with only the traces of a smile to touch his lips. Flickering. Gone.

“Ah,” Ede said, standing, looking to the door, almost making Tahlr jump. There was a Dryn in the doorway, slipping past the curtain with a tray smelling of food in her hands. “Rohana,” Ede said to Tahlr by way of introduction for the one who had just entered the room. “Our sister.”

They rested the tray on a ledge against the fireplace, and there was warm bread and cold featherhare that had been charred on a flat stone until the skin was crisp. There was a thin soup that was little more than broth and tasted of carrots and onions and spice gathered from the forest. There was cheese that had been smoked over a smoldering fire of ash and the thick fat of a longhorn prancer, and there were apples half the size of Tahlr’s palm that were both tart and sweet. They took the food in silence, gathering about the tray, and Tahlr relished the quiet that the food provided them.



*The Lady Amalthea found them listening to the chatter and gossip of the fire as it played and danced in the center of the room.*

## The Etymology of Fire

“Have you left me anything?” she said, crossing to the tray, which they had at last put aside, and Amalthea selected a piece of bread from out of the rumpled remains. “I regret my absence. I hope I am forgiven.”

“We left you some, did we not?” Ede said. “Even if it can only in charity be described as yet warm.”

“For which I thank you even if only some of what is here was meant to be served cold. And, you, Tahrl?” she said, moving to stand before him; the bread untouched in her hand. “Do you forgive me?”

“Lady,” he said, finding the word lost and alone in his heart as if all language had fled leaving only the one straggler behind too tired to move.

“Enough with the titles, Tahrl. I am Dryn. Rank and title make my skin itch.”

“I am sorry.”

“Be not sorry. Call me Teresa if you must call me anything at all. Or, simply throw rocks at me if you can think of no better way to get my attention. Armada there once threw a knife. Nothing focuses the attention as quickly as a knife.”

“Or fire,” Armada said but quietly.

“Yes, but fire is such an indiscriminate attention getter. Everyone might think you wanted to talk to them. How would I know you wanted me?”

“Then I shall resist using fire,” Tahrl said.

“For which I thank you,” Amalthea said, finding a cushion next to Alexander, sitting; the bread still forgotten in her hand. “All the same, you desire my attention, Tahrl, and now you have it undivided.”

In that moment, all words left him, fleeing from his tongue, and he could not speak. The Lady Amalthea was a giant, and even sitting, she towered over Alexander.

“I am at a loss,” he said.

“Really, Tahrl, I hardly believe it,” she said. “I saw you at the Ivory Tower. Standing before the King. Standing before all the Kianan. You were never lost.”

“That was before.”

“Before you sacrificed the Ivory Tower? No, that was not weakness.”

“Sacrifice?” Tahrl said as the echoed memory of an abomination’s roar cut through him. “Weakness?” The nightmare of long

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

forgotten rage had descended on the small town at the edge of the forest. "I was wrong."

"About what?"

He looked at her as if she had just asked him why people bother to breathe, and then he noticed the bread still untouched in her hand.

"Everything," he whispered.

"We've been over this," Armada said.

"Not enough, it would seem," Amalthea replied. "Why are you here, Tahrl?"

"What?"

"Why here? In this place."

"Because Alexander brought me."

"No, he only escorted you to Greenhaven. Why are you here?"

"I do not understand. Why here? I have nowhere else to go. The soldiers were coming. Vemarian's orders. Alexander said so."

"Why here? You look at me now like a lost featherhare cornered by a copperwood falcon; but why are you here? In this place. The Ivory Tower forgotten. Edgewood abandoned. Why?"

"I was seeking you."

"Why? You knew a moment ago. Not even an eighth. There were raised voices, I understand. You did not doubt then. What happened so quickly to shake you?"

Tahrl sat back, shaking, shivering, sinking into the cushion; he could not match the Lady Amalthea. The night had been cold as he had walked all alone in the world away from the Ivory Tower. The morning had been cold with the charred and blackened body of the dragon still burning on its funeral pyre. He had burned, standing over his cushion, facing Armada, facing the Dryn.

"I am a prisoner," Tahrl said, suddenly, grasping at the words.

"Really?" Amalthea said. "I was not aware of such a prison. Trapped by your actions? Your beliefs? Do the Kianan cage you because you do not see the dragons rage?"

Tahrl laughed like a shout. Bubbling. Echoing. Gone.

"No," he said, raising a hand, shaking away sudden tears like warm blood on his face. "I am literally a prisoner. I cannot leave."

"That," Amalthea said, stretching the word out as if she was struggling to gather what the future might hold, "is not entirely true."

"Then I can leave?"

The Lady Amalthea said nothing.



## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“Then I can go to the mountains, seeking dragons?” Tahrl said to the silence.

“No.”

“Then I am a prisoner, and it does not matter why I am here.”

“But it does,” she said, whispering, and nobody answered after her. “The mountains are dangerous.”

“In Edgewood, they were coming to kill me.”

“Do you know why the Kianan lost the mountains? It was not us. Creatures of the dark. Hunters of the night live in the mountains. Delan and Armada are going. Is that right?” she said this last to Alexander, touching his shoulder, brushing her face in his hair. “You are determined? Nothing more you can learn from the Kianan?”

“Nothing,” Alexander said. “The mountains hide the dragons. Hide the key. There is no other way.”

“Two wizards will go where even our patrols fear to step,” Armada said. “In numbers few, we may avoid troglodytes and cavern trolls. We may reach the dragons.”

“What is one more?” Tahrl said.

“One more? Do you know nothing?”

“The troglodytes drove your kind from the mountains,” Amalthea said. “You would be a burden. What could you do?”

“Speak with dragons,” Tahrl said.

“I see. This is the price of your help?”

“Yes.”

“Armada,” Amalthea said to her daughter who moved at once to the cushion next to Tahrl and sat facing him. “Do you know what you are asking, Tahrl?”

Armada rested her right elbow on her knee, holding her hand out like a challenge.

“Yes,” Tahrl said, taking Armada’s hand; her grip was strong, and he felt his fingers burn.

“I don’t think you do.”

Armada raised her left hand half-curved into a fist. Hunched forward, Tahrl held aloft his own free hand. The hold on his right hand grew even stronger as if Armada might try to bend his arm back or even flip him from his cushion.

“I’ve played this game before,” Tahrl said, holding his gaze to Armada’s eyes. The Dryn would reveal herself through her eyes. A smile flickered at her lips.

Armada struck. Tahrl’s face stung and burned, feeling as if the

## **The Etymology of Fire**

world had opened and a void had formed behind his nose and between his eyes. She had struck with an open fist, moving so fast that he had not even seen the blow. He blinked his stinging eyes, rubbing at his face, and then moved the hand back from his face.

She struck again. Tahrl's face felt cracked; his eyes sliding sideways into his skull. Their clasped hands held together, holding him from sliding to the floor. His fingers burned.

Armada struck; his left deflecting her fist. The side of his head felt crushed. Armada was lightning. His fastest block had only deflected her fist from his nose and eyes, and the blow had fallen on his temple. Fingers grasping her arm as she pulled back. Unable to hold. She slipped free.

"Troglodytes are much faster," someone said.

Tahrl held his hand before his face, moving it in slow circles. He applied pressure to the clasped hands as if he would push at her and this would stop him from sliding from his perch. Her fingers flew along his arm, sliding away, leaving a trail that burned, and she struck his face above his eye. He cried voiceless words, feeling the void grow behind his eyes and against his skull. Hand trembling; he struck, flailing, reaching between them.

Armada caught his hand as if he had been holding it still. She held his left fist with fingers like stone, holding it so that he could not draw back, and then she twisted the arm. Tahrl cried, feeling fire, feeling ice race all the way up and through his shoulder. He would have been thrown from his cushion if their right hands had not been locked together.

"Troglodytes never hunt alone."

Armada released his burning left arm, and he could do nothing but hold it like a dead thing, feeling the flames race and the fire burn. He shook his arm, trying to look with eyes that refused to focus and only light swam.

"Yield."

"No," he said, leaning forward, pushing their locked arms, trying to force Armada backward off her cushion, and then he pulled forcefully the other way, bringing the Dryn forward. Her face held above their gripping hands.

Twisting sideways, he pulled, spinning, bringing his left shoulder around, trying to smash it into her face. She caught him easily, holding him immobile as if he were a child, and then her hand was

## The Etymology of Fire

beneath his leg. She flipped him backward. He fell, slipping from his cushion, crashing against the floor.

There was nothing. He was on his back. He knew he was on his back. It took him a long moment before he realized that Armada had released his right hand. It didn't even burn. Nobody spoke, and then Ede was at his side, helping him to his knees.

"You must rest," voices said. "Take him to his room."

He felt the world grow distant as if he were sailing into the sky, and then he realized that Ede and Rohana were helping him stand. Swaying on his feet, he could not move, and then they were walking. The room lost somewhere behind him. Each step was the journey of a thousand miles, and he found himself without knowing how he had arrived in another room. Slipping, stumbling; Ede and Rohana helping him slip into a bed of furs and soft blankets. Tahrl lay there without moving, feeling the warm tears burn his face like blood, and then there was a warm cloth damp with water touching his forehead and caressing his tears.

"That was very well done," Ede whispered.

"I hurt. I failed."

"Not at all," she said, and the cloth turned and swirled across his face. "You did not yield. They will take you. If I know my mother at all, she will let you go." Tahrl felt a kiss as light as a feather against his lips. "Rest."



*Tahrl woke slowly, feeling numb, feeling the world drift back to him in fragments and broken pieces. He felt the weight on his face and in his shoulders as if even the blankets and covers of the bed were holding him down and keeping him prisoner. Not wanting to, he could not move; only remember Amalthea's daughter. With a face that still ached of numb fire and dead weight, he could not forget Amalthea's daughter or the test. Armada had been so fast and so strong. Tahrl curled among the covers, wanting to block memory and forget pain that still burned like an old scar. Armada had been a blur, striking, striking, striking.*

Tahrl opened his eyes into darkness, breathing with a sigh and tasting cold air on his tongue. He looked through dim light and shadowy darkness, finding himself in a bed of blankets and furs he did not remember, and finding himself alone. He did not know the

## **The Etymology of Fire**

room, remembering how Amalthea's daughter Ede had helped him and then left as he drifted through sleep.

He remembered the Lady Amalthea from her visit to the Ivory Tower. She had been kind; she had been good, supporting him, saying that his findings and research showed merit. Alexander had introduced her to him even before she had spoken to the King. Alexander had wanted Tahrl to know her and understand that she supported him. Alexander had given no indication of how well he knew her or that they had children together. The Lady Amalthea was a lie; she was a figment of Teresa's imagination so that the Dryn might not be hated and feared someday. Teresa cared nothing for Tahrl. She had let her daughter beat him and humiliate him. She had watched him from the forest without a word and allowed an abomination to savage Edgewood. He could still feel Armada's tongue on his face. The Lady Amalthea never would have allowed that. There was no Amalthea; she was a disguise and a deception for the governess of Greenhaven. There was only the Dryn Teresa who allowed her people to kidnap children and steal babies. Teresa was not Amalthea.

Tahrl rose, struggling from the bed, and stood swaying in the chill air and the dark. He crossed to the curtain without stumbling without falling and stood for a moment before pushing at the fragile door releasing light. Nobody waited for him as he rubbed at his eyes struggling to see through the light. Nobody guarded him.

The hallway was empty only it was not a hall. He stood looking out upon a room like so many he had scene in Greenhaven. It was almost as if the Dryn did not believe in corridors or hallways. They simply stuck one room up against another, and if there were people in the room, they simply had to accept the others walking through.

Tahrl passed the thin curtain, letting it slip across his shoulders with so light a touch it was almost as if it was not there. He left the room and the bed behind him, walking through the other chamber, wondering at the light. There were tall candles of swirling wax the color of milk and butter set near the walls without actually touching them. The walls sloped and swayed too much for anything to be placed against them. He marveled at the shape and design of the walls, reaching out, letting his fingers grace the surface, and he could not tell if what he touched was polished wood or shaped earth.

He abandoned the room, following the chamber as if it was a hallway, and passed through another doorway, pushing the cur-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

tain aside. He found himself in another room very much like the last with burning candles and many covered doorways. The rooms were not identical; they had different shapes. There were different sweeps and sways and patterns to the shape of the space.

All the rooms were different, and he knew he would not be able to remember his way back to where he had spoken with the others and fought with Armada. He passed from room to room without caring what he might find, discovering they were empty and mostly dark, wondering if it was day or night, and he was amused to think that there might be some trick preventing him from stumbling unexpectedly upon Dryn slumbering in the dark.

At last he found a room with voices and discovered several young Dryn sitting together and talking one to another. They ignored him as if they could not be bothered to notice that they now shared the room with a strange Kianan. The Dryn looked to be little more than children old enough to be married but too young to have children of their own, and they suddenly reminded Tahrl of Rae alone in Edgewood and urging him to take her to visit the Montmorin. Tahrl almost slipped to the floor, thinking of Rae, wondering if she would try to reach the Montmorin on her own. Rae would not want to listen to the soldiers who had been sent to find him. She would not want to hear the townsfolk speaking openly against him because the soldiers had come and he had disappeared. They might take her because she liked him.

There was a man watching him, having entered the room through another doorway, and Tahrl almost cried out, forgetting where he was. Tahrl held still, saying nothing, feeling his face burn, feeling ice sweep through his back, but the stranger only watched him. Tahrl noticed that the chattering Dryn with their singsong voices paid no more attention to the other man than they had to him. The stranger looked young but tall as if he was almost finished growing, and he looked old enough to be just starting a family if he had been living among the Kianan. He moved slowly but easily, taking his time to reach Tahrl, ignoring the Dryn who continued to take not the slightest interest in either Kianan.

“You are new here,” the strange Kianan said; his voice little more than a whisper as if he did not wish to disturb the Dryn. “My name is Willem.”

“Tahrl. I arrived this morning. At least I think it was this morning.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

“I know the feeling,” Willem said. “This place can be like that. You must be tired.”

“Not at all. I have had too much of sleep. I wish to be up and about; even though, I do not know if it is day or night.”

“Oh, it is night. Very, very night. Not tired? Well, I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. They do try to be kind to people when they first arrive.”

“Who?”

“The Dryn. Kind to us. I suppose they haven’t told you anything.”

“No.”

“Typical. They leave it to us to educate our own. Even to teach their own language. Unless you find one who takes a particular liking to you. Oh, but I can tell those girls have started to eavesdrop. You wouldn’t think it to look at them that they were listening. We should move,” Willem said, turning, looking to the Dryn. “Maybe when you are older, I shall have the pleasure of servicing you.”

Silence like an explosive shout radiated from the Dryn in the wake of Willem’s voice. One of them, looking to be the oldest of the group, answered him as if she had suddenly remembered she had a voice. Speaking words that might as well have been gibberish for all Tahrl understood them, the Dryn stood, pulling at her shirt, exposing her breasts. The other Dryn laughed. Willem only turned, blowing a kiss back over his shoulder as he guided Tahrl from the room. Tahrl lost their voices as he crossed into the next room with the curtain falling to block all sight and sound of the young Dryn.

“Don’t even think about touching them,” Willem said as they crossed through the room beyond. “They would kill you without a thought.”

“What?”

“It’s true. If there is one thing you should learn as quickly as possible. One mistake you could make. The Dryn children are off limits. Do not speak with the children. Do not approach them. And, whatever you do. Do not touch them.”

Tahrl stood still, looking to Willem, feeling cold air in his face, and he realized they were standing in a doorway without a curtain. Beyond them was the dark and the night and the city of the Dryn between the trees.

“I know; I know,” Willem said to Tahrl’s silence. “There is more to it. More complicated than I have described. But, until you learn, stay away from the children.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

“I will try to remember,” Tahrl said, looking out at the dark and the night.

“Where are you staying?” Willem said when Tahrl did not move.

“Here, I think. They showed me to a room. I doubt I could find it again.”

“You are being treated special. I heard a rumor that the queen’s consort had returned with someone important. Could it be you? You are not behaving in the manner I would expect of a visiting dignitary.”

“Queen’s consort?”

“Yes, well, not a name I would use to his face. We find humor where we may, as the saying goes. Did Delan escort you here?”

“His name is Alexander. It is what I have always called him, anyway.”

“I have spoken out of turn,” Willem said, growing silent.

“Have you?” Tahrl said, but Willem did not answer. Tahrl crossed through the open doorway to stand on the topmost step in the dark beneath the trees. “There is so much I do not know. I fear I shall have the rest of my life to learn.”

“It is not a bad place,” Willem said, moving to stand beside Tahrl beneath the canopy of trees. “They ask little of me that I do not enjoy. Can’t think of a single reason why I would ever want to leave.”

“Except.”

“Except I cannot leave. Cannot even go into the forest unescorted.”

“How long have you lived here, Willem?”

“I was born here.”

“What? You are Kianan.”

“Do you think they throw away Kianan daughters discovering they have chosen wrong? No, there is reason enough for everything. Kianan mothers can produce sons to service the Dryn. A domesticated source is preferable to being dependent on the wild.”

“There is sense in this?”

“You are going to discover something. They never talk about. You have to stumble across on your own and wonder if you are right because nobody will confirm or deny.”

“What?”

“The Dryn children,” Willem said, looking about as if he feared they were being watched. “There are only daughters. I don’t mean they dispose of the sons. There are no sons. There has not been a

## The Etymology of Fire

male child born of a Dryn in all the memories of all the Dryn through mothers and grandmothers and mothers of grandmothers for as far back as anybody can remember. Without us, they would die.”

“It is a curse.”

“I suppose. Angered the DiKena so long ago that nobody remembers.”

Tahlr did not answer, looking at the night. Armada had stood over him in the forest in the dark. Her ax discarded behind her still buried in the heart of the forest troll. Her tongue had been slimy against his cheek.

“We are all of us DiKena,” he said, raising a hand to rest against his face.

“I don’t know anything about that,” Willem said. “It is late, and I am tired. Where would you go?”

“The mountains; seeking dragons.”

“What? Right now? They patrol the mountains, you know.”

“Who?”

“They do. The Dryn. Protecting us from troks and forest trolls.”

“I did not know.”

“Not surprising, I guess. I am returning to Kianan country. It is late, as I said. You would tempt the mountains this night?”

“No, I will stay this night. Right here, I think,” Tahlr said, sitting on the step.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Very well then. I am sure one of the queen’s daughters will come looking for you soon enough. If you are that important.”

“It would not surprise me.”

“One final word then. Beware the queen’s youngest daughter, Armada. She- well, I’ll say no more. Only watch yourself around that one.”

Armada had been so fast he had not even felt the pain coming as she struck him in the face.

“I will remember,” Tahlr said.

“Good night to you then,” Willem said, descending the steps, and then he was gone, disappearing into the cold and the dark between the trees and beyond the door of the queen’s house.





## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

*Ede found him sitting on the step as if he had not moved since Willem had left him before the door of the Dryn mansion.*

“You must be cold,” she said, placing a blanket around his shoulders.

“I could say the same to you,” he answered, looking up at Armada’s sister. “Should you be out at such a time of night as this?”

“Oh, I have no worries,” Ede said, shifting a hand to rest upon her stomach. “I have borne this child for two seasons. Time enough still to run naked through the storm. I am stronger than I look. My daughter will be strong for having experienced the cold this night.”

“You know it will be a girl?”

“Yes, of course, I know. What a silly question.”

“How do you know? How can you be so sure?”

Ede did not answer, watching him as if she might speak. Tahrl sat quietly, looking to her face, as words formed on her lips only to vanish without a sound as if she was trapped between memory and desire.

“Have you thought of a name?” Tahrl said, shivering in the blanket, wanting to break the night before it could consume Teresa’s daughter.

“No, of course not,” Ede said. “She will have her first name when she learns to walk. Her real name will be- if she lives.”

“It is much the same among the Kianan.”

“No, I envy the Kianan. I have three living sisters. Most Dryn have none. Only children. If this one lives, my daughters will be closer together in age than my sisters, Winonah and Rohana.”

“I am sorry.”

“Spare me your sorry. It is bitter on my tongue. You surprise me, Tahrl.”

“How so?”

“You were so quiet before. No questions. No curiosity. Now, in the dark. In the cold and the night, you begin to seek answers. Maybe, Armada knocked some sense into you.”

“No,” Tahrl said, standing, pulling the blanket around his shoulders. “I do not know. I had not noticed.”

“We should get you back to bed.”

“I am not tired.”

“You should rest while you may. The morning will be busy. You must prepare for the mountains.”

“Thought I was a prisoner.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“Never.”

“I was told there was disagreement about what was to become of me. There are those who fear what I might reveal to the Kianan.”

“There will always be questions and debate; however, Teresa is our governess. If she should choose to let you go, nothing else need to be said.”

“I don’t understand.”

“This is nothing. You should have been here when the decision was made to support you at the Ivory Tower. There were some vigorous debates then.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“Because we don’t want you to go. It is dangerous. Teresa had to be convinced. Learn that you would die if you remained here while others searched.”

“That is a bit much. Really, I would not die.”

“You would wither. Grow resentful. Can we at least go back inside? It is cold.”

“Yes, yes, of course. I was told you guard the mountains.”

“Who told you that?”

“He said his name was Willem.”

They crossed through the doorway, leaving the cold and the night behind them. Tahrl grabbed the blanket, pulling it even more snugly around his shoulders, watching Ede, standing in the grand room of the Dryn house where there was room enough for many to gather and laugh and talk. He was reminded of a Montmorin feast hall, and he tried to remember the last time he had been with that extended family at table.

“I know a Willem,” Ede said. “A little young for my tastes; but, others fancy him.”

“He said he was born here.”

“That is true. I know his mother, Anne, quite well. I tended his birth. I am quite the midwife, if you really must know.”

“You’re ducking my questions.”

“I can’t believe you are asking. What makes the difference between the evening and the dawn?”

“I don’t.” He felt Armada standing over him, remembering her face so close to his own as she had devoured him with her eyes. Her tongue had been strangely cold. She had been at the campsite; she had been in the room with Alexander and Ede before the fire. Armada had been harsh, accusing him of cowardice. “I don’t know.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“It matters not. Well, go on. Ask me another. I’ll answer as we walk.”

“I don’t know,” he said; Alexander had pulled him from his door and taken Edgewood away from him forever.

“We shall walk anyway,” she said, pulling him from the room. The young Dryn were nowhere to be seen. “We don’t exactly guard the mountains. We discovered many years ago that we could hold the troglodytes in check if we patrolled the mountains. If they believed it was our land.”

“They are very territorial, I understand. Does it work? Do they respect your territory?”

“Yes, as long as we defend our land vigorously. It is demanding work. Constant vigilance. There is no rest. Armada spends more time in the mountains than she does here.”

“It is much the same on the Northern and Western slopes, I understand. The soldiers of the Troglodyte Defense do not speak much of their tactics. What of the Kianan soldiers? What little they say mentions nothing of encountering the Dryn.”

“It happens. The exchanges are seldom pleasant. One of the many reasons why we seek peace with the Kianan.”

“Wait, the Kianan soldiers go into the mountains. I was told that you can see dragons in the deep mountains. See that they do not rage. Vemarian’s soldiers know that the dragons are peaceful. He knows.”

“That one among the Kianan has plans.”

“No,” Tahrl said, whispering the word as if he might lose it forever. The great man had stood before him in Edgewood, looking down at him, taunting him, mocking. Vemarian’s soldiers had turned the townsfolk against him, forcing him from his home.

“We are here,” Ede said, pushing a curtain aside, and Tahrl realized that he had been walking in silence and lost to thought.

“Thank you,” he said, standing in the middle of the room, looking to the bed.

“I don’t think you need me anymore so I will leave you to your thoughts. Try to get some rest.”

“Wait,” he said, surprising himself. “Stay.”

Ede said nothing, watching him with what could have been a smile but wasn’t playing at her lips.

“Why?”

“Because,” Tahrl said; Armada had forced herself against him,

## The Etymology of Fire

pushing him into the ground into the tree. “You do not need my services.”

Ede laughed, brushing a hand across her face as if she might hide her eyes, looking so much like her sisters.

“I don’t know what to do with you,” she said, brushing hair across her face. “I feel I know you so well; yet, not at all. You are like the brother I could never have. There isn’t even a word for you in Dryn. I should call you sister, but you are not. You are something I could never have.”

“I am here. You say you know me? I know you not at all. I would learn. Stay.”

“Yes,” Ede said, reaching for him, holding him tight. “Nothing to fear from me this night.”

They went to the bed, shedding shoes, shedding clothing, and they curled among the blankets and soft furs. Ede rested on her side, stroking fingers through his hair and touching his face, and Tahrl slept, knowing that Alexander’s daughter watched over him.



*They remained in Greenhaven for several days not so much to plan and prepare but simply to give Tahrl time to adjust. He woke that first morning with Ede still resting beside him. Opening his eyes, he found her watching him as if she might have been watching him all the long hours of the night. The others were quiet, giving him time, giving him space while Ede gave him his first tour of the Dryn city. Armada said nothing to him at all. Ede and Armada both escorted him to his rooms that second night, and both sisters stood in the doorway, holding the curtain aside, saying nothing, waiting for the other to leave. At last, Armada turned, wandering away, leaving her sister alone at the door.*

“Rest without fear,” Ede said, letting the curtain fall.

They took him to Kianan country in search of clothing he could wear and weapons to defend himself with in the mountains. There had been so little time to prepare at Edgewood before the soldiers would have found them. Tahrl discovered that his sack contained even less than he had thought. There was a spare shirt, rumped and old. There was smoked featherhare, liarscake and even a little dry cheese. He had remembered the dagger Quicksilver but that was all. A proper pack with blankets and a change of clothing were found. Shoes fit for striking through the mountains were located along

## **The Etymology of Fire**

with a heavy cloak for the cold mountain winds and snow scented nights. A sword was chosen to accompany the dagger Quicksilver.

“Where did you come by the weapons? The armor?”

“We have been here for almost two hundred years,” Armada said, answering him. “We have gathered much in that time.”

“I haven’t studied the blade in some three years,” Tahrl said, holding the chosen sword out and balanced with an awkward and forgetful hand. “Not since I fled the Ivory Tower. Not much call for such things at Edgewood. The soldiers controlled the weapons and arms.”

“Then you must practice.”

Ax met sword between them, sliding down the blade; Tahrl almost lost his grip, feeling the weight of Armada’s ax in his arms and in his hands. She turned the blade, pulling back and away, and swung the ax in a slow, lazy arc as if she were daring him not to block the stroke.

“This hardly seems sporting. I never practiced sword against ax.”

“Then your teacher was a fool. Troglodytes will not courteously match whatever arms you carry. They will face you with fang and claw. And, speed.”

The ax was a red blur. Tahrl ducked, stepping back, slipped and fell. He staggered, coming back to his feet, watching her.

“Not so much skill as a strong arm, I take it. That explains the ax. I mean I know you have studied. You are very good with your chosen weapon.”

“Thank you.”

“You must have skill. You must be very careful against the Kianan. I understand you do stumble across them. Kianan soldiers in the mountains; even though, they never mention it. I wonder how Vemarian keeps the secret. Or, why.”

Armada said nothing.

“Of course they keep the secret,” Tahrl said to her silence. “They never go back. They are brought here. Somehow. But, you can’t bring them here. Too many soldiers might rebel. They never leave the mountains. It would be so easy to make it appear the troglodytes were responsible.”

“Not even necessary. The troks vanish everything. How did you think we came by these arms? Trade?”

He stabbed the tip of the sword into the soft earth, saying nothing. He let go of the blade and watched as it slowly toppled to the

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

ground, clattering to the dust with a dull sound that was almost lost against his ears. Looking to Armada with her great red ax, he could not see the resemblance to a Kianan or Montmorin woman. He remembered the creature he had faced in the forest sitting on the fallen tree and screaming at him. It had roared at him like a caged and shackled monster wanting only to rip and tear him to shreds.

He turned from the Dryn Armada with the ax still balanced and forgotten over her shoulder, and he could not help but wonder how much Kianan blood it had tasted. He left the Dryn standing there without a word and without a sound. He wandered through the city in the forest, ignoring the world around him until he came at last to the lake with its solitary tree growing from its depths.

Alexander found him sitting on the bridge over the river as it flowed from the lake and left Greenhaven in its wake.

“Was it your turn to look after me?”

“No,” Alexander said. “I think Ede is doing a good enough job of that on her own. I ran into Armada. Thought she was with you. Said you had wandered off without a word. Raised my curiosity that did.”

“I’m having trouble adjusting.”

“Noticed that.”

“Yes, hard not to.” Tahrl tried to laugh, choking on the sound, feeling the wind burn in his throat. He looked to his toes dangling in space; he watched them sway above the rush and flow of the river. “I know better,” he said without looking to Alexander. “I know what would happen if the Kianan found this place. I know.” He felt the river take him. If he but lost his hold on the bridge, the flood would carry him back to Edgewood. “I know. I am troubled none the less. How do you do it?” he said, looking at last to his friend. “Why do you remain?”

“Why do I stay among such thieves and corrupters of small children?” Alexander did not look to him as he answered, letting his eyes drift over the river as if he too could see all the way to Edgewood. “Love, I guess. More than that. I understand them. Some things are necessary. Not wanted. Never desired. But, necessary.”

“Necessity makes monsters of us all.”

“So the saying goes. No, I am wrong. That was never a saying. How do I survive? By recognizing the necessity. By working to redirect fate. By not dwelling on what cannot be controlled.”

“It is so much,” Tahrl said, feeling that the creature Armada watched him.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“Patience,” Alexander said, tossing something small like a stone into the river. “What have you learned that troubles you so?”

“I figured out why the soldiers never speak of encountering the Dryn in the mountains.”

“Did you?” Alexander held a small lopsided marble of polished stone or shaped glass between his fingers, turning it one way and then another, making it spin and dance between his fingers as if at any moment it might take flight or else slip forgotten into the river. “For what it is worth, Dryn who patrol the mountains so that they might hunt the Kianan do not get invited to patrol the mountains again.”

“As you say,” he replied, watching the stone in Alexander’s hand, wondering if it was twin to what had been sacrificed to the river. “For what it is worth.”

“I am sorry, Tahrl. This is not how I would have chosen for things to go.”

“You would prefer I not know of what the Dryn must do?”

“No, I have not been kind. It is strange. I have not spoken to you in three years.” Alexander caught the marble between fingers, holding it frozen in space. “Oh, you know what I mean. Take these last few days all together. Before that, three years have passed.”

“I noticed. There hasn’t been time to think about it. *Hurry, we must go* is not much by way of the meeting of old friends.”

“It’s certainly not what I would have chosen. I hope you can forgive me for that.”

“Sure, learning you are the father of children who are older than I am is shock enough. Have I even met them all?”

“I think so. Winonah is the oldest.”

“What about grandchildren?”

“Let us not bring them into this.”

“Why, Alex, would you prefer not to be reminded of your age?”

“Age? What is age? I am but young. In love with an older woman. Time holds no nightmares for me.”

Tahrl looked back to the river, seeing Edgewood in its depths, seeing a pit of black fire and despair where the dragon had died.

“What do you think of our chances in the mountains?”

“I don’t,” Alexander said. “If I took the time to dwell on such things, I would be too scared to move.”

“Do we have a plan then? Or, just a vague notion about bringing my family closer to the dragons?”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

“Not so vague. We have one final stop to make before losing ourselves among troks and trolls.”

“Really.”

“Something to check out. It may be magic or enchantment that causes the dragons to rage, and there is a magic maker who lives between the forest and the mountains.”

“A magician? Here?” Tahrl remembered magicians at the Ivory Tower. He remembered flowing white robes and serious faces looking as if they had forgotten how to laugh.

“Yes, one of the twenty master magicians. I do not know which one.”

“Why here?” he said, looking to Alexander, remembering that it had been the rustling of the Dryn that had drawn a master of wizardry to the forest.

“I do not know. He first built a mansion at the foot of the mountains as if he expected much company. That must have been a dozen years ago. In all that time, he has never entered the forest. Never entertained visitors as near as we can tell.”

“You watch him? It is a he? Well, that narrows down the candidates a bit.”

“I think it is Balthazar. Almost certain.”

“Balthazar?” Tahrl said as a swirl of faces and white robes danced before his eyes. “I’ve heard tale of him. Never met him. He’s not one to let things go.”

“He’s breeding graths.”

“No!”

“Yes, it is true.”

“How long?”

“A dozen years; give or take.”

“And, you have done nothing?”

Alexander looked to him, letting his gaze linger, watching until Tahrl’s eyes dropped to the river beneath their feet. Tahrl had once seen a grath’s corpse all mangled and foul and broken. The caravan had brought the body to his father like a gift. It had attacked, and they had survived to bring home such a trophy as none of them had ever dreamed before. Thirty men had been bringing salt and oil and grain to Earlinstien, but fewer than ten had arrived with the grath on their backs as their only prize.

“We have watched,” Alexander said, shaking Tahrl with his



## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

words. “There is little else we can do. The magicians would notice if something happened to their brother.”

“They would enter the forest. Alert the Kianan. The Dryn would be lost. This place gone.” Tahrl grew silent; Alexander did not answer. “Necessity makes monsters of us all.” Even in death, the grath had been monstrous and like nothing he had ever seen before. “The magicians must know. Even if they did not approve, they would say nothing. They value their independence so.” It had taken six men just to carry the creature, which could have stood almost to the shoulder of a horse. “Why graths?”

“That is something I have wondered for some time now.”

“We are going to ask him?”

“We shall not put it so bluntly; but, yes, we shall try to learn why he is breeding graths. What web of shadow and secrets protects Vemarian and his men.”

“You think he knows why the dragons rage?”

“He may be the cause. But, no, if he knows, we shall not have it from him. He is a master magician, after all.”

“And confronting him may tip our hand.” Tahrl saw the forest in flame just for a moment as if he had glimpsed something out of the corner of his eye. Kianan soldiers surrounding a pyre that was the very heart of the forest if not the forest entire.

“We may have no choice,” Alexander said, tossing the misshapen marble into the waters below. “It may be time to tip our hand.”

“How will we face him? Learn why the dragons rage?”

“You are forgetting I am the bard Alexander. There is much we may dare in the name of song and story.”

“I can hear the tale now of how a simple singer of music did battle with the mighty master of magic.”

“I think we can count on Armada for that. She is quite the knowledgeable wizard. These magicians have forgotten how to fight fire with fire. Throwing magic around. They think they know everything. They know nothing of subtlety and feint, aggression or style. Balthazar won’t know what hit him.”

“I do not doubt,” Tahrl said; his voice fading as he remembered the Dryn standing over him in the forest in the dark. The ax had been nothing but a blur as Armada had destroyed the forest troll. “What of the graths?”

“We should hope he does not have time to release them.” Alexan-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

der smiled, looking to Tahrl. “You should enjoy yourself before we set off for danger.”

“No, I don’t know.”

“You should. It would do much to ease the Dryn’s concerns if you made yourself available to them. You might even enjoy it.”

Armada had towered over him, forcing him to the earth, holding him in place, pressing down against him. She had stood in the doorway, facing her sister Ede, and had finally left him in peace.

“Do I matter so little to them? Cast aside after use?”

“No, Tahrl, you are precious. I am amazed that Teresa is permitting you to go.”

“So, I was to be a prisoner!”

“Never a prisoner. But, safe. I wanted you safe so that I could face the mountains without fear.”

“I would speak with dragons.”

“I know. I could not prevent it now even if I tried. If it can be done. If it is within my power, you shall speak with dragons.”

“Good.”

“They have never let us get close before. They keep to the deep mountains and tall peaks where we cannot follow them. But, we shall try. We shall try.”

“So confident, are we? What happened to your plans? If we cannot reach them, how shall we introduce them to my family?”

“I fear them.”

“My family?”

“No, the dragons.”

“Why? You said they do not rage.”

“No, it is myself that I fear. I mean I fear what I once was. I am ashamed.”

“That the dragons might see you for who you are?”

“There is much you do not know, Tahrl. So much I could tell you. So much I shall keep secret. Yes, Tahrl, to answer your question, the dragons may see me for who I am and that is a burden that is hard for me to bear.”

“I am sorry.”

“No, be not sorry. You do not understand. I have not told you. The dragons may rip open old wounds. Even thinking about them, facing them, reminds me of things better left forgotten. Reminds me of long neglected pain. Do not understand, Tahrl. I hope you never understand.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

He sat beside a stranger who had once been the most powerful wizard to ever grace the earth. Tahrl knew nothing of magic. He had been introduced to magicians visiting the Ivory Tower or speaking with the King. He had seen tricks performed, fragments of wind and storm act like servants, and he had seen fire and lightning dance to amuse an audience. He could not imagine how someone could touch the firewind and not be burned, hear words that were never spoken, or change one's skin for a hawk or a horse or a bull.

Once upon a time, his friend Alexander had been able to do all of those things with ease. Alexander had known things, touched things, done things. Alexander had been able to help and heal with the slightest of touches, and he had been able to burn and destroy with but a thought. The other wizards had gone to him for help and aid. They had studied with him, listening to his words, and they had held him up as the greatest wizard who had ever lived. Tahrl could not dream of what Alexander had been able to do. It must have been beautiful.

Alexander sat beside him on the slip of a bridge above the river as the water flowed from Greenhaven. Alexander was a wizard no more. The others must have been shocked and devastated because the greatest wizard had abandoned enchantment and magic. He had forsaken wizardry and power, and Tahrl could not imagine how. If he had been able to touch the moon and the stars, Tahrl could not imagine having the strength to let go. He sat beside the friend he had not seen in some three years and maybe had never known at all, saying nothing and watching the river as it flowed from Greenhaven leaving the past in the far distant past.



*It was raining on the morning that they left Greenhaven with nobody to watch them go except for the Lady Teresa as if departures were such a common thing that nobody took notice of them. Tahrl, Armada and Alexander wore heavy packs under thick cloaks, and the weight was mostly wine and water and hard apples and dry bread. Teresa watched them grow soaked to the skin even under their cloaks, and it seemed almost as if she had shed a layer of clothing as if the governess of Greenhaven was basking in the rain and drinking it in even as the flood washed over her shoulders. She called the storm the most promising and hopeful of omens no matter how much Tahrl doubted her. They left Greenhaven with the*

## **The Etymology of Fire**

rain pouring all around them and the mountains a quarter turning of the moon before them where the magician Balthazar waited breeding graths.

*Chapter Three*  
**The Edge of Forever**

*They walked through rain, and they walked through storm all that long day after leaving Greenhaven behind them. The governess Teresa, watching them leave the warmth and safety of the Dryn city, was a distant and faded memory as if all the world had become a dark forest and drifting rain. They rested that first night in the rain in the dark, trying to raise rough covers above their heads to hold back the worst of the storm. There was no fire they could build against the downpour, and they tried to rest as best they could huddled together, speaking as little as possible as if words would drain all the strength from their bones. Tahrl would have laughed at the faint memory of Teresa's voice and the promise she had made that rain was a good omen except he could barely muster the heart to breathe.*

The following morning was dry as if taunting and mocking them for their weakness beneath the storm. They greeted the morning with the fire they had been unable to strike only the night before, and they prepared dark tea and warm bread by the budding flames and shimmering light. They traveled quickly that day among damp and still dripping branches, but the storm was not done with them. The rain would fall at unexpected moments, slowing their progress. The storm was quiet when they stopped for the night and raised their awkward shelter against the dark, and they sparked a fire, which made the forest dance with red and amber light. They still spoke as little as need required, fearing that their voices would bring the storm back down on their heads, but then they laughed at odd and unexpected moments as if preparing a camp was the strangest thing that any of them had ever done.

Once the needs of the camp were seen to, Alexander took his flute from his pack, removing it from its coverings and wrappings, revealing a wonder of silver and shimmering moonlight as if he held a dream. He held the whisper of mystery to his lips and began to play.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

The music that Alexander coaxed from the silver flute washed over Tahrl as sweet as star shine, flowing around him, filling him, taking away the long troubles of the day. As the night drifted around him and the quiet music soaked through him, Tahrl became aware of the fire growing dim and old before him as if both light and flame had been lollled to the edge of sleep. Tahrl could feel Alexander sitting there with music in his hands, and he could feel the Dryn Armada next to him in the forest in the dark. As if time held no meaning in the quiet night, Tahrl began to remember; thoughts and memories slipping confused and unwanted into his mind. The Dryn Armada had towered over him with the scream of the forest troll still echoing and reverberating through the confines of his mind. He wanted to scream as if surprised from sleep. The Dryn had held him to the ground, forcing herself on him, and he had been unable to move as the creature out of the deep forest had studied him while perched on his lap. He wanted to push, shoving her away, except she was not on top of him. It had been nothing more than a faded memory made vivid by the forest and the fire in the dark. He looked to her, trembling, feeling his whole body shake, and she ignored him, saying nothing, watching her father and listening to the music.

Tahrl thought he would fly apart, sitting before the fire, wondering why memory frightened him, until at last the music did touch him, and he remembered a soft bed in his room among the trees. He remembered the touch of Armada's sister, gracing and comforting against his skin, and he remembered Ede standing in the doorway beneath the curtain so that he could sleep all through the long night. She had been warm, and her touch had been kind. Even her smile had been soft as she had led him, trying not to laugh at his awkward step, to where others waited for him. Ede had turned, not needing to watch and not needing his services. In memory, he forgot the monster that had held him. No monster touched him, and the memory and silver music let peace filter through him to last all the long night beneath the quiet sky.

The rain fell and was silent. They walked in peace, and they walked in storm, setting up their sheltering curtains even on nights when the rain did not fall because they knew they might be drenched by morning. They did not speak, saving their breath, hoarding their strength even when the storm did not taunt them, and Tahrl gave even less time to thought, ignoring the memory of warmth and dry beds of Greenhaven. In spite of storm and in spite of rain, he wanted

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

only to see mountains and the shapes of dragons looking so much like birds as they sailed gracefully above the clouds.

“We shall reach our friend the magician this day, I think,” Alexander said in the morning after they had been traveling through the forest for a full quarter of the moon.

“Good,” Tahrl said, cupping his hands to a bowl of steaming dark tea. “Our plans have not changed?”

“We still need information.”

“I know. It is our approach that troubles me.” He remembered standing beside the King as the magicians had greeted him with half a bow and the graceful sweep of one hand. “I think we should confront him directly. No, not like that. I mean that we should not hint and search. We should ask him straight away what he knows of the dragons and why he is breeding graths.”

“He will not answer.”

“Perhaps.” There had been two master magicians dressed all in white robes and a half dozen others in brown and silver and gray. “Perhaps,” Tahrl said. “The magicians do not like deception even among their own. It’s unavoidable, but they do not like it. I think this magician, especially if it is Balthazar, will respond much better to direct questions. About the graths, most definitely. He cannot hide them.”

“Tipping our hand.”

“How shall we explain we know of them?” Armada said. “He is between the forest and the mountains. No roads pass here.”

“Somebody always knows,” Tahrl said.

“Yes, the Dryn know,” Armada answered. “Can we hide that truth from him? As you say, he will not be pleased by the attempt to deceive him.”

“It may not be necessary. Who knows what rumor is whispered in Edgewood or Windvale? Can we be sure that none of the soldiers know or speak?”

“You knew nothing.”

Tahrl did not reply, looking to Armada. She had struck him, moving so fast he was amazed that he did not bleed. She had spoken out against him, calling him coward, wanting him to stay in Greenhaven.

“I know,” Tahrl finally said into the silence. “I know the magicians. Have had dealings with them. Do you remember Hobshollow?”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“Yes,” Alexander said. “A rogue mage was responsible for that. When the townsfolk died, he would bring them back to life. Carry on his work.”

“Not exactly back to life,” Tahrl said. “He would animate their bodies in much the same way as any magician could animate an inanimate thing. The King was very concerned. When it was over, he summoned the master magicians to make sure that it could not happen again.” Tahrl remembered the magicians standing before the King. “I have had dealings with magicians.”

“As have I.”

“If we are too subtle, we will learn nothing. He may learn more from us than we from him.” Tahrl surrendered his tea to the fire, listening to the surprised hiss and cackle of the flames. “I think I may speak. I may have the best chance of protecting our secrets.”

“How?”

“I will give him other secrets to unravel.”

“You know nothing of graths,” Armada said. “None know that he breeds them.”

“The Montmorin may know,” Tahrl said and then watched the fire, wanting to say nothing more. He remembered the halls of Earlinstien, and he remembered grand passageways. He remembered the laughter of voices all spun together, turning this way and that.

“The Montmorin?”

“The magicians may know what Balthazar does here. He cannot hide it from his own fraternity.”

“What?”

“There is a Montmorin magician,” Alexander said.

“Let Balthazar think I have been at Earlinstien among the Montmorin,” Tahrl said with eyes only for the fire. “Let him believe I met Alexander there. Found an untutored magician to accompany us. Let him wonder who trained you. Think you may be rogue.”

“Rogue,” Armada said. “Let him wonder.”

“You intend to speak for the Montmorin, don’t you?”

“Let him wonder.” Tahrl watched the fire, remembering great hearth fires in the feasting halls of the Montmorin, remembering half-forgotten days when the world had been filled with familiar voices and people. “I have heard nothing of them in so long. What is their position on the dragons?”

“A danger to the Kianan is a danger to the Montmorin,” Alexander said. “What other position could they take?”



## The Etymology of Fire

Tahrl closed his eyes, thinking of flame, feeling it burn his eyes and scorch his tongue. He touched his hand to his face, expecting to feel charred and blackened flesh, feeling nothing instead.

“They would not approve of the graths,” he finally said. “I can be reasonably sure of that. You see? Let our magician wonder why the Montmorin have sent me, disgraced child that I am, to speak with him concerning graths. He will have no cause to think of Dryn or wizards.”

“Perhaps.”



*“Perhaps,” Tahrl whispered as they left the woods behind them and approached the home of the master magician between the forest and the mountains.*

The home of their solitary magician was as grand a mansion as any Tahrl had seen resting before the Ivory Tower, and he imagined that it had been lifted from out of that far away city only to come to rest before the ancient home of the dragons. He pictured a man clothed all in flowing white robes directing the flight of the mansion and bringing it to rest so gently against the fields of tall grass before the mountains that not a door was shaken or a window broken. No other explanation fit the mansion’s existence for even Alexander and Armada did not know how the grand house had arrived. One morning it had simply been there as if the mansion had always been resting at the edge of the forest where the Dryn thrived in the deep woods among trees that were older than memory or time. They approached the mansion, Tahrl, Alexander and Armada, seeking the magician who had placed it there, leaving the forest for the first time since Tahrl and Alexander had fled Edgewood.

The door to the mansion was grand and stood out like a great gateway set right in the center of the building. As they approached the double door that dwarfed them but was still made small by the majesty of the house it fronted, they could see that the door had been carved with an impressionist’s fantasy of the mountains beyond. Tahrl stayed to the foot of the three steps needed to reach the door, looking upon grandeur he had not seen since he had fled the Ivory Tower, watching Alexander ascend, wondering if he turned in a circle would he find himself once more in the far away city of the tower. Alexander rose to the door as if ignoring the imagined city as

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

if mansions always grew alone from the earth between the mountains and the trees.

“There’s no need to knock.”

They turned, hearing the voice, looking to the far edge of the mansion. Alexander stood with his hand raised suspended but ready to touch the door, looking to the source of words. There was a man dressed all in white robes having just turned the corner of the mansion walking toward them.

“There is no one within to answer,” the stranger’s voice reached them as if by magic even though he was still distant.

They stood, waiting, watching the magician approach. He was dressed all in flowing white robes encircled by a belt of faded gold that looked as if it was made of a ring of pouches. His hair was long and gold with a beard to match. He had a broad face and piercing eyes that could be felt even from a distance to be studying them.

“Greetings,” the magician said. “I am Master Balthazar, the magician. You do not seem surprised. Was I expected? Were you seeking me?”

“After a fashion,” Alexander said. “But first let me return curtsy that you have shown me. I am Alexander the Minstrel. You may have heard of me.”

“Heard of you? My dear fellow, I have heard you play. Oh, it was years ago, and I was hardly the most important guest in attendance. You would not have known me.”

“It must have been many years, indeed, for you are noteworthy. You helped so much against the bandit kings though you let your involvement go all but unrecognized.”

“It is how I prefer things. I have no need for praise. There need be no songs in my name or stories told in my honor. If I had a reputation for the bandit kings to have known, things would have gone much differently.”

“Yet, it is in part this lack of tale or story that draws me to you.”

“Only part?”

“Well, I did not know for certain who lived between the forest and the mountains. Only that a great magician was here. I thought I might learn such as I could add to song and story.”

“And, you find me reluctant to give you not to sing of. Forgive me, friend Alexander, I shall send you home empty. In a manner of speaking. I will not have it said that Balthazar has forgotten all of hospitality.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“I will never hear it said, Master Balthazar. Allow me first to introduce my companions of the road for these are still dangerous days. Tahrl Morgan can find any path even if it is only the scent of a featherhare. Armada Mathis is the finest champion and braggart you could ever hope to have at your side.”

“Wonderful,” the magician said, looking first to Tahrl. Balthazar’s eyes lingering as if the name struck memory, and he was wondering what to make of the person whose name was so close to that of a disgraced scholar of the Ivory Tower. The magician turned for as interesting as the secrets Tahrl held might be they were nothing compared to the puzzle that was Armada. Even at such a slight glance, Balthazar should have been able to sense the magic Armada held in her hands. Balthazar would wonder at the mage he did not recognize, and he would ponder the danger that stood before his door. “I am Balthazar,” the magician said. “Welcome to my home.”

Ascending the steps, Balthazar threw wide the great double door, and they entered the magician’s home. The entry hall alone was as large as Tahrl’s entire house back in Edgewood, and here they left their gear and their packs, leaving even their weapons, swords and ax and bow in the hall before the door. Balthazar lead them deeper into the house, finding a grand room with a fireplace that took up most of one wall and a stair that lead to a second and even a third floor. From this room, they passed to another that was only slightly smaller than the last, and the ceiling only reached to the second floor instead of the third. There was a great round table occupying most of the room with an open center and a fire pit where servants might work and see to the guests who would be seated around the table’s edge. It looked very much as if an entire working kitchen could fit into the open center of the table. Set all about the second floor were alcoves where people could sit and dine almost in privacy while looking down upon the main floor.

Balthazar lead them to one corner of the table as if there was nothing special about the room and bid them all sit in chairs provided there. The magician clapped his hands as if to summon the staff, and traps opened near the center of the floor as if the servants would rise into the room. No one appeared but food did rise on great trays that were carried by figures of smoke and wind that bore little resemblance to man. The fire pit was started by invisible hands, and bread and meat were warmed by the flames. Tahrl and the others were quickly served roasted mushrooms and small potatoes. There

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

was desert boar and longhorn prancer. There was summerharvest and salt water fish. Tahrl could not remember the last time he had eaten ocean born fish, and then it had been smoked over rosewood with salt and honey.

“Too much,” Alexander finally said, laughing, as they were presented with platters of sweet bread and sesame cakes. “We are not an army.”

“Forgive me, I have so few guests. I do not know when to stop. I will not have it said that the magician Balthazar has forgotten everything of hospitality.”

“My dear fellow, I will never hear it said. I doubt if even the King fares as well as we have this day.”

“Well, there is something to be said for being a master of magic.”

With that, Balthazar lead them back into the great hall where they sat upon proper cushions before the fireplace that could consume entire trees whole. A wisp of cloud offered them steaming cups of dark chocolate brandy and glasses of chilled wine.

“Now, tell me,” Balthazar said. “Stories and music were only part of the reason that brought you here.”

“We heard rumor that you breed graths,” Tahrl said, speaking up for the first time.

He watched the magician grow quiet and sag into his cushion as if a great weight had been remembered or thrust fresh onto his shoulders. Alexander also sat quiet and attentive, watching the magician, but Tahrl could feel his friend’s eye glance over him as if he doubted his reason for allowing Tahrl to choose this path.

“That is true,” the magician said as if disappointed to learn he was not sitting with old friends without a care in the world. “I have no reason to deny it. Nothing to hide. I breed monsters. Would you know why before you condemn me?”

“I would know truth,” Tahrl said at the edge of his cushion.

“Let me show you.” Balthazar rose and beckoned for them to follow him down the hall.

They did follow the magician but slowly, moving cautiously and quietly; Armada made not a sound at all. As they followed the passage, Tahrl wondered that Balthazar had not challenged him. The magician had simply accepted the fact that he knew things he could not possibly have known. The magician had not asked who could have told him or how he could have known about the graths. Tahrl tried not to think of answers he did not know and simply followed

## **The Etymology of Fire**

Balthazar down the hall and then through a grand kitchen that looked as if it could feed many more people than could stay at the mansion.

They passed through the kitchen's entrance and found themselves behind the mansion looking out over a field of tall grass, and some ways back from the mansion was a fence that looked as if it stretched almost from the edge of the mountains to the forest. Tahrl had never seen its like. It was a divide in the world, binding mountains and wood with a chain of white interlocking branches, and looked nothing so much as like a paddock for keeping horses. Balthazar strode quickly to the fence, but they followed him slowly for they knew that the magician did not keep horses. He did not keep sheep, goats or even boar. The fence marked the edge of a cage for monsters.

Balthazar turned at the very edge of the fence, looking back at Tahrl, Alexander and Armada, watching them approach with wary eyes and uneasy step. The magician stood, watching them as if he carried a burden that pulled at his soul or as if he were simply following steps that had been laid out for him years before. Tahrl and Alexander stood before him at last; Armada holding back as if she expected the very earth and the air to rise up against them without any trace of warning.

"Learn what fools we are," Balthazar said before turning once more back to the fence, and then he made a sharp sound like a whistle that echoed out over the paddock like the wailing of a lost soul.

For a long moment in which Tahrl forgot even to breathe, there was silence as if the very world had stopped dead in its tracks waiting for danger to pass. Tahrl could not move, looking past Balthazar, looking through a fence crafted of interlocking tree trunks as if the wall must be strong enough to hold back the tide. There was a cry just at the edge of hearing and distant as the faded wind, but it still made Tahrl gasp sucking air like ice past his jaws. He had never heard such a sound as the stark and musty breeze carried to his ear. It was the growl of a mountain cat. It was the howl of a desert wolf. It was the cry of twisted nightmare made flesh and made real. The call of the monstrous creature that was a grath carried to them on the wind.

Tahrl reached for his dagger Quicksilver, finding nothing, stumbling over empty air, remembering that they had left all arms and armor in Balthazar's home for safekeeping. He tried to step back-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

ward as if attempting to climb a stairway that simply was not there. He could not move, listening to the rumble of the wind, feeling more than sight and more than sound that monsters approached. It was said that a grath could kill you before you could move. The survivors had carried the carcass, unwilling to part with that which had all but consumed them. People had looked. People had stared, wanting to touch, shying away as if the thing was destruction even in death.

A grath stood before them. It had skimmed the ground so fast they had almost not seen it approach. It was huge. It was monstrous. It was beyond memory. It would have stood to the shoulder of a horse or even taller. It wore a long coat of shaggy fur the color of wheat ready for the harvest. Even for its size, such a monster would be invisible standing alone in the tall grass. There was a flattened face and impossible eyes. Massive shoulders and long flanks. Long ears. No tail. Its paws must have been the size of Tahrl's head. It snorted with a sound like rumbling thunder, standing beyond the barricade, watching them with insanity for eyes.

"Be not afraid," Balthazar said as if speaking to children. "I control it absolutely."

"You control nothing," Tahrl whispered with eyes only for the creature of death and destruction. The body the traders had brought to his father at Earlinstien had been broken and shrunken. Before him stood a living force. Climbing the wall would be nothing for such a creature.

"I asked you to suspend judgment if only for a little while. The grath is under my control. At my mercy if you prefer." The magician grew quiet as several more creatures loped into view. They gathered next to the other, facing Balthazar. They flew like the wind for creatures of such monstrous size. A horse was slender compared to them. "Why, you would ask me?"

"Yes."

"They are not real. Not natural born creatures of this earth. They were made. Before you, see the craft of wizardry. The binding of a great cat and dark wolf. It is a thing that should not be. Dangerous, I am sure you would agree."

"Such death and destruction these things have wrought I could not even begin to speak," Alexander said. "There are no songs or stories of graths. Only warnings."

"I would put an end to it," Balthazar said. "Folly, I know, but I

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

would set myself such a task as only fools could dream. A wizard made them? A magician shall unmake them.”

“How?”

Balthazar looked over the creatures assembled before them, saying nothing. The graths watched, shifting uneasily on monstrous paws as if they longed to be free of their cage, and then without a word, they scattered as if startled as if the magician had dismissed them.

“I haven’t quite figured that part out,” Balthazar said. “I am not breeding them. They do not keep well in captivity so I must replenish my stock so that I may continue my work. So, I guess you could say- yes, I breed them.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“They cannot be controlled.”

“I must.”

“It is folly,” Tahrl said and then looked away. “As you said, folly.”

Balthazar turned from the fence, looking to his guests; his eyes lingering over each of them in turn as if he might wonder how he was judged by all the peoples of the world. Tahrl could not hold such a gaze as if he expected to find something as monstrous as the graths behind the magician’s eyes. The magician was weary, and Tahrl could not chance to look upon something so human for nothing with a heart should be able to stomach the care of hideous beasts such as were the graths.

“You know what they do,” Balthazar said as softly as the winter breeze drifting in through cracks in the door. “There must be an end to such savagery. There must be a way. I will search. I will strive. I cannot do nothing.” Sharp glance to the fence and then away as if stung. “Is that what you will tell them, Tahrl Morgan ap Morin? Have I answered your challenge? Are you satisfied?”

Tahrl wanted to step back, holding his ground, finding the strength to look upon the magician who should have been a monster for breeding monstrosities but was not. Graths could not be caged. They could not be held. The survivors had carried the body to show his father; everything else had been lost.

“No.”

“No,” Balthazar echoed, letting the word fall like the slain spark of laughter to the ground. “By what right do you judge me? By what folly do you challenge me?”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“By birthright.”

Balthazar did laugh; nothing but the dry rasp of a sound as if he could not breathe.

“You speak for none or have you forgotten all in your folly? Rumor reaches even my ear. Here, between the mountains and the wood.”

“We all have our follies.”

“Yes, I would say that we do. However, I do not embrace savagery. I seek to end it.”

“As do I.”

“Really? I think you jest. I think you contradict what I say without thought. Letting the words flow. Unconsidered. Uncomprehended.”

“I have seen savagery. I have seen hatred. I have seen rage that will not be stilled.” Memory of a dragon ripped at Edgewood behind Tahrl’s eyes. “Nothing I have seen.” It had ruptured wood and broken stone. “Only rumor to contradict my eyes.” Killing everything in its path. “I would know why none speak of such things. I would know truth.”

“Truth? What truth? What truth do you seek? What truth have you seen? What truth could you know?”

Tahrl said nothing, looking to Balthazar, feeling the magician standing before him more than he saw him as if he stood at the edge of a storm. There was a whisper on the quiet wind as if the whole world stood poised for flight, and at his back, Tahrl felt the Dryn Armada like a brand of wildfire ready to strike. He must speak or be lost. The moment forgotten like a sliver of memory of what might have been.

“Nothing,” Tahrl said, and the magician looked to him; the storm forgotten. “I know nothing. I seek everything.”

“Then let me show you something.” Balthazar did not wait, stepping around them and making his way back toward the mansion as if he knew without knowledge or reason that Tahrl would follow.

Except Tahrl did not. He stood like a statue caught between life and death, watching the magician fade into the twilight, feeling the breeze build behind him as if it might lift him like a feather and then drop him like a stone. Armada stood at his side; her breath held tight in her lungs and caught in her throat as if to release the rush of winds would be to admit defeat. The battle lost before they ever knew it had begun. Tahrl knew that Alexander stood there as well, but he could not find him. He could not sense his friend of



## **The Etymology of Fire**

many years or know his thoughts or feelings. To stand before the magician was to stand before the last remaining traces of something that his friend had been long before Tahrl had been born. Alexander stood in memory. Alexander stood in fear of discovery.

Balthazar stopped half-lost to shadow and the fading of the day. Turning to look to them, Balthazar said nothing. The magician would show them something, and Tahrl could only imagine what it might be. He doubted it was the truth about dragons. There was something in the mage's words that made Tahrl think that he would not tell them anything that they did not already know. There were the graths to think of. Balthazar bred them, shaped them, controlled them. They were creatures of the dark and savage nightmare. The carcass that the survivors had brought to his father had smelled of old flesh and festering blood. Nothing could control such monsters.

Balthazar stood, swaying softly by the gentle light and soft breeze as if even such a faint wind as pushed against them might knock the magician to the ground. There was something about him. There was darkness. There was sadness. Tahrl thought he saw one who desired to comfort the sick, feed the hungry, defend the innocent, and save the world, and yet such a man bred monsters. Tahrl could not follow, feeling the moment slip away, feeling the magician grow still as if he would reach a decision. There was something about the way he held against the wind as if he must do things he felt were necessary and need only find the strength.

It was in that moment as the world changed that Alexander stepped forward. Balthazar stood as if startled as if he had forgotten that the minstrel stood there, and his gaze locked upon Alexander as if seeing him for the first time. Feeling Alexander pass, Tahrl felt released from a trap of his own devising. He felt the wind and the storm let him go, and he found that he could follow Alexander. Stumbling, almost falling, he found his feet at last and walked with Alexander toward Balthazar.

The magician stood as if lost to the dark and to the night, and he did not see that they approached him. At last, they stood together, and Balthazar seemed to notice them, saying nothing. He turned, facing the mansion once more, and began to walk. They followed him back to the servant's entrance and back to the kitchen, which looked as if it had gone unused for a very long time. They retraced steps through long hallways and back through the great hall where the fireplace could consume them all. There was another hall

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

half-hidden by the grand stairway, and they followed it into darker passages and narrow confines. The mansion was growing dark as the sun sank beyond the mountains casting everything in red and dark shadow. A light bloomed from nowhere and followed them. It was joined by another and then another. Light drifting around them without source or destination; simply the desire to guide them on their way.

Balthazar found a door, opening it, and stepped down three steps into a room that was half wood and half stone. The lights scattered, drifting this way and that, filling the chamber, revealing secrets that the darkness had held. There were no windows here. There was no portal through which the light of the sun or even the moon and stars could visit upon this space. There was only a table. It took up most of the large chamber. Having seen it by the drifting and fickle lights, Tahrl could not draw away from it. He went to the table, seeing mountains, seeing the forest, seeing the mansion like a child's plaything resting between the mountains and the Dryn's forest.

"It is beautiful," Tahrl whispered, watching lights drift over the miniature mountains like stars wafting through the sky.

"What do you see?" Balthazar said.

"I see the mountains formed from clay," Alexander said. "Are they accurate? Are they true? How long did you labor on this?"

"Many years," the magician said. "The mountains are vast, and there was much to learn."

"It ends here at the forest," Alexander said, almost touching the table, letting his fingertips drift over miniature trees pretending they were giants. "There is so much you have not touched."

"Only the mountains interest me. We took them from the Wraths and Wraiths so long ago. We lost them to the troglodytes. We must not lose any more. I promised to show you something. Look to the mountains, Tahrl. Tell me what you see."

The lights drifted, descending like falling stars, and Tahrl saw signs and markers appear by shimmering light. They were everywhere. Little signs and little markers stuck into the mountains like miniature signposts for the traveler to heed and beware. They told of troglodytes, and they spoke of cavern trolls. The little signs listed the paths of the creatures that ruled the mountains. Signs listed their numbers and their patterns, their strengths and their weaknesses.

"There are so many," Tahrl whispered, stretching fingers, read-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

ing signs, looking from lowlands and half-formed hills to the deep mountains and far away peaks. Lights shifted, dancing as his eyes moved, yielding him views of the miniature world that had been lost to view. “How could you know all of this?” he said and then was suddenly silent as if struck dumb.

There were signs for Wraths and there were signs for Wraiths in the deep mountains and at the tops of the highest towers. There were markers and there were numbers. There were names, and Tahrl felt the blood flow out of him as if someone had opened a trapdoor in his heart to leave nothing but darkness, ice and cold numbness in its wake.

“What is this?” he whispered, feeling cold, feeling ice, feeling the bite of the freezing wind crash against him with a harshness that made his skin burn.

The magician Balthazar said nothing, and Tahrl fell away from the table as if he risked falling into it. As if the mountains were a trap that pulled at his soul, Tahrl stepped backward, holding his arms tight, feeling the table pull at him as if he might fall to his death.

“What is this?” he whispered words as if they were lost.

“What do you see?” Balthazar said.

“You have named them,” Tahrl said, looking to Balthazar, looking to Alexander who stood as quiet as could be with eyes only for the table and the map. “Wraths and Wraiths, you have named them.”

“Yes.”

“Bloodfiend? Soulreaper? Deceiver?”

“Yes.”

“Dreamslayer?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because it is what they are.”

“No.”

“Yes, Tahrl, it is what they are. You say you have seen savagery? You say you have seen destruction? You have not been into the mountains. You have not seen them. You do not know what they want. What is going to happen.”

“This is wrong.”

Balthazar laughed. The lights fled, huddling in the heights and far corners of the ceiling.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

“If only I could believe you,” the magician said. “They are kind? They are benevolent? I wish I could believe.”

“Then believe.”

Balthazar said nothing, looking to him while the phantom lights huddled and shivered in the recesses and distant rafters casting strange shadows that fell and played over the land. Tahrl could not look but could not look away as the darkness shifted across the room, turning this way and that, distorting everything through a nightmare prism of chaos and order.

“What have you seen?”

Tahrl closed his eyes; the room was a twisted mass of shapes and figures and dark impressions of fire. Trying to breathe, he found nothing as if the room was slipping out of focus, and he would find himself falling through shadow like mud bent on smothering him.

“Nothing,” he said as if breathing through fog. “I have seen nothing that I can believe.”

“Let me speak then of what I have seen,” Balthazar said.

Tahrl wanted to fold in upon himself. He felt the mist like ice drifting all about him and settling on his skin. Shivering did nothing. The cold like points of diamond sank through skin and bone.

“I have seen them,” the magician said, whispering words sounding like the grating of fingers across stone. “I have seen chaos. I have seen destruction. I have seen the work of savage monsters that live in the mountains. They are Wraths, and they are Wraiths; and, they will destroy us.”

“No,” Tahrl tried to whisper, finding no voice, hearing no sound drift forth from his lips. He opened his eyes, letting them slip like the press of the wind past an ancient door. He looked to the miniature mountains resting on the tabletop, and he tried to imagine shapes looking so much like tiny birds sailing gracefully above the peaks. The imagined figures and shards of fantasy turned and danced above the mountains with a beauty he could not describe. They swooped and dove, and they sailed and climbed. Every wing stroke was a touch of perfection between clouds and sky.

He looked to Alexander, standing beside the table, matching him eye to eye, but there were no words to be found in that dark chamber between the mountains and the forest. He looked to the magician who stood watching him sway in time to the beat of his distant heart.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“So,” Tahrl said. “You know why Wraths and Wraiths give themselves up to savagery and rage.”

“After a fashion.”

Tahrl laughed, coughing on the sound, trying to silence the darkness before he might tumble to the ground.

“You would play games?” Tahrl said, feeling his voice crack. “Even now?”

“Would you?”

“I would not give up my delusions. I cannot see savage monsters where there were once guardians and protectors. I must believe.”

“What of truth?”

“What of it?”

“You said you wanted truth.”

“Yes.”

“What have you seen?”

Tahrl felt he would slip through the earth like a candle melting under its own flame to fall in upon itself and die.

“Nothing.”

“Then you are blind.”

“Then I am blind.”

For the longest moment of his life, which was nothing more than the passage of time between one breath and the next, there was silence in the dark. The magician did not speak, brushing a hand across his eyes, touching fingers to his face.

“I wish I could help you, Tahrl Morgan ap Morin,” Balthazar said. “I wish I could see what you see. I would give much to be blind, but I cannot. If only I could forget what I have seen.”

“What have you seen?” Tahrl asked, but the magician did not answer.



*Tahrl woke in darkness, sitting up, gasping for breath as if he had forgotten how to dream. He was in bed. They had all been shown to rooms. After they had gone back to the great hall with its fireplace and the three-story stair. After they had left the map room with nothing more to say. Balthazar had left them to their thoughts, saying he had things to see to. The graths had required feeding. There was little to say.*

Tahrl was sitting curled among blankets and covers in bed in the dark in the middle of the night. Shaking as if the cold sapped his

## **The Etymology of Fire**

soul. There was somebody in the room. Armada stood at the edge of the bed. Tahrl twisted, throwing covers, sliding across sheets and furs and pillows. Armada had him, grabbing his wrist as he tumbled and spun away from her. She had towered over him. In the forest, she had held him to the ground. He cried out with a strangled voice as if he was trapped in a charcoal nightmare, pulling at his wrist. There was nobody except the Dryn. Ede would not stand in the doorway to hold off her sister. There was only Armada.

“Quiet,” she said; more hushed command than whisper.

Tahrl wanted to bite his own arm off at the shoulder if only he could be free of Armada’s grip. She held his fist as he slipped as he tumbled from the bed; Armada almost falling after him. She pulled hard, wrenching his arm, and he found himself standing to face her. His arm straight in the air as if reaching for the far branches of a tree; her fingers around his wrist. She was half on the bed; half beside it.

“Awake, stupid Kianan,” she whispered; her voice a harsh whisper. “We must be away from here.”

Tahrl blinked dull eyes that saw nothing but outlines and shadow. His arm burned. He could not move. His stomach made a run for his throat. He choked on his soul, gagging, almost collapsing to the floor except Armada held him suspended in the air. Her fingers locked around his wrist as if he stood dangling; his arm suspended from a tree.

“What?” he managed the word without vomiting his life all over the furs and the blankets.

“We must go,” Armada said without letting go. “There is danger. We have done much that the magician will not like.”

“How?”

“Really, Tahrl, you must ask?”

He did not answer, looking to Armada, saying nothing; she had been a blaze of light in the forest, attacking the forest troll. She had held him in the wood, vanishing between root and twig, appearing unexpectedly between bark and leaf. She had blinded him with light that had not actually been there. He said nothing, feeling the weight in his arm, feeling numb fingers, feeling his shoulder burn, while his feet almost did not touch the floor.

“Let go,” he said.

Armada was little more than a figure of dark shadow and charcoal outline, straddling the bed and holding him suspended in the

## **The Etymology of Fire**

air. She did not move. She did not breathe, standing motionless as a forgotten tree in the dark forest where there was no wind to rustle against her branches or caress her leaves.

All at once, she released his wrist, and he doubled over almost falling, taking the sudden weight in his legs. Feeling fire race his spine, he wanted to gasp, grinding his teeth so that flames would not leap from his mouth and set the room ablaze. Rubbing at his alternately freezing and burning arm, he glanced about the room for his clothes and began to pull at the nightshirt that had been part of the chamber as he spotted his things.

“Where is Alexander?” Tahrl said, fumbling with his clothes in the dark, fastening clasps with numb and burning fingers.

“Inflicting mischief,” Armada said, watching him through dark shadow and moonlight. “The magician will yield us no secrets. That much is clear. He intends to use the graths against the mountains or against the forest. I do not know. We cannot allow that.”

Tahrl stopped fighting with his clothes, looking to Armada, seeing little more than an outline against the window. He remembered monsters in the pen the size of small horses with massive feet and claws like the edge of a sword. He imagined Alexander among such creatures and saw them fall at nothing more than a glance from his friend. He imagined music on the wind touching graths and destroying them as he imagined Alexander with his flute to his lips while all around graths howled and cried and fell.

“What have you done?”

“There is no time,” Armada said. “No, this way. The window. There is a ledge. You must make your way to the drainspout. Climb down. It is the only way to keep you safe.”

“By crawling along the window ledge?” he said from the window’s edge, looking out at the narrow way.

“You force us to protect you.”

“There must be another way. Our packs remain by the door.”

“The other way risks facing the magician. You must go.” She had the window open. Wind like ice swept around him. “Now.”

She had him by the shoulder, and he did not resist as she guided him to the ledge. It was little more than the width of his feet. All great houses and mansions such as this one had window ledges so that the housekeepers and craftsmen could see to the care of the windows and shutters. He had used them many times when he was young and visiting his family in the great city before the Ivory Tow-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

er. Ledges had always seemed the best way to cross from room to room especially after being consigned to bed for the night. Between the forest and the mountains, the ledge seemed so narrow as to be almost useless to the household staff, which did not matter if the magician did not maintain such a staff. Tahrl balanced on the ledge, feeling the chill air bite, feeling the three-story drop to the ground almost as if he had already fallen.

Turning back to the window; Armada was gone. He kept his eyes to the black gap in the wall almost as if the open window had swallowed all strength to look away. He listened for anything, holding still, feeling the midnight breeze creep through his clothes and burn his skin. There was nothing; no voices, no sound, no sign of Armada. He wanted to hear the sound of a silver flute carried to him by the wind except he stood in silence listening only to the rush of his own breath. Alexander could be among the graths. Shaking himself, he looked to the sky, slender moon and bright stars. He took a breath that burned with frozen fire in his lungs and then forced himself to inch along the awkward wall, taking one slow step and then another. He paused, looking. He had reached another window. There was another bedroom between himself and the drainpipe that Armada insisted was a grand stairway to safety and freedom, and he could not help but imagine the magician waited for him to cross the glass plain. If not Balthazar, then some servant as had brought them supper would force him from the wall as he passed.

As he stood shivering, looking, wavering, he felt the whole side of the mansion move as if the walls and the floor were expanding, stretching, bubbling. Then everything shrunk as he gripped the wall as if the world was being pulled into the bedroom where he had so recently been sleeping and Armada had disappeared. The half-open window of his room expanded outward with a rush and roar of shattering timber and breaking glass. The wall exploded. Tahrl screamed, gripping the ledge, watching wood fly. Armada was tumbling through air amidst wood and shingle and glass. Slipping head over feet. Burning except there was no flame. Her fall turned into a slide; sparks like fire trailing flame spread around her feet and arms and hands as if she gripped at the night and the wind. The very air seemed to slow her fall amidst a shower of sparks and bright light like flame, and she came at last to touch the ground three-stories down almost as if she had done nothing more than take a single step to the ground.



## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

Tahlr could not move, watching Armada; sparks like ghost-fire drifting around her and reaching for the sky. She faced the broken window and ruptured side of the mansion where he had so recently been sleeping as if she expected thunder and lightning to fall down upon her. She stood without moving for so long that Tahlr imagined she was frozen, and then she turned as if listening as if following some thing's progress within the confines of the mansion. Tahlr remembered the window, and he felt the world burn as he gasped air and forced the frozen wind into his lungs. He was so close to the shattered wall that he could not believe the ledge still held, and he tried to move, knowing he had to get past the window, feeling that he had to reach the drainpipe.

Armada moved, reaching the edge of the mansion, climbing the drainpipe as if she ran across open ground. She did not stop, reaching the roof, disappearing from sight, and Tahlr knew that the mansion must have roof access. He knew that the magician must have made for that door. He could feel Armada above him; even though, she made no sound at all as she ran across the roof of the mansion. Tahlr waited as if frozen to the side of the mansion, listening for the touch of wind or the distant melodies of Alexander's flute. There was nothing so he counted the beats of his own heart as he gripped the ledge and forced air like ice through his mouth and into his lungs. He tried to move, managing somehow to slip past the window, expecting at any moment for the wall to give. He kept his eyes to the wall and the ledge in front of him. He could not look back; he would not look to the destruction and ruin behind him where his room had been. He did not want to think by what splinter of wood or stone his ledge survived. The world could give at any moment. He could find himself falling through the air, and there would be no resistance of light and fire to slow his fall as Armada had sailed almost gracefully to the ground.

The mansion shook, and Tahlr screamed, gripping the wall, feeling his fingers slide across smooth wood and stone. If the mansion pitched him forward, he would not stop until the ground held him. He doubted he would know anything after that. The mansion shuddered and shook and rumbled to itself as if echoing the distant cry of thunder, and Tahlr held to the flat edge as if there was nothing except the moon and the stars and the sky. He could feel the night dark sky all around him. He forgot about the mansion and he forgot about magicians and wizards and savage dragons. If only for a mo-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

ment, he floated with the heavens, feeling the midnight air all about him, looking to moon and stars sailing around and through him. Armada appeared, hanging upside-down from the mansion's roof, and Tahrl remembered the wall and the ledge and the drainpipe once more.

"Don't stop," she said. "You are so close to the wall."

He did nothing but look to her as if she had not said anything at all, and all he wanted was to sail once more with sun and moon and stars.

"Tahrl!"

He gripped the edge, holding still, looking to Alexander's daughter as if she always stood with her feet in the sky and her head toward the ground. Suddenly, he wanted to laugh, feeling midnight air push at his lungs as ice and storm raged against the prison of his jaw. Holding still, he looked to the ledge and then looked to the wall. Feeling frost and dreaming of snow, he took a step as if he must pull his foot from mud, and then he took another, inching along the wall. Armada stayed with him somehow, dangling upside-down from the roof and moving as he moved along the ledge toward the drainpipe and the ground. At last, he was descending, climbing down against the edge of the grand doorway to the mansion. Looking up, he saw Armada descending and keeping pace with him. Then he touched ground with his foot and fell, tumbling, rolling, smearing himself with dust and earth at the edge of the mansion.

"Balthazar is around back," Armada said. "I pushed him off. He's given up on us and looking for Delan. We must hurry."

She did not move, watching him, standing on her toes, quivering as if she wanted nothing but to be after the magician. Tahrl wanted to laugh, facing her; she did not move. Having spoken, she did not move, and Tahrl almost fell, tripping over his toes as if he might step closer to her but could not. Armada did not move, standing before him, and he looked past her to the mansion through the darkness through the night. Balthazar was out there, having fallen from the mansion, and Tahrl imagined his fall, picturing him slip through the sky much in the same way that Armada had touched to the ground. Balthazar was out there, moving, planning, and Armada stood still as if she could do nothing. Tahrl tried to speak, questioning; the words catching in his throat, and then he knew. He understood why Armada did not chase the magician; she had to protect him. He wanted to scream, wanting Armada to come to life

## **The Etymology of Fire**

once more and be after the magician before anything could happen to Alexander.

“Where is Alex?” Tahrl said, and Armada turned with a sudden twist of her shoulders at his words, looking along the length of the mansion as if she might take flight. “We must find him,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “Follow.”

With that she was gone, running toward the edge of the mansion, making her way around toward where the monsters were caged. Tahrl following her; trying to keep pace. They traced the mansion, looking for Balthazar, not finding him. Armada did not stop, leaving the mansion behind her; the fence growing before them.

Balthazar was there, facing the fence as if he had lost something, turning at their approach, raising a hand. Tahrl stopped as if he could not move, feeling his breath catch in his throat as if it burned as if the wind might rush from his chest but could not. The magician stood with his hand raised as if he could not see and was trying to shade his eyes from a blinding light. Tahrl wanted to fall back; looking only to the magician in his pale white robes reflecting an invisible light, Tahrl wanted to step away and leave Balthazar to his home. Tahrl could not move as if he had been held frozen by an imaginary giant. He wanted to scream only he could not.

Balthazar lowered his hand, and the land rose. Remaining perfectly still, the land rose up in a wave to rush against Tahrl and Armada only he saw that the ground was still. It was as if the land was two things at once. From his frozen vantage, he could see and feel that the land remained perfectly still beneath his feet. He could feel it rushing against him; spreading out in a wave from around Balthazar. The earth pushed against Tahrl, and he could feel it rising to engulf him. Armada remained before him, and he could feel the wave crash against her with the roar of an avalanche. The flood subsiding without cresting as if it had been unable to dislodge Armada, but still it swelled and swirled around Tahrl almost lifting him from his feet. He could taste dirt in his mouth as the roar of the land subsided as he found that he could breathe.

There was a flicker and flash of light, and Tahrl saw that Armada held lightning in her hands even as the flood receded. She brandished the lightning like a whip, lashing out at Balthazar, filling the air with the crack and crash of thunder. The magician flinched at the snap of lightning in his face. Armada struck with the whip again, and the sparks and leash of lightning wrapped around the

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

magician's upraised arm. Armada pulled; Balthazar tumbled to his knees. The leash between them so bright that Tahrl could see little beyond colors and light to burn his eye. Balthazar turned this way and that, writhing on the ground, trying to pull himself free. He did not make a sound. The lightning vanished with a crash of thunder that brought Tahrl's hands to his ears. Wind pushed around him with a force that tossed him through the air. He could not see. He cried out, striking the ground, tumbling against the earth. There was an explosion like a fireball racing for the sky, and Tahrl felt his lungs burn as if the very air had been turned to flame. If he had possessed a voice, he would have screamed.

"Enough, I am here," Alexander said at his side, and Tahrl found that he could breathe. The air no longer burned.

He looked to his friend standing beside him with his flute in his hands shimmering and shining softly to itself like a thing alive. Alexander was watching the fence and the darkness as if he could see his daughter facing the magician in the dark.

"Alex- what?" Tahrl said, trying to stand, wobbling on his knees. "What?"

"I am sorry, Tahrl, but we had to do something. Long past time."

Tahrl had imagined his friend among graths in their cage, and he had imagined music that had ripped the life from their monstrous bodies. He could not stand before his friend or even look him in the eye.

"What have you done?"

"Only what I had to."

The ground shook. Shapes moved in the darkness, and Tahrl found that he could look once more at Alexander, studying him by starlight. He did not want to imagine his friend with a song that could steal life and hearts and souls.

"What have you done?" he said, looking to his friend, and Alexander looked to him with his flute of silver and starlight in his hands as if noticing Tahrl for the first time.

"Trapped the graths in their cage," Alexander said. "Nothing more. We do not want them free to search for Greenhaven."

Alexander reached down, helping him to stand, and Tahrl was surprised to realize that he had been against the ground the whole time having never found his feet. Standing, he turned and saw Armada and Balthazar against the fence. The magician was stretched as if bound to the wall by both hands and feet while Armada stood

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

before him. Balthazar was struggling as if the very wood of the fence held him bound, and then suddenly, he held still as if noticing Tahrl and Alexander standing before him. He watched them, saying nothing, as if exhausted he must struggle for even the breath to speak. He only looked to them as if he hoped that his glance alone would cause them to burst into flame.

“Do you understand why we have done this?” Alexander said, facing Balthazar; the magician did not answer. “We found your present activities disturbing. We could not let things continue as they were.”

“Your experiments are dangerous,” Armada said when Balthazar did not answer. “We could not let you continue to raise your army. Your hold on the graths will slip. Even now they fight against your will.”

“We have caged them. Please stop what you have begun. We do not wish to do more.”

“Why not?” Balthazar said. “You have already chosen destruction.”

“How is that?” Armada said. “You are the one breeding an army of monsters.”

“To fight monsters. Sometimes we must do things because we must. The Wraths and Wraiths must be stopped.”

“Stopped?” Tahrl said as if surprised that he had a voice. “Do you not mean slaughtered? Destroyed?”

“If necessary.”

“They were once our guardians and protectors.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because some things are necessary. Because some times guardians become destroyers.”

“Or deceivers? You said you were breeding graths in-order to unmake them. Can we not say of you what you say of them?”

“My goals remain unchanged.”

“Then which is the lie?”

“I have no need of lies.”

“Another lie.”

Balthazar pulled at his bonds, struggling against the fence, and then just as quickly, he grew still, sagging against the wood as if he could not find the strength to stand.

“No,” he said.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

Tahlr looked to the magician bound to the fence of the graths' cage; his arms spread wide. Tahlr wanted to cry, looking at the prisoner, feeling his heart sink and tasting the cold of the dark of the night against his skin. He looked past the magician into the confines of the cage, and he imagined graths racing the dark. Monsters might approach the edge of the cage, racing the night, finding the prisoner bound to the bars. They would snap and bite at their jailer held against the wall.

"This is not necessary," Tahlr whispered.

"You think so?" Balthazar said, glancing down his arm to where his hand was bound.

"You have done so much good. Why have you chosen to breed savage monsters?"

"I could say the same of you."

"I suppose you could." Tahlr closed his eyes, seeing Wrath fall upon Edgewood, watching ruin unfold, and he felt the creature's roar echoing forever in his mind. "I seek truth. Nothing more. I do not breed monsters."

"So now what?"

Tahlr said nothing, letting his eyes flutter as if he might banish the vision of Edgewood's fall from his mind. He turned, looking to Alexander, looking to Armada.

"You will do nothing," Armada said. "Abandon the graths."

"If only I could," Balthazar said. "Will you leave me so bound?"

"No. But we will watch you. We will know."

"Do you think you can stand against the council? They will learn. They will come."

"It has been tried before. Have you forgotten everything of your heritage? The wizards stumbled. You need not do the same."

"You court destruction."

"I think not."

"Then you are deceived, and wrath shall consume us all."

"You cannot know that," Tahlr said.

"I know that I am bound."

"For that I am sorry." Tahlr glanced to Armada then Alexander, seeing two strangers in the dark. "I do not understand why this was necessary. We came to talk. We came to understand."

"And did you find your answers?"

"No."

"Good."

## **The Etymology of Fire**

“Why was this necessary?” he said, turning on Alexander. “We came seeking answers.”

“He was going to release the graths,” Alexander said. “After we reached the mountains. They would have caused us much inconvenience.”

“You would have done that to us?” Tahrl said, facing the magician in his pale and pasty robes of faded white. Somewhere there was light blossoming beyond the mountains. Somewhere the sky was being slowly painted blue and red and gold.

“Events are in motion,” the magician said; his eyes to the dirt and the dust at Tahrl’s feet. “The dragons rage. The Kianan must rise against them or fall. Sometimes things are necessary.”

“Necessary.”

“Yes.”

“How do you measure your heart and your blood? What price is on your soul?”

“I could ask the same of you.”

“I do not set out to kill!”

“And, yet, people will die.”

“They will die.”

“I am going to remember you said that.”

“As will I,” Tahrl said. “Do we leave him here?”

“No,” Armada said.

Balthazar fell, crumpling to the earth, shaking like a newborn faun beneath the pale morning light. They left him on his hands and knees before the fence, returning to the mansion to collect their gear before making their way to the edge of the mountains and leaving the mansion and the forest behind them.

## *Chapter Four*

# **Hunters of the Dark**

*Tahrl said little that first day after leaving the home of the magician Balthazar and venturing into the mountains, remembering how the magician had lain sprawled against the ground as if he had lacked the strength to crawl even to his knees, knowing that he still lived only because his body shook and trembled in the dust. Tahrl could not speak, remembering white robes smeared dark with earth and red with the bleeding sun. Tahrl could do nothing but place one foot in front of the other, following in the wake of strangers who had swept his home away as if he had always been a wanderer. He tried to remember the friend he had known at the Ivory Tower standing in the library with his flute of silver and moonlight held absently across his shoulder. They had spent many hours in the library, talking, laughing, speaking in hushed voices as the world grew dark and candles flickered teasing them with light. Alexander had been gentle, and Alexander had been kind, listening to Tahrl's memories of life with the Montmorin. Alexander would laugh, and Alexander would sing. They would play games, seeking mysteries among the books, and they would search for secrets about forbidden Wraths and forgotten Wraiths never revealing to anybody what they had sought. From out of all those days, Tahrl never would have believed that Alexander could be vicious or that he could be cruel. Balthazar had welcomed them into his home so Tahrl walked in silence as they followed paths that he never would have imagined on his own. He followed cruel strangers and tried to remember a bridge in the Dryn city where the river flowed and he had sat beside his friend of many years. Some things were necessary. He wanted to believe. Some things could not be avoided. They were not wanted; they were never desired, but sometimes you could see no other choice. He remembered a bridge, and he also remembered a man bound to a fence speaking of necessity and desire. They all did what was necessary; not what they wanted. He remembered a bridge, walking*



## **The Etymology of Fire**

among mountains. He remembered a bridge, throwing rocks into the current, and he tried desperately to remember that he walked with friends.

They followed paths without a trail through the mountains as if Alexander and Armada had passed that way so many times before they knew the route by heart. They traveled gentle passes and steep inclines, pausing to rest among thistles and bracken and thorns. There were few trees as if the mountains were a wasteland where nothing tall or green could grow. What trees they found were dry and thin as bone with gnarled and twisted limbs as if they were writhing in frozen agony never to know freedom from pain.

They camped under the stars wrapped in their blankets and sat around a small fire of glowing embers and coals. They kept quiet, saying as little as need be, sharing bowls of warm tea, thin soup and dry bread. For the first time, the trees did not surround them, protecting them from the dark and the night. For the first time, they rested where troglodytes might roam. They stayed curled around their small fire, trying to ensure the embers glowed to help warm them in the night, trying to ensure the embers did not grow revealing them to the dangers of the dark.

The morning came cold as ice and tasting of snow; even though, they were far from the tall peaks where the snow never melted. The light drifted around them; the sun reaching, stretching above the peaks before them. Tahrl, standing, turning, looked back over the path they had followed only the day before, and he saw the forest. It was an ocean of green and brown and gold billowing and swirling with patterns that only the wood understood. Even though he stood in sunlight, the forest so far below was still wrapped in deep shadow and darkness. As he watched, the light grew, spreading over the forest, chasing shadows to the far distance and lost corners of the wood. He wanted to cry, seeing the green, seeing the orange and gold and red as the forest billowed and swirled and flowed like a thing alive. For the first time, he saw the forest; saw a thing of beauty. Since he had fled the Ivory Tower, Tahrl had lived in the shadow of the forest. Looking, he had always seen trees and branches of dark wood towering over him. The trees had stretched and leered over Edgewood as if they had known that one day wrath would fall upon the town and that one day the wood might drive the people away. The Kianan never entered the forest, fearing it; the forest was huge. Tahrl had never seen the end of it. Looking down with the

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

sun in his hair, he saw the wood as something more and thought he understood even just a little what compelled Alexander to want to protect such life and beauty. It was more than just protecting the Dryn. They could move; they could find other places to live in safety, hiding even among the Kianan if necessary. Teresa had fooled them all, calling herself Amalthea. They could hide if necessary, but Alexander wanted to save the living forest as well. Light spread across the sea of green, and Tahrl imagined just for a moment that the light was flame. He pictured Kianan soldiers burning the wood with smoke and flame, and he looked away, turning to the far peaks and deep mountains, watching for Wraths and Wraiths.

They kept watch the third night, taking turns sleeping, keeping the fire so small it was little more than a firefly in the dark. Huddled in his blankets, Tahrl watched the embers, trying to keep warm, and then he heard it. At the very edge of thought, he found the sound of pebbles falling as if they were sliding down a cliff, and Tahrl was on his feet, looking one way and then another, seeing nothing through the dark. He listened to the erratic beat and click of stone striking stone in the night, fighting with his breath and trying to control his heart. The echoing click and clatter faded, slipping into silence, and Tahrl found he could not be still, turning this way and that.

“Rest,” Armada said; Tahrl turning, spinning, looking to Alexander’s daughter watching him through the dark. “There is nothing to fear this night.”

“Is that it?” Tahrl whispered, shaking, shivering; surprised he had a voice. “Is it? I’ve heard stories. I never imagined the sound. Is that it?”

“Rest,” was all Armada said.

Tahrl was startled from sleep the following night by the harsh beat of stone striking stone once more in the dark. He saw Alexander and Armada at the edge of their perch looking down into the far valley. Seeing them, Tahrl was on his feet, scrambling to stand beside them. The click and crash of a stone drum was all around them. Looking down, he saw them; pale white forms moving through the dark. The shapes were moving quickly across the valley, running with great loping strides. Tahrl could not breathe, watching the creatures, feeling his chest burn. He imagined the line turning, running straight for him, hearing the beat of his own heart. The creatures vanished, slipping from the valley without turning without rushing

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

upon their high perch, and the sound of a staccato avalanche slowly faded from the night.

The following night found Tahrl pacing. The camp was dark; having not even bothered with a fire. Tahrl looked to the sky, watching the moon, seeing the stars. The sky was empty. Always as they had walked, he had watched the far mountains and looked to the sky, seeking sign of birds that were not birds only looking so small because of the distance. He had searched, finding nothing, but he did not stop. He had looked through the night, and he had looked through the dark, seeing the moon, seeing the stars, listening for the strike of stone against stone to come echoing into his thoughts.

“Rest,” Armada said, and he turned, seeing her in shades of gray cast by moonlight, watching her resting against the ground with her blankets wrapped around her shoulders.

“I am waiting to be pulled from sleep,” he said, pacing, stepping past her. “They will come, will they not? Searching. Exploring. Seeking.”

“They will come. Searching as you say. Exploring. Patrolling their territory. They will come. In their own time. Until then. Rest.”

“You say that so easily. Rest? I do not know how.”

“You’ve done it before. I’m sure you will remember.”

Tahrl started to laugh, catching his breath, trying to hold back the sound, knowing that troglodytes listened to the night. His heart burned. They would find him if he laughed.

“You speak so easily,” he said. “Do you fear nothing?”

Armada did not answer, watching him through the dark, keeping her blankets around her shoulders.

“I have spent much time in these mountains,” she finally said. “I know the paths and the ways better than anybody. We are safe this night.”

“Safe,” Tahrl said, turning about, seeing Alexander through the dark curled in his blankets as if asleep, and he wondered if his friend really was asleep or simply giving them the illusion of privacy. There were no conversations that the three of them did not share even when Alexander and Armada spoke in a language that Tahrl did not understand. They were never alone with their thoughts. The mountains kept them huddled together even when they did not talk, surrounding them, towering over them. The mountains were vast and all but void of trees as if they had been ripped out by their fingers and roots. The mountains were empty.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

“Where are they?” Tahrl said, turning on Armada, watching her, imagining great shapes in the sky that were not birds. “If you have spent such time in the mountains, where are they?”

“Patience,” she said. “We have far to go, and you will burn yourself to a stump.”

“I know patience. We are old friends. You cannot do research without it.” Tahrl turned again, walking to the edge of their perch, looking down. They always found a high point, camping, resting where they could look down and see all the lands around them. It was as if each campsite had been carefully scouted and prepared for them even before they had entered the mountains. “This wasn’t on the map,” he said. “That magician had marked troglodytes, Wraths and Wraiths. Nothing of the Dryn. Certainly not this.”

“That magician cared nothing for the Dryn. We are always overlooked. Forgotten. Ignored. Even the wizards misplaced us after they lost Delan.”

“Forgotten until remember more likely. If Kianan should ever grow lonely or cold, they will remember. Even in Edgewood, we knew who the neighbors were.”

“So we are thanked for protecting them from troglodytes and forest trolls.”

“We knew nothing of that. Nothing of your home.”

“I am grateful for small mercies.”

Through the dark and through the night, Tahrl saw Kianan holding torches and following the river back to the homes of the Dryn. The soldiers would come, learning of Greenhaven; they would burn, and they would destroy everything that they found. When the dragons were gone, the Dryn would not be able to hide in the forest. The Kianan would remember how the Dryn had once been their slaves.

“Do you think it will work?” Tahrl said, looking back to Armada. “Preventing the massacre of the dragons. Do you think it will help your people?”

“Nothing will happen quickly.”

“You have already tipped your hand, I fear. Because of Balthazar. The one thing you said you did not want to do. Things will happen quickly.”

“Some things will. The dragons will draw the Kianan’s attention. For ourselves, we have studied what your family did for the Montmorin.”

“It’s not the same thing.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“I know. We have considered that. We cannot offer trade like the Montmorin.”

“Things will happen quickly. They will remember that you were once slaves.”

“I know,” Armada said, looking to the dark, avoiding his eyes.

“We must find them. You said the dragons were everywhere.”

“In the deep mountains.”

“Well, what do you call this? When do we reach the deep mountains?”

“Quarter moon.”

“Another quarter moon? So long? Why do we tarry so?”

“Some things happen in their own time.”

“Is that an excuse? I thought you were a rogue mage. Could fly like the wind if need be. What reason compels us to delay?”

“Answer that yourself.”

“What?”

“You are,” she said. “You are the reason. Why we tarry so. We must protect you. Because you must speak with dragons.”

“I did not know.”

“Of course not.”

Tahlr said nothing, burning, looking to the dark. He had watched a monster fall upon Edgewood; it had spread chaos, and it had spread destruction. He looked to the stars, and he looked to the deep mountains, seeking shapes that would drift and glide. People had run screaming, fleeing the abomination, falling beneath tooth and claw. Tahlr turned, looking to the dark, trying not to notice memory, and he listened to the night, feeling the cold burn him.

“We must hurry,” he said.

“Yes.”

Tahlr turned, facing the dark and the night, looking to the deep mountains. He felt one foot in front of the other as if he might walk if only he could remember how to move, and then he tripped, stumbling as if he might fall from their high perch. Armada had not moved.

“I want to fly,” he said.

“No.”

Tahlr made a sound as if his lungs burned and he had forgotten how to breathe.

“Don’t protect me,” he said. “I am not a child to fall to pieces if I

## **The Etymology of Fire**

but scrape my knee. Fly like the wind? Let us fly. I will speak with dragons.”

Armada said nothing, watching him, and then she rose, letting her blankets fall. Tahrl stepped back as she approached, and then she held out her hand. He watched the hand through shadow, seeing little beneath the moon and the stars, and he wanted to look into her eyes, feeling her tower over him. She was a grand tree, standing before him with the wind roaring in her branches like the force of the hurricane. She held her hand before him, tempting, inviting, and he remembered her grip on his fingers. He remembered that she had held lightning in her hands.

Tahrl took her hand, and the world fell away. He was lost as if ripped in two as if he had been lifted from out of his skin and only his lungs and his heart remained. He swam, tumbling, spinning, trying to grip the sky and hold it still only he could not breathe. He tried to scream, feeling the blood rush in his throat and press against his teeth. If only he could open his jaws, the world could come gushing out of his throat and he could take that first breath. He could find his way among clouds and lightning and storm. There was no moon, and there was no sky. The wind rushed past him as if it might tear away what little remained of his soul.

“Enough.”

Tahrl tumbled to the earth, feeling a gurgle in his lungs push at his chest and then race for his throat. He felt the scream spill from his lips like blood, and it did not stop. It did not stop. His chest ached, and his arms burned. His mind was on fire, rushing with the memory of wind. After forever and a day, he realized that somebody was beside him, and he turned, looking, seeing Alexander on his knees. Armada lost, standing somewhere beside him.

“I am sorry,” Alexander was saying. “I wanted to protect you.”

“What?”

“There is so much we have forced upon you. So much that was not necessary. So much to understand.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Armada tried to show you something. You were not ready.”

“Some birds learn to fly by being thrown off a cliff,” she said.

“Does he look like a bird?”

“Stop talking about me,” Tahrl said, shaking his head, trying to clear it of the roar of wind and flame.

“You wanted to know why we tarried so long in troglodyte coun-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

try,” Armada said. “You were not taking explanations for an answer. Now, do you understand why we travel so slowly?”

Tahrl felt wind and storm behind his eyes and between his ears. He gripped his face, trying to hold himself still, and he found that the ground did not move.

“I would not be a burden,” he said.

“You are.”

Tahrl made a sound like a cry, feeling blood or warm tears on his face.

“Easy,” Alexander said.

“Why did you tempt me?” Tahrl said, looking to Armada; his hands still firmly held to the ground. “Why did you speak with me so long ago?”

There was silence in the dark as Tahrl slipped to the earth, and then Alexander helped him turn so that he might sit beneath the stars. Tahrl looked to Armada and found no answer.

“I thought,” he said; his voice trailing away. “I thought.”

“What?” Armada said, and Tahrl bit at his tongue, feeling the cold of the dark and the night sweep over him.

His skin itched with raw heat, and his thoughts burned. He tried to find words, looking to Armada, remembering a shadow in the forest before Alexander had come for him. Watching Armada with the stars at her back, he could find nothing but the void.

“Did you think that I liked you?” she said, and Tahrl could not face her; could not look away. “Protecting you from the forest troll? Do you think that meant anything?”

“Armada,” her father said; his voice little more than a twist of the forgotten breeze.

“Do not trust me, Tahrl,” she said as if Alexander had not spoken. “I am dangerous.”

“That is what your sister said.” Tahrl could not match her eye. “You were not supposed to talk to me, but you did. You are contrary. Reckless. Foolish. Is that why we attacked Balthazar? Because it was the wrong thing to do?”

“That was my idea,” Alexander said.

“Then maybe you are both destructive. What am I saying? We have entered the mountains, seeking dragons without a plan. Of course, you are reckless.”

“That was unkind.”

“You wanted to leave me behind.”

## The Etymology of Fire

---

“Yes.”

“You tortured Balthazar.”

“Yes.”

“What next?”

“I do not know. We do what we must. Like Balthazar. What we hope is right. Fearing the future. Fearing the dragons. Will they speak? Will they rage? I do not know. I cannot know. We cannot do nothing. You said as much.”

“Yes, I did.”

“We will reach them,” Alexander said. “We will find them. And, then, I do not know. Do not be too quick to rush into the unknown.”

“And, yet, we rush.”

“That we do.”



*The Kianan had claimed the mountains. With the last of the dragons defeated, the soldiers had stood exhausted, wondering why there were no more monsters to fight, and they had taken the mountains. The Kianan had formed camps, communities and towns in the hills and highlands. They had discovered precious metals in the far reaches and deep mountains, and they had begun to dig. The troglodytes finally drove the Kianan away. After many years of infrequent battles and confrontations, the Kianan had finally abandoned their houses, camps and homes. The ruins remained in the mountains, and Tahrl began to see them as they passed deeper and deeper into the land of the troglodytes. Some were small, being little more than the remains of a stray building or two. Some were huge. Stone walls still stood, and the remains of many houses could be seen resting one against another. Some ruins had the look of forgotten fortresses that had stood for a long time against the advance of the troglodytes. Others were little more than dust.*

They found one great ruin almost like a forgotten castle, resting on a grass-strewn plain between two tall hills with a lake spread out before it. They did not stop, moving as quickly as they dared in the shadow of the castle. It had been a mine with tall walls to protect the people from any who might have tried to claim their wealth. The walls had stood against many a bandit, rogue, or otherwise honest man. The castle had withstood all such attacks until it had fallen from within. It was said that the troglodytes had swarmed out of the mineshaft itself where none had ever thought to post so much



## **The Etymology of Fire**

as a guard, and the castle had fallen in a single night never to be reclaimed. The ruin stood; treasure forgotten. Troglodytes had no use or knowledge of such things. The land was theirs. The mountains fell. The troglodytes ruled.

Tahrl wanted to stop and rest; admire the remnants of the castle that still stood so tall. They could not stop; Alexander and Armada refused even to pause when they reached the top of the rise and they could take one last look at the grand old ruin. Tahrl did stop, turning, looking, knowing that he risked falling behind. He studied old rock and ancient stone. Edges were blunt, and crumbling dust flowed everywhere as if the walls were slowly being ground away. The Kianan had lost the castle to the troglodytes, and someday, the troglodytes would lose the ruin to the wind and the rain and the storm. He turned, hurrying to catch Alexander and Armada without once looking back.

They walked for a time in silence with the castle ruin lost somewhere behind them and the sun drifting leisurely toward the horizon. They were deep in troglodyte country, and Tahrl thought of shadows drifting over the old ruin as the sun set. He imagined shapes slipping out of the cracks and from between the walls. They would swarm over the ruin, rushing this way and that, and the only sound would be the click so much like stone striking stone that was the troglodytes substitute for sight. With the sun so low in the sky, Tahrl knew that Alexander and Armada would be looking for their next shelter. The perch from which they could look down across all the land may have already been selected for the night. He would know when they began to climb with the sun so low it would be hard to see, and he began to look, wondering where their destination for the night might be. They were already high on a ridge that would make a poor camp, and he began to hope they would find a spot that was a little more flat. He looked, and somewhere far below them, he thought he saw a flicker of shadow move contrary to the spreading dark. Armada pushed him to the earth.

“What?”

“Graths,” Armada said, holding him pinned to the stone.

“How?”

“I was wondering that myself.”

“You said they were bound.”

“These may not belong to Balthazar,” Alexander said still stand-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

ing, looking down and across the valley floor. “He tries to contain them. He even tries to control them. Never said he had them all.”

“Of course,” Tahrl said, feeling his own heart, listening to blood rush and wind flow in his chest. “What now?” Armada was against him, pushing, holding him down. Tahrl could not move, and he realized that there was no sound. “Alex?” He felt a chill wind as he found himself listening to nothing more than the breeze. Feeling the cool air touch and tease him, he tried to look, pushing against Armada, seeing the sun very low in the sky. The troglodytes would be moving, and they would be leaving the shelter of their fallen castle to explore the expanses of the dark. He could see Alexander looking down into the valley below and standing as if he might never move again.

“Willow’s Point,” Alexander finally said.

“Too far,” Armada said. “We must go back.”

“No.”

“We can make it before dark.”

“When was the last time you sheltered there?”

“Years.”

“What are you talking about?” Tahrl said, pushing, shoving, and at last Armada released him as if she had forgotten that she had been holding him against the ground.

“There are graths between us and Willow’s Point,” Armada said. “We would be safe there, but we will never make it. We must go back to the ruin.”

“Why?” Tahrl found his voice rising without laughter. He thought of pale shapes moving against gray stone. “You told me troglodytes lived there.”

“No, they use the old mine at the center of the ruin to reach the surface. They don’t live in it. They live under- so, yes, they do live there.”

“And, this is preferable to safety?”

“We’ll never make it.”

“I think otherwise,” Alexander said.

“I know the mountains better than you.”

“I have traveled the mountains since before you were born. The graths have not noticed us. Have no reason to seek us. We can avoid them. Willow’s Point is our best option this night.”

Tahrl remembered monsters as big as horses behind a fence that seemed so small it could not possibly contain them, and he looked

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

to Alexander, shivering, wanting to speak, finding nothing but silence. He looked down, seeing shadows grow, watching the dark begin to creep and crawl from its hiding places knowing that the light would soon pass. He saw nothing of monsters. He could see nothing skim the dark, running, looking, scenting them from their perch.

“We don’t know if Balthazar’s hand is in this,” Armada said. “He could have sought them. His pets trapped. He could have looked to the mountains.”

“You are right, of course,” Alexander said. “We do not know.”

“The ruins.”

“No,” Tahrl said.

“What?”

“We know what awaits us at the Kianan ruins.” He thought of shapes crawling over old stone, and he remembered the echo of stone striking stone in the dark. It made him turn, and it made him look to think of the sound, searching for sign of pale forms in the fading light.

“Willow’s Point,” Alexander said.

Armada did not answer, looking down, looking across the fading sky as if she could see things that they could not comprehend. There were creatures in the valley hiding from them and hiding from the light. They waited only for the three of them to look the other way, and then creatures as large as nightmare would be upon them. Graths were before them. If they went back, troglodytes would take them, crawling out of the stone, creeping out of the shadows, and they would be lost.

“Willow’s Point,” Armada said, and Tahrl felt his breath move. He felt the air rush and flow as if he had only now remembered how to breathe. “Let us go,” she said, turning.

They retraced their steps at first, following the ridge back the way they had come, and then descended a slope that was almost as steep as a wall. Armada took her ax from its straps against her back and held it loose in her hands and balanced over her shoulder. Watching her, Tahrl wanted to draw his sword and find a rock close at hand from which they could stand and guard against the night. There were monsters and everything was so far. The ruins were lost somewhere behind them, and Willow’s Peak was a name that could not be found. There could be no safety and no protection. They must simply stand and face monsters before the light faded, but they did not stop. Armada looked always to the horizon

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

and the edges of what they could see, watching for movement or sign that something lurked or waited for them. They did not stop, moving quickly; the world drifting by them. Tahrl looked to the sky, finding the sun; it still hovered low on the horizon. There was time for many things, but he did not know if there was enough to reach whatever sanctuary it was that they sought. He looked to the sky, seeking shapes, searching for creatures too large to be birds, and he wondered if they had at last reached the deep mountains where the dragons lives.

A shape moved like the rustling of the wind. Light flashed, and fire burned with a whoosh of scorching air that pushed him to the ground. There was a scream like nothing he had ever heard, and another bursting star of flame like a flower blossoming and reaching for the sky. A shape moved, and Alexander was shouting. Tahrl was looking, searching this way and that, climbing to his feet. Something was there. A great creature the size of a horse, holding one forepaw raised, stood before them and growled. Tahrl felt ice sweep his skin. He recognized the sound from Balthazar's mansion, and he would have screamed if only he had found his voice.

Armada was facing a grath. Ax held with both hands pointed toward the monster, facing it like a spear. Her tunic was torn. There were layers and layers to her tunic and shirt. There was leather strong as armor and soft padding and more layers of leather and cloth. There were rings and plates of bronze and iron hidden among all the layers and folds. The grath had cut through them all. There was a great rent in her tunic as if the grath had ripped through the layers of leather and hard armor as if they were not there. Her shoulder was exposed. Tahrl could see bare skin. There were three marks like red lines slanting down and across her back. The last one was smeared as if a drop of blood had escaped and was slipping down into the folds of her ruined tunic. She faced the grath as if she had not even been touched.

The grath growled, sounding deep as thunder. Tahrl could feel it echoing through him; the challenge of something that should not live. The creature stood still, favoring one foreleg, watching Armada with insane eyes. She did not move; the tip of her ax holding to the monster. The grath shifted as if it would pace as if it would choose the moment to strike. Even in the pen standing before Balthazar, the graths had been huge. Muscle and bone had rippled beneath skin, and the eyes had been a window into chaos. Nothing stood be-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

tween Armada and the abomination. The ax held steady, following the monstrous creature as it moved as it tried to pace around her. Its eyes never wavering from the ax. When it moved, Tahrl wondered if he would see it.

There was no time to see muscles bunch or legs flex before it leapt straight at Armada. The creature was a blur; Tahrl had not even the time to draw breath. Armada was so fast. Tahrl had never seen anyone move that fast. The grath may have been the wind, but Armada was lightning, spinning as the monster reached her, swinging the ax. The grath staggered to a stop as if it could not understand how it had missed. Armada watching it calmly as if waiting for the monster to fall. The ax was embedded in the creature's neck between the shoulders buried so deep that Tahrl could not see the blade, and he wondered how the head could still be perched on the body.

The grath seemed not to understand that the ax was there. It could not turn; could not even turn its head. The grath staggered forward, limping on the one foreleg, and then staggered forward again, stopping the motion because it could not understand why it did not turn. It tried again, limping forward, stopping, and then staring off into the distance. It took another step as if it had forgotten that it could not turn. Armada left it there, ignoring it; Tahrl could do nothing but watch as she crossed to Alexander. Her father had his sword in one hand, and he held several small stones between the fingers of his other hand. Armada took the sword and then returned to the grath, stepping around flames, and Tahrl realized that the ground was on fire.

There was a great swath of flame as if the earth burned or as if a creek little more than a trickle of fire ran between their feet. Tahrl saw the other grath alive with flame. Its body was crumpled against the dirt. Fire wreathed it. Flame consumed it. Fur and skin did not burn; it was being eaten. Fire and smoke like growing things had taken hold in the creature, digging roots and reaching forth branches to touch the sun. Tahrl had never seen such flame. It devoured the grath, and he understood without knowing how that soon all that would remain of the creature would be bone and ash.

Armada drew her long knife. Tahrl turned; the pyre forgotten. She approached the first grath with her father's sword in one hand and her knife in the other. The grath stood as if it had been struck dumb, but somehow it knew that Armada approached. It tried to move, trying to turn, and growled with a moan that was only half-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

alive. It kicked blindly with its hind legs, seeking to strike Armada somehow, and she drove her knife into its hip. The grath made not a sound, wobbling as if it was losing its grip on the world, but it did not fall. It tried to turn. It tried to move, snapping at Armada as she stepped before the blunt face and stood facing the grath with the sword in her hands. They watched each other. The monster growled.

She finished it; the grath crumbling to the earth. The wind rushing from it as if it had been holding its breath and rattling with a sound that Tahrl would never forget. Its body sagged against the earth, and the grath did not move again. Armada stood as if she expected at any moment for the creature to leap at her, but at last, she pulled the sword free. Cleaning it, wiping the blade against dark fur, she returned the sword to Alexander, and then she went back for her knife.

“Where is the last one?” she said.

“It ran,” Alexander said, holding his sword, watching her. “I tagged it. Doubt it will survive the night.”

“That is unusual,” she said, pulling at her ax. It was buried deep. “They do not run.”

“I know.”

Armada had the ax free, and she leaned against it, planting the handle against the earth and looking only to the fallen grath.

“Let me see to that,” Alexander said, moving quickly to his daughter. He touched her where the red streaks were exposed, and then he had his pack free of his shoulders.

Tahrl saw bare skin where there should have been cloth and armor, and he remembered the marks he had glimpsed on her back. He staggered forward, wanting to speak, finding no voice, looking to father and daughter. Armada seemed to sag as Alexander touched a white cloth to her skin. One grath lay dead before them. Another was alight with unnatural flame. The ground was scarred and blackened as if a great fire had raged all around them, and the sun rested low in the sky.

Nothing moved aside from Alexander tending to his daughter’s wounds. There was no sound except for the faint rustle and hiss of unnatural flames burning the grath’s body. The creatures had appeared so quickly Tahrl had done nothing. He had not even seen the third grath. There was a third grath. Armada was leaning against her ax, trying to stand tall, looking as if she might fall if she lost her grip. The graths had moved so quickly. The third grath, returning, would

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

be a blur. Tahrl had done nothing. He tossed his dagger Quicksilver into the sky. It hovered there as if held by an invisible arm ready to strike at the slightest movement or sound. Tahrl would not be fast enough, but Quicksilver would fly for him. The dagger would strike. It would shine as bright as a star, streaking through the air, striking the monster before it could reach them. They would be protected.

Looking away from Quicksilver, Tahrl found Armada's pack without searching for it; simply finding it with his eyes. It was broken and torn as if great claws had pulled it asunder and all its contents had spilled forth. Something had shredded the pack as easily as it had shredded Armada's tunic, and Tahrl looked to father and daughter. The white cloth was wrapped around her chest and held against her back. Alexander was holding the loose and shredded edges of her tunic as if he might somehow bring them back together. They tried; Armada helping him. With fragments and loose pieces, they pulled the tunic into a semblance of its former shape. The pieces dangling loosely against her back.

"The ruin," Alexander said, and his daughter turned, looking at him.

"There is time," she said, moving her arm as if testing her shoulder and back.

"It is a trap."

"Yes." Armada moved away from her father, looking down, lifting her bow from the ground, and twisted the severed string between her fingers. "I intend to have many words with Balthazar when I get the chance."

"Balthazar?" Tahrl said; the ruptured pack forgotten at his feet.

"The graths are being controlled," Armada said. "Balthazar is driving us back toward the troglodytes."

"How can you know?"

"This wasn't an attack. It was a push. The third grath retreated. These are not even the same as we saw from the ridge."

"One looks the same as another. Why not finish us?"

"Balthazar does not want to risk his children," Armada said, looking to the corpse still shimmering and alight with flame. "Let the troglodytes overwhelm us."

"Let them," Tahrl said, picturing shapes of white shadow swarming out of the ruin. "We should not make it easy for them."

"That we will not. There is a point of safety among the ruins. We

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

have used it- if not often, then many times. It is well guarded by spell and wizardry. We will be safe. If we can reach it in time.”

“If the light holds. If the graths do not fall upon us again.”

“Yes, we must hurry.” Armada went to her pack, taking it from him, looking over it, searching for ways to hold it together. “There is time if we hurry.”

“If we fly like the wind?”

“No,” she said, trying to shoulder her pack, testing her arm and back. “We should conserve our strength as best we are able. The day may be short, but the night will be long.”

Armada pulled Quicksilver from the sky, handing it to Tahrl, but he did not put the dagger away. He held it loose in his hand. The graths had been so fast. From his hand, he could throw the dagger. It could dart, and it could strike. It could defend them freely. There were other graths, and the troglodytes could spring from many sources.

They did move quickly, retracing their steps, walking back over paths that Tahrl barely recognized. He looked forever to the sun, watching it settle, watching it sink, following the stretch of dark shade and long shadow. He looked to Armada, wondering if she was weary, and wondering if she was weak. Her back must burn from the touch of the grath’s claws. The marks would seep, and the scars would bleed. Moving as they did, the wounds would not settle. They would not begin to heal. Saying nothing, she must be in pain.

Tahrl looked all around them, waiting for the strike, watching for dark shapes to charge them from out of the deep and darkening shadows. The graths would make not a sound if they came. They would simply be there, and he would not know until they had already fallen upon him. The troglodytes could not take them by such surprise. Troglodytes could not see; they had no eyes. They relied on sound and they relied on touch. They made a clicking noise somehow deep in their throats or in their chests as if the very act of breathing rattled the bones that were responsible for the sound. The clicking noise of a troglodyte, sounding so much like the maddening crash of stone struck against stone, was there substitute for sight. A burst of sound was the only warning that they would get if the troglodytes attacked.

They reached the ruins with the sun so low in the sky it was little more than a faded red smear against the horizon as if the far clouds had been washed with blood. Tahrl paused, looking for shapes,



## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

looking for movement among the shadows, and then he saw that Alexander and Armada did not stop. They made straight for the ruin that they had so carefully avoided while the sun had yet been high in the sky. Tahrl followed, dragging his feet and not wanting to move. Watching the ruin, listening, he followed Armada. They touched the outer wall of the ruin, reaching a point where the defenses had mostly crumbled away. They climbed to the top of the wall, reaching hand over hand, finding many a grip and foothold, and then they kept moving, following the wall toward the tall corner facing the lake and the fading sun. The remains of a watchtower still stood tall at the corner of the ruin, and they climbed the old and crumbling stone, resting only when they had reached the top.

Armada dropped her pack to the tower floor as if releasing a great weight that was trying to pull her to the ground. Turning, she began to dig through the pack, searching, scattering items. There was no organization. There had not been time to put everything back carefully after the grath had savaged it. She tossed things aside without looking at them, rummaging, searching, breathing hard through her teeth, and Tahrl said nothing, only watching. His pack still on his back. He looked to the sun, watching the light fade; they were surrounded by shadow. The sun would fall beyond the mountains. The clouds smeared as dark as dried blood. Armada had something from out of her pack that looked to be an old quill pen. Tahrl had never seen its like, having always used carved sticks or brushes. Writing was an art that few could do well and many more simply smeared and got wrong. Once or twice, he had remembered holding a quill and had found it strange and awkward in his hand.

Armada was on her knees at a corner of the tower, brushing, digging at the old dust and debris, and then she began to scratch with the pen, making small marks that seemed to glow for an instant and then vanish into the stone. Tahrl turned to Alexander as if he could watch Armada no more and found that his friend had taken a small sack from his pack that clacked and jangled as if it were full of stones. Alexander had removed his pack, placing it at his feet, and he held a long sling and several stones in his hands. As the light faded, it looked as if the stones glowed as faintly as the smoldering embers of a long forgotten fire, and Tahrl remembered the flames that had knocked him from his feet. He remembered a grath burning as if the fire had been eating it as if the flames had been thriving on skin and flesh and bone.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

Armada moved from the wall, scuttling to the next corner, digging and pulling at it much as she had at the first. Tahrl said nothing, wanting to speak, wanting to open his mouth and hurl words at them, but he could not. He held Quicksilver, which was now providing more light than the faint flickers of the fading sun, and he said nothing. Alexander was looking out over the ruin and the valley before them as if he would be able to see anything that moved.

The sun was done; light fading, and the stars began to grow in the sky. The air was cold, and Tahrl could feel it brushing against him and flowing around him with a gentle touch that still left him tasting ice. He rubbed at his arms and pulled at his cloak, trying to find warmth, trying not to shiver and shake with the cold. The growing dark was quite with only the sound of Armada scratching and writing at the dirt to keep them company. Tahrl listened, straining, hearing only the sound of Armada's pen, and he waited for the touch of stone against stone. He waited, knowing he would hear it, knowing that the clicking sound of the troglodyte's sight would reach them traveling through rock and through stone. There was nothing to be seen by the dark; the sky revealing nothing but shimmering stars and drifting clouds. The moon was far gone toward a crescent and would not reveal himself until long into the night.

At last, Armada was done, having moved from corner to corner and edge to edge until she was satisfied with her writing. She returned to the center of the tower, moving slowly and saying nothing. Leaving the quill pen with her pack, she took up her bow and began to play with the string, touching and stroking it as if she might somehow make it whole. She took weaving thread from her pack and began to work with the bow, pulling it together, binding the new string.

"I remember the last time I was here," she said; her eyes never leaving her fingers and the bow. "Young. Inexperienced. We had been hurt bad. More blood on the outside than in. Knew about this sanctuary. Came here. Rested. Hid from the troglodytes for a day and a night and a day. Waiting. Worrying. Resting. Trying to heal." Her hands stopped in the string; fingers twined with thread. She reached for her knife, playing it over the thread, carving the bow as if shaping fine wood. "The sound was everywhere. Like an avalanche. Clicking. Clicking. Chattering. Always clicking. Never sure if it was simply sound or language. Enough to drive one mad. There

## **The Etymology of Fire**

was nothing we could do. We had to keep quiet or else they would find us.”

She put the knife away, pulling at the new bowstring, testing, and she stood with the bow in her hands. She held it as if she had an arrow in her hands fitted to the string, pulling as if she had a target, testing to see if it would hold. At last, she put the bow down and then pulled arrows from their sheath, touching them, looking them over, and Tahrl noticed by the dim and fading light that there were markings on the shafts as if someone had burned patterns into the wood.

“Put Quicksilver away, Tahrl,” she said. “It draws too much light.”

He stood as if dumb, feeling warmth between his fingers where he touched the dagger, and Armada looked to him, saying nothing. He raised the dagger; it was a spark that glowed so much like the stars that drifted far overhead. He studied the blade, blinking eyes at the light, wanting to see marks or carvings in the dagger’s surface, but he found nothing. There was nothing but the feel of distant fire in his hands, and he had to shade his eyes or else be driven blind by the light. Putting away the dagger, the world did at last grow dark, and he realized that the sun had long since set and it had only been the dagger’s light that had made him think the day remained.

He wanted to speak, finding no words, and none were offered by Alexander or Armada. There was only the cold and the dark and the silence of the night, and then there was the sound of stone striking stone seeping out to them through the very stone they stood upon. Tahrl gasped, fighting for breath, wanting to scream, wanting to jump from their perch. He could see nothing, turning, pacing, looking, and at last, Armada put a hand to his chest, saying nothing and holding him still.

The sound grew louder, and then the creatures appeared through a crack in the old ruin so far away and below them that things looked like little more than splinters of the rock. Shapes appeared and moved, looking to be as pale as milk or old snow. They moved, rushing this way and that, appearing out of the break in the wall. Troglodytes climbed the walls and rushed over the ruin. They spread into the valley and made for the lake. There couldn’t have been more than two dozen. Maybe more. Maybe less. Tahrl stood, watching them unable to count and unable to breath; the air would not move in his mouth. The sound was everywhere, pushing at him

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

and pushing at him and rubbing against his skin. The troglodytes moved.

They swept across the field and the plain as if searching as if seeking to quarter the land. Rushing this way and that, the creatures moved as if every stone and blade of grass had to be examined. Watching, Tahrl knew it was only time before the troglodytes found them. The walls and the tower would be searched as everything else was scrutinized and examined. The crash and click of stone was everywhere, rattling at Tahrl's teeth and his bones. He did not know how long he could last before the clatter and echo forced a scream from between his lips. He did not know. A troglodyte touched the wall, climbing, and then another followed after it. Tahrl could not move, looking down, wanting to fall back; he could do nothing but watch the pale shapes move. The troglodyte scurried up the wall; its head turning from side to side as if it had eyes as if it could see.

There were no eyes. Tahrl could watch it climbing the wall, moving more slowly as it ascended. The troglodyte did not have eyes. Its head was the wrong shape. There was a gaping maw of a mouth that looked as if it could open very wide with the whole top of the head tilting back to reveal teeth upon teeth upon teeth. Its head was entirely the wrong shape. It could not see them, but it could hear them. Tahrl was sure of that, watching the creature climb. It would hear them move; it could hear them breathe. The echoing sound of stone against stone would bounce off him and back to the creature's ear.

Tahrl's hand rested against Quicksilver; he wanted to take the dagger and strike the monster, driving it from the wall. Wanting to move, wanting to strike, Tahrl did nothing, knowing that Quicksilver would blaze; it would burn the night. The troglodytes would sense the dagger even without sight. They would be drawn to the light shining like a star in the midnight sky. Tahrl did nothing, watching, trying to control his breath.

The troglodyte climbed and climbed, reaching forever higher, moving slowly, searching without eyes this way and that. It stopped, and Tahrl wanted to scream. Holding back, he wanted to fall away from the wall and hide in the center of the tower, but he did nothing. The troglodyte wavered, holding still as if it was listening, and then it turned, falling away as if it had lost interest in the tower. Tahrl could breathe, watching the creature fall away, watching it descend. The second troglodyte following after the first, and they

## **The Etymology of Fire**

continued their exploration of the wall, moving sideways, ignoring the top of the tower as if it was not there.

Tahrl did fall back, settling to the center of the tower, looking to Alexander, looking to Armada. She stood without moving, holding the great ax in her hands, pressing the hilt against the stone as if she were using it like a cane. Beneath them, the stone rattled in sympathy to the clicking drumbeat of the troglodytes. Beneath them, the troglodytes moved, ignoring them, and the creatures began to move farther and farther from the ruin until at last they were gone. The echoing sound that was so much like an avalanche fading at last into the dark and the night. There was silence as if the whole world had slipped into the void, and Tahrl was surprised to find the whisper of his own breath on the wind. There was Armada; turning from the wall as if the night held no more nightmares and they could rest without risk or fear until the dawn. Tahrl had expected more. The troglodytes used the ruin. They should be running forever to and from the doorway to their cavernous world. It could not be enough to simply send out patrols and care nothing more for the scouring of the ruin. If nothing else, an endless parade should be stretching from the ruined castle to the lake; instead, there was nothing but silence.

They rested beneath the stars, looking to the sky and listening for any sound of stone against stone in the dark. Once and then again, they found troglodytes moving through the valley and traveling among the ruins. Then, a sound drifted to them on the wind that was lost somehow between the howl of a great wolf and the roar of a mountain cat. Armada was on her feet before Tahrl could even move.

“What?” he said on a wisp of air as if he had not the time to draw breath.

“Graths,” Armada replied, taking-up her bow and placing an arrow to the string. “They weren’t expecting us to find sanctuary. Now, they must risk a direct confrontation. They must show the troks that we are here.”

“How can graths plan such a thing?”

“It can’t be the graths. That magician must be behind this.”

She said nothing more, listening to the dark, hearing the faint click and clatter of stone against stone through the ruin. Standing to the edge, Tahrl looked to the dark and the night, looking for pale shapes, searching for dark graths, wondering if he would see them.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

Troglodytes appeared, moving along the wall, spreading around the break in the ruin. They rushed onto the plain as if they must search every scrape of land all over again, and Tahrl tried to count them, losing track; there were so many. Armada pointed out across the tall grass of the plain. Tahrl saw shapes near the lake moving toward the ruin. They were like gray shadows skipping across the land. He could not tell their number they were moving so fast.

There were other shapes appearing from the water's edge, and they rushed the graths. Pale forms swarming over gray and gold monstrosities. Tahrl wanted to laugh, biting at his tongue to hold still as he watched graths tumble and spin among wiry creatures that were so pale they had no color. The night was littered with twisted yelps and distorted roars and other screeching calls that he could not hope to comprehend. The troglodytes abandoned the wall, rushing the graths, moving to help their fellows. Graths rose, and troglodytes fell. Their number was diminished, but the graths were determined to strike the wall. They ran; troglodytes rushing to stop them. Graths all but ignoring the smaller creatures; claws striking without breaking stride.

Armada raised her bow, striking the arrow against the crescent moon, and the air turned cold as if the arrow had turned to ice. All the world was freezing, spiraling out from the arrow as if the marks and symbols on the shaft were pulling all heat and warmth out of the sky. Armada seemed not to notice the sudden cold as she fit the freezing arrow to the bow, and then she let go. A cry like none Tahrl had ever heard came from the field below. The arrow had found a grath, taking it in the shoulder. The creature tried to limp along, snapping at the arrow as if its whole side had gone numb, and Tahrl knew that frightful cold had struck the grath. Its shoulder, neck and side would be ice. Lungs and heart would be laboring and working sluggishly as if its blood had frozen. The troglodytes took the grath, swarming over it; the creature did not even cry out as it disappeared beneath pale forms.

Another arrow was fitted to the bow, stealing life and warmth from the sky. Armada sighting down the shaft; finding another grath. Tahrl felt frost stealing at his breath. The arrow was gone, striking a grath in the back. The creature howled, ripping its soul out of the wind. Troglodytes reached it, tearing at its flanks, dragging it to the earth. Chatter of stone striking stone filling the sky. Armada had another arrow, slapping it to pull the ice and pain

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

from its core. Graths were before the ruin; troglodytes falling upon them. Pale forms smeared red. Grath coats slick with blood. The graths shaking off troglodytes; smashing them beneath monstrous claws, and Tahrl did not wonder why the beasts were feared. He understood the pride in the survivors' eyes as they had brought the monster's corpse to his father while everything else had been lost. The graths were wading through the swarm of troglodytes, leaving nothing living in their path.

An explosion ripped through graths and troglodytes, rushing over them with heat and flame, burning them so quickly they did not even cry out. The wave of light and heat reaching past the top of the tower where the three of them stood. Tahrl looked to Armada; she still held her bow with an arrow that froze the very air still held to the string. Alexander held a sling, fitting another small stone into it. The stone glowed dark and red as he spun it around in the sky, leaving a trailing halo in the dark above his head. Below them, a grath touched the wall licked with flame, and Alexander loosed the stone. It struck the grath, bursting like a soap bubble, and fire blossomed like a flowering star.

Troglodytes were on the wall, trying to understand the source of ice and flame. Armada held the bow still with an arrow slack against the string. Alexander did not place another stone into the sling. Troglodytes crawled the wall, inching slowly upward, sniffing at the stone as if searching for any taste of fire or frost. Tahrl did not breathe; his hand upon Quicksilver, feeling warmth, feeling power and magic beneath his fingertips. He wanted to turn the dagger against the troglodytes, bringing light to blind even monsters that did not use eyes to see, but he did nothing as Alexander and Armada did nothing while graths and troglodytes swirled beneath them. A grath clawed the wall, climbing, having leapt over fire and flame, trying to outdistance troglodytes. The grath climbed; troglodytes ignoring it. They were seeking for the top of a tower that they could not find.

The grath climbed the sheer outer wall of the tower as easily as the much smaller troglodytes scaled it. Troglodytes moving slowly as if they were trying to follow the massive creature's progress as if they wondered if the grath was crawling after them. The grath climbed quickly as if it was ascending nothing more strenuous than a straight stair. It reached the troglodytes, passing them, ignoring them, looking forever upward with madness for eyes.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

With a growl deep in her throat that could easily blossom into a scream of rage, Armada raised the arrow and shot the grath in the face. The monster was so close it could have snapped at her fingers; instead, the creature fell into fire and flame. The troglodytes raced upward, floundering at the top as if surprised to discover there was no more wall to climb. Armada shot the first without even time to turn the arrow to ice. The creature sailed out and away from the wall, the arrow having passed right through it, and then the creature fell.

Tahlr had Quicksilver; it struck the second troglodyte and then a third. Hovering before Tahlr's eyes, the dagger was like a star that had fallen from the sky. He wanted to touch it, fearing for his fingers. There were more troglodytes on the wall and scaling the tower. The crash of stone against stone was everywhere. Armada abandoned her bow, taking-up the ax and standing at the pinnacle's edge. A troglodyte ascended the top of the tower; surprised like all the rest that there was no more stone to climb. It was pushed from the wall with a swing of Armada's ax; so did the next one fall and the next.

There was another grath on the wall, troglodytes dripping from it. Armada could not turn. There were more troglodytes and even more. A stone greeted the grath as it crested the tower. The creature roared as the stone ruptured in its face. The world rushed around them, burning. Tahlr was flattened against the floor of the tower with the wind screaming against his skin, and then the night was as cold and quiet as death. He did not want to move, hearing darkness and then the far away rattle of stone against stone. There was Armada with the ax in her hands; ready to strike at anything that moved. There was Alexander swinging the sling as if sighting for more troglodytes climbing the wall, and there was what little remained of the grath slumped over the wall. No flames roared. No fire burned. It was as if the rush of flame had consumed the grath and troglodytes and then vanished into the dark and the night.

Tahlr found his feet, moving slowly, watching father and daughter stand at the wall. He watched them, listening to the faint click of stone against stone, but Armada and Alexander did nothing. They watched from the wall, studying the troglodytes far below. The troglodytes did not climb. They remained on the ground as if wary of fire and flame as if contemplating the top of the tower that defied location and yet burned. Tahlr had never heard much of troglodyte



## **The Etymology of Fire**

strategy and tactics. The soldiers always spoke of facing them on open ground. There were few records of how the old towns and keeps had been lost. Troglodytes attacked in wave after wave after wave until they overwhelmed the enemy. The wards and defenses that Armada had placed on the tower were confusing the creatures, and they were trying to adapt. Alexander did not drop another fire stone as if hoping the troglodytes would not rush. The troglodytes might simply lose interest and let the tower be.

The tower shook, rattling with the chatter of troglodyte voices. They were in the tower; Tahrl could feel it. The clack and clatter of the creatures' substitute for sight reaching them through the rock and the stone. The troglodytes were reaching up and clawing through the stone, trying to find the top of the tower without being burned. Troglodytes were tunnelers and diggers. They lived underground, making their homes out of the rock and the earth. Tahrl knew it would take them no time at all to break through the floor, and then the tower began to list to the side. Tahrl looked to Alexander; looked to Armada. There was shock; there was surprise. Their perch began to tilt, sliding sideways. Tahrl watched their packs slip to the edge; caught by the stone wall. He could hear rock grind and stone crack, and the clatter of the troglodytes' sight grew louder and louder. He could feel his feet, slide across the uneven floor, bracing himself against the edge, looking down, seeing the ruin spread out below them, and he knew. The troglodytes wanted to topple the tower. They would bring it down if they could not find the top. They would fall. They would crash against the stone. Tahrl held against the edge. Armada had dropped the great red ax somewhere. Alexander held to the far edge, looking up into the sky, and Tahrl remembered watching Armada fall from the edge of the mansion. She had slid through the sky as if gliding with the air and touching gently to the ground. She had held out her hand to him, speaking of flying through the mountains, and he had lost his grip. She could not support him if he fell.

The tower fell. Rock crashed and stone roared. Tahrl lost his hold, slipping, sliding, as the tower tried to toss him into the sky. Quick-silver was a light, shimmering like a star. Stone struck stone with a roar that took him between the eyes. The ruin collapsed. Tower and stone and roof crumbling. Tahrl tumbling, rolling, falling. He stopped. The crash and roar of falling stone lasted forever and then was gone. Dust drifting like a cloud. Falling rock slipping into si-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

lence. There was nothing. The ruin moving nevermore, and then Tahrl found pain in his shoulder and in his neck. His arms ached, and his legs burned. He tried to move, searching for his feet, wavering in darkness. There was no light; there was no sky. He tried to stand, shaking on his feet, leaning against stone, feeling dust in his mouth and against his skin. He listened to the dark, hearing the slip and fall of rock as the ruin settled, and found nothing of Armada or Alexander. The rattle of falling rock grew. He scrambled, reaching for his sword, finding nothing, wishing he could see, and there was a spark of light as if a star had fallen from the sky. Blinking, shielding his eyes, he found Quicksilver. He left the dagger in the air. The click and crash of stone against stone grew. There were troglodytes. Quicksilver struck, taking one and then another, slashing them, stabbing them. The troglodytes fell, limping, crawling against the stone. A troglodyte raced for him, trailing blood, crashing into him. They struck the wall. He could feel claws in his shirt. He stumbled, slipping, falling; the creature like muscle and wire above him, flailing at him. There was another; there must have been another.

White-hot pain like fire took his shoulder as if his arm was being crushed, and all he could do was scream and then nothing. Slumping to the stone, he could barely move, feeling troglodytes against him. The click and crash of stone against stone was everywhere. The troglodytes did not kill him. They lifted him, trying to carry him. Clawed hands were everywhere. They would take him into the depths of the tunnels beneath the mountains, and they would feast on him in the dark where the light never reached. Quicksilver was lost somewhere in the dust and the dark.

There was a scream of rage that rushed all around them and then a roar of wind that was so hot it burned. He fell to the stone. The troglodytes swept into the air by the wind as if it was a thing alive. The troglodytes screaming, crying out, flailing with claws and limbs before they were silenced. The very air stretched the creatures like taffy, pulling them apart, ripping them limb from limb; blood dripping to the dust, and then there was silence. The breeze caressing Tahrl, touching him, feeling him, seeking out the pain in his shoulder and arm, and then light grew. Quicksilver hovered in the air above him, and then Armada appeared, walking through the ruin, finding Tahrl against the stone. She reached down slowly; the wind swirling all around her like a cloak of bright fire. She touched a

## **The Etymology of Fire**

hand to his forehead, and the world felt cool. His body did not ache, and his arm did not burn.

Armada said nothing, reaching down, lifting him from the dust, and taking him in her arms. She carried him through ruin and stone until they found the sky, and then the wind lifted them, carrying them gently from out of the rock and the earth. They ascended into chaos, and Tahrl found that the world burned. There was flame everywhere, lashing at the rock and the stone. The ruin glowing yellow and red; turning soft and melting away. Alexander was there, standing at ease in nightmare and flame. They said nothing, stepping from the ruin, leaving burning rock and melting stone behind them. Tahrl looked to the sky, seeking moon and seeking stars, finding nothing but smoke and ash to fill the sky. The wind swept around them, teasing them, carrying them away from ruin and flame. Tahrl could not touch the ground. He could not feel the soft earth as Armada held him and cradled him, and Tahrl could remember nothing after that as if the world had died.

*Chapter Five*  
**Daughter of the Ancients**

*They stayed at Willow's Point for more than a quarter turning of the moon. The point was a pinnacle of shear rock like a monument standing alone with nothing but the clouds and the sky for company and only the one path to approach it. Tahrl liked to sit at the base of the rock tower and look down upon valleys, sparse trees and even birds so far below they looked like butterflies. His shoulder was bandaged and his arm was held to his side, but he knew that he was not the reason they tarried so long at the refuge. Armada was weak. As much as she might try to hide, she could not disguise how she slept for long hours and wobbled on her feet whenever she tried to stand. Nobody spoke, but he knew. He had only to look and to watch, and he knew.*

“What happened?” he said one time while Armada was resting. Alexander said nothing, watching his daughter, and Tahrl let the silence drift and grow around them.

“She overexerted herself,” Alexander finally said. “It was hard, Tahrl. Watching over you. Protecting you. You cannot understand what it cost her to rescue you.”

“You are wizards.” His voice was a whisper swept away by the light and soft breeze.

“Wizardry and magic have a price, Tahrl. It eats away at you, nibbling bit by bit until you forget.”

“What?”

“Everything.”

“Is that why?” He remembered sitting in a cramped and dark corner of the library with nothing but a candle between them to light their way. Alexander speaking so softly that Tahrl doubted his own ears as he learned that his friend was far older than he had ever imagined. “Why you left them?”

Alexander did not answer, and Tahrl looked only to the fading light of the sky. The sun was a red smear of light against the horizon

## **The Etymology of Fire**

that would soon leave them with nothing but the cold and the dark. The moon would rise and the stars would shine, but first there would be nothing but the dark. He looked to Armada, resting, sleeping, recovering from the work of burning stone, and he remembered music that would drift around them. Sweet and mournful music that would drift into their souls. The night would be cold and dark, and then there would be stars. Then, there would be music.

Tahlr knew without understanding how that the music would protect them. They need not fear troglodytes or graths or trolls. The music Alexander played was for their ears alone. It was soft and warm and gentle, and Tahlr felt peace, listening to tunes and melodies. The music was health, and the music was life. They rested in silence, and they rested in song. Tahlr did not want to leave Willow's Point for he knew the music would remain at the pinnacle of rock and far vistas when they returned to the mountains and the world.

Armada said little while they rested, and the music echoed through the night. She had lost the red ax somewhere in the ruins when the troglodytes had toppled the tower. They had lost most of their equipment and packs, and the only thing Tahlr had saved had been the dagger Quicksilver. They took new supplies from Willow's Peak, which the Dryn had fortified for just such emergencies. They replaced their packs and blankets, and they selected swords to replace the weapons that had been lost.

They had done all they could to make ready to return to the mountains and the world, and they waited only until Alexander decided that they were fit and strong enough to travel. Tahlr would dream of the mountains, seeing the ruins burn in his mind, and he would toss and turn in the dark of the night after Alexander had put his flute to bed. Tahlr's shoulder would ache and his arm would be numb when he would wake from nightmares, but he tried not to show how the memory of troglodytes still bothered him. At last, they left their sanctuary behind them, traveling slowly on the first day that they returned to the world. Resting beneath the stars that first night, they heard nothing of troglodytes or graths, and the dark did not echo with the sound of stone striking stone sounding so much like an avalanche.

Tahlr woke with the sunrise to brush against his eyes and the memory of silver music to bring peace to his soul. He looked to the morning, and he looked to far clouds and the sun slipping over the mountains to bring light to the sky. Tahlr rubbed at his eyes, feel-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

ing sleep and fatigue and the dull ache of his arm, and he saw a dragon. It was like a great bird far above them soaring peacefully through the sky, and Tahrl realized that he had never seen such a thing of grace or beauty before. He could not find breath, looking to the sky, watching the creature soar like a leaf sailing with the wind. He thought his heart had stopped and that he had forgotten all the world. There was only the dragon. It was monstrous only it was not a monster. There was no Wrath or Wraith. There was only a quiet and majestic beauty soaring beyond their reach.

“Now, you have seen,” Armada said, standing to Tahrl’s side. “Do you still doubt?”

Tahrl did not answer; his eyes only for the creature so far overhead, and he remembered a scream. He remembered a cry like the death of all souls in the morning light. Wrath had struck Edgewood like the vengeance of lost innocence, killing all that it found, destroying houses and homes. He watched grace, and he watched beauty. He remembered rage. Tahrl fell, finding himself on his knees, wiping at tears as if his face burned, and then the dragon was gone, disappearing through clouds, finding places wholly unknown.

“We should go,” Armada said.

“I cannot,” Tahrl said. “I cannot move.”

“Yes, you can.”

“No.”

“We shall leave you behind,” she said, watching him, looking to his heart as if she could wait until the world turned to dust. “There is nothing for you here.”

“I have seen,” Tahrl said; his voice exploding from his chest and drifting into silence in the same breath. Wrath had fallen on Edgewood, smashing the town, spreading chaos and despair. He had seen it. “I don’t know what I have seen.”

“You have seen nothing but the truth,” she said, touching his arm, and he remembered that he had lost his feet and was still kneeling on the ground. “As much truth as any of us have ever seen, anyway,” she said. “They do not touch us. Descend from out of the sky. We only ever see them flying as you have seen them so far overhead.”

“I remember,” he said, feeling the wind in his lungs, feeling his chest ache and his heart burn. “It was you or Alex who told me.” Tahrl climbed to his feet, feeling Armada’s hand linger on his shoulder. “But, you have never reached them. Know nothing of them.”

## The Etymology of Fire

“That is true. They are distant as the moon or the sun. Never noticing us.”

“They will,” Tahrl whispered, remembering smoke in Edgewood and all the townsfolk gathered around the funeral pyre. “They must.”



*Tahrl saw no more dragons; even though, he looked and he watched the sky. The dragon did not return as if it had vanished as if the dragon had been nothing more than an illusion or fantasy of fractured hope. They traveled through the mountains, looking to the sky and far peaks that were always covered with snow, and they tried to remember the dragon’s path through the sky as if they might trace it back to its home.*

They traveled deep into the mountains, leaving all sound and memory of troglodytes and graths behind them as if the creatures had been spent. Such monsters as called the mountains home had learned of what Armada had done to the ruins, and such creatures as lived among rock and stone had decided that the three travelers were not worth bothering. The deep mountains were quiet as the morning’s first light as if the only things that ventured there were the moon and the stars. They saw another dragon one morning, watching it soar, watching it sweep and glide, and they did nothing. It was beyond their reach.

At last, they saw pinnacles. At last, they stood before ancient and snow-covered peaks. Looking up, they saw spires and monuments of rock that were so beautiful and wondrous they could hardly believe that such sights had been formed with only the wind and the sun to shape them. Nobody said a word, but they knew. They had found the home of dragons. Looking up, they saw there was still far to go, and they knew they would have to climb rock faces as steep as a ladder with nothing to stop them if they should fall. Tahrl touched his arm, which was still bandaged to his side, and fire swept his heart as he looked to the far peaks they must climb. The others said nothing; not even looking to him. They let him hold his arm and stretch his fingers in the quiet afternoon.

The dragons were above them, watching, waiting, wondering if three children of the DiKena would reach them. Except Tahrl could not climb. There were spires and tall cliffs and long drops into space, and Tahrl knew he would be tested even without the wound-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

ed shoulder and arm. The dragons would not come down; it was the last test. They never descended from the peaks and the clouds except to ravage and to rage. Tahrl would have to climb only he could not, and he could not be left alone. There were still troglodytes and graths even if they were invisible and silent. Armada or Alexander could not try the ascent alone. Even wizards sometimes needed the support of another. So, they said nothing. They did nothing but watch the high peaks and far spires, waiting for nightfall, waiting for dawn. They slept without speaking, resting in silence that was greater than any shout.

A dragon came with the morning light, sailing out of the sky as if it loved nothing so much as the sun and the wind and the clouds. First one and then another appeared in the sky, having leapt from some point in the tall peaks far above their heads. Tahrl watched them soar and sway, and he watched them circle passing between clouds far overhead. He wished he could fly, watching them, feeling his injured arm like a dead weight hanging around his neck. He wanted nothing more than to spread his arms so much like wings and leap into the sky. There was grace dancing between the clouds, and there was beauty circling above them and descending in slow leisurely arcs.

Tahrl wanted to scream. He did not know. He did not know why. A dragon had found them; had noticed them. A dragon had ravaged Edgewood. He could see it in his mind and behind his eyes. He could hear it, echoing between his ears. The people had screamed. The monster had raged. The crack of shattering wood and stone had dropped him to his knees. Clinging to a tree with fingers digging into wood and into bark, he had slumped against the trunk, hiding in the forest, hiding from Edgewood.

The dragons descended from the mountain, and Tahrl could not move. Armada was a statue, and Alexander only looked to winged apparitions with a hand raised as if shading his eyes from the sun. The dragons were huge with a wingspan that seemed to dwarf the sky, but that could not be true. The creatures' arms and shoulders could only support so much. In fact, Tahrl could not comprehend how they could stay in the air at all. Their arms with long and slender fingers held aloft great folds of wing so much like the sails of a ship. They were mostly wings and shoulders with a very slender body, a long neck, and an even longer tail. It sliced the air, holding itself aloft with great billowing wings.



## **The Etymology of Fire**

One descended; the other turning back to the sky. One dragon like something out of a half-remembered legend or fantasy came to rest before them, folding wings. It took some time. The folding and curling of its wings seemed to go on forever. Tahrl could not describe it. The exotic creature sat there watching them; coiled as if at any moment it could leap back into the sky or strike them down without a thought. They were not facing troglodytes or graths or even forest trolls. Tahrl remembered Edgewood. If the dragon struck, they would not even see it move.

It did not move, watching them with unnatural eyes. It did not have eyes only black pits as dark as the night beyond midnight where there was neither moon nor stars in the sky. The abyss watched them. Wrath watched them, and Tahrl could not look away. It dwarfed them; it did not seem that big resting on the ground; but still, it dwarfed them.

“Be not afraid. I mean you no harm.”

The voice came from the dragon slow and awkward like someone unaccustomed to words and speech. It had to have been the dragon only its mouth had not moved, and the voice had been muffled as if it had come from deep in the creature’s throat. Nobody spoke. Tahrl could only stare. The Wrath had not spoken as it had savaged Edgewood. It had only screamed. Monsters and nightmares and things that should not be never spoke. The dragon like some half-forgotten guardian out of the distant past had spoken to them, and none could answer it.

“I am Moonlight,” the dragon said carefully as if it was desperately trying to remember. “I was sent to greet you because of all the Winterbred I speak Kianan best.”

“Sent?” Tahrl did not even realize that he had spoken until the dragon turned its gaze on him.

“Yes.”

“Moonlight, please,” Alexander began but said no more as the creature turned on him as if he was the only thing in the universe.

“You are the one,” it said.

“What?”

“The one with the voice. Please, may I see it? The song of the earth’s heart, may I see it?”

“I do not understand.”

“We heard your voice in our homes and in our beds.” The dragon shifted, rustling its wings, slipping toward Alexander as if excited as

## **The Etymology of Fire**

if it was doing everything in its power to remain still. Tahrl was suddenly reminded of a puppy. Alexander took half a step backward. “We heard your voice,” it said. “Please, may I see it?”

Alexander said nothing; his face indescribable. He had once been the greatest wizard that the world had ever known, and he had thrown it all away. He had left magic and he had left wizardry, preferring life on the road and the sounds of people in halls both grand and small. Tahrl had watched Alexander play, listening to the music, letting it seep into his soul. People would come from miles around when they learned that Alexander was in town. They would appear from places that nobody knew existed, and Alexander loved every moment of it. He was never far from music and never separated from his silver flute. It was the only thing he had saved from the burning ruins when the graths and troglodytes had attacked them.

“The flute,” Tahrl whispered, hoping that Alexander heard him. “It wants to see the flute.”

Alexander moved but only slowly; his eyes never leaving the dragon. He went to the flute, finding it wrapped in its leather bindings, taking it from his pack next to their small fire. He held the flute below his chin, stroking the leather with his thumb, watching the dragon.

“I made this flute from earthsheart stones that were a gift from the Earlstien families of the Montmorin,” Alexander said. “Why must you see it?”

“Please, I make no demands,” the dragon said. “I only wish to see something that has not existed in so long that even the Preservers know only stories. When we heard your voice, we knew that we had found you. The one who has remembered the gentle magic.”

“The what?”

“The power that heals but cannot be taught. The gentle magic. Even the Preservers remember nothing more.”

“No, I have done nothing,” Alexander said, holding the flute tight to his chest. “I do not understand.”

“You have touched the gentle magic. You hold it in your hands.”

“No.”

“Please, you have touched us. Your voice has found us, giving us hope.”

“I have done nothing.”

“You have done everything.”

Alexander said nothing, looking as if he would turn and throw

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

the flute as hard as he could, looking as if he wished to put as much distance as possible between himself and the music still bound in its wrappings in his hands, but he did nothing. He had forsaken the wizards. Tahrl knew that Alexander could not abandon the flute.

“Moonlight, please,” Tahrl said when he could stand the silence no longer. “Why?”

“Because we are the guardians of the DiKena,” the dragon said; its eyes never leaving Alexander. “We failed the DiKena. The gentle magic forgotten. We lost hope and then came the slaughter.”

“Slaughter?”

“There are so few of us left.”

“What slaughter?”

“When the children of the DiKena abandoned us. When the Ki-anan raised blade and storm against us.”

“You mean the Crusade?”

“If that is what you call it, yes, the slaughter when the very mountains were stained red with blood.”

“I am sorry.”

“There are so few of us left. We had failed. Guardians forgotten. Nothing more than monsters. We had lost hope until now.” The dragon stretched out its neck until the tip of its nose was right before Alexander’s eyes. Watching it, Tahrl could not breathe. “We first heard your voice half a turning of the moon ago. It touched us. It filled us. We remembered the song of the earth’s heart.”

Watching Alexander stand frozen, Tahrl wanted to cry, feeling his soul was empty, feeling nothing but a great weight in his chest as if a rock had grown at his core. He felt the weight like a thing that would rip out his heart, and he could do nothing but watch as the red and black stone that had once belonged to him slid to the earth where it lay like a dead thing that had never known life. He kicked at the earth and he kicked at his toes, imagining his life’s blood on the ground turned soar and turned hard, and he wanted nothing but to smash it and to squash the vile thing that was so much like a forgotten piece of despair.

“We are here because of the Crusade,” Tahrl whispered, finding the breath to speak even though it burned his chest and scared his lungs. “We are here because it is not over.”

Moonlight did not answer. Alexander said nothing, and the dragon turned slowly to look at Tahrl as if it did not want to move. The creature turned as if it recognized death and did not want to face

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

the horror that lay before it, but it did look at him. Its eyes were impossible. Its eyes were like something that could not exist. A grath's eyes were simple in comparison. A grath was chaos. A grath was insanity. The dragon's eyes were beyond reason. They were the end of days.

"There are so few of us," the creature said.

"I am sorry." Tahrl did not know where he found his voice. "I do not want it. I do not want the slaughter to continue. I must know." He could not look; the forgotten country was in the depths of the dragon's eyes. "I must know."

"What?"

"Why the attack." Tahrl heard voices in his head. He saw screams. He smelled blood and fire and smoke. He tasted fear. "Why Edgewood had to suffer. Why the dragons rage."

"I do not understand."

"A dragon savaged Edgewood."

"Edgewood?"

"My home beyond the forest and the mountains."

"Edgewood?"

"Yes."

"The Winterbred do not rage."

"What?"

"The Windmasters do not rage."

"You?"

"Yes."

"I have seen it." Tahrl wanted to shout, finding the creature before him, finding his voice in the depths of time. "The dragons rage."

"No."

"No?" Tahrl wanted to laugh, coughing, choking on the sound. "I have seen it."

"What?"

The dragon was looking at him, and he could not turn away. A dragon had descended upon Edgewood, turning the morning into nightmare, and he had fled before it. Hearing a roar that had ripped at his memory and tore at his soul, he had run without looking, without thought or feeling. He could have stopped. He could have looked or helped somebody; instead, he had fought his way to the wood, hiding behind root and branch and tree.

"I have seen." Tahrl closed his eyes, seeing the monster even through darkness and despair. "I do not know what I have seen. A

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

forsaken guardian. A nightmare out of time. A dragon destroyed my home.”

“I am sorry.” The creature pulled back and away from him, falling in upon itself. Its lips never moved as it spoke. “I did not know.”

“You must learn,” Tahrl whispered. “Why?”

“I have no answers for you. We have lost so much. We seek only to be forgotten by your kind.”

“Then, why do you speak?”

“Because you have touched us.” The dragon’s eyes turned to Alexander. “This one has touched us, and we remember what once was.”

“You were once guardians.”

“Yes.”

“We have not all forgotten. We seek to remember.”

“I do not know.”

“The Kianan will remember given reason to forsake hate. We must learn why your kind rage. We must learn how it is done.”

“I do not know.” The dragon turned, looking to the tall peaks and deep mountains from where it had come. “I came seeking hope. I was sent to find answers. Forgive me, I was not expecting questions.”

“You have done nothing that requires my forgiveness.”

The dragon did not speak, shifting, unfurling wings to shift and rustle like sails beneath the sky.

“I must go,” it said. “I must tell the Preservers. You have given us much to ponder. I am sorry that I leave you with so little. Look for me by morning’s light,” the dragon said and was gone, disappearing into the sky.

Tahrl watched the dragon as it circled back into the sky, lifting itself with great wings that shaped the very wind to its needs and desires. He stretched out a hand as if he might reach for the dragon as if he might pluck it from the sky, and he began to laugh, feeling the sound tear at his throat. Wrath had attacked Edgewood. Houses had been destroyed, and people had died. A monster like some forgotten nightmare had ripped the world from his eyes, and he laughed. Moonlight had spoken to them so he laughed until his heart ached and his chest burned. He laughed until the tears scarred his eyes.

“Silence,” Armada said.

Tahrl felt earth between his fingers. His lungs were laced with fire that threatened to consume him. He could not breathe.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“I said enough.” Armada was before him.

“I was right,” Tahrl whispered; every word was agony. He lifted his eyes, meeting Armada’s gaze. “I was right.”

“Yes.”

“There is hope.” He tasted blood in his mouth. “If there is time. If we can reach the Montmorin. Send word to my family. Alexander’s plan.”

“Not now!”

“What?” Tahrl said and was quiet. Alexander had not moved. He held the flute to his chest, and he watched the sky. “Alex?” Tahrl said, rising to his feet. There was no answer.

Alexander stood as if he had not moved since the dragon had slipped back into the sky, and he watched the mountains as if he could see the very spot that the dragon called home. Tahrl moved, walking slowly toward his friend, and he remembered listening to Alexander’s voice and watching his face when Alexander had told him about the wizards. The words had not come easily. Alexander had looked as if he had been sifting memories like shards of glass that had stuck and lodged in his hands even as he had touched them.

“Alex?” Tahrl said, standing before the forgotten avatar.

Alexander’s eyes drifted from the mountain slowly as if he did not want to be drawn back into the world, and he looked to Tahrl. His eyes were deep and laced with frost as can be found in the old mountains or deep forest, and he tried to smile, looking to Tahrl.

“Not what I expected,” Alexander said as if his voice might catch as if he was trying to sound strong. “Then, again, what could any of us have expected?”

“How- how- are you all right?”

“Yes, I think so. Caught off guard, I must say. The gentle magic.” His hands twisted around the flute still wrapped in its leather bindings and held tight to his chest. “I never would have thought.” He touched the flute to his chin as if he would raise it to his lips and brush it with a kiss. “It’s probably nothing. Their name for music, perhaps. It makes a certain kind of sense; after all, it said my voice reached them. My voice? I have not spoken so grand, have I? The music. Now, that carries on the wind.”

“Alex.”

“Yes, I know,” he said, looking to his toes; the flute’s wrappings twisted all around. “It is much to think about. So, what do you think of Moonlight.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“Well,” Tahrl said, noticing that Armada stood behind him as if she would move as if she would strike him down where he stood. She said nothing. “I noticed it did not actually say that Moonlight was its name. It is Moonlight.”

“A problem with translation, perhaps, just like the gentle magic, or it is simply protecting itself.”

“It is possible. I haven’t had time to think. They do not rage, it said. That is factually true if Vemarian is doing something to them.”

“They do not rage in anger, you mean?”

“Perhaps.” Tahrl looked to the mountains. “I haven’t had time to think.”

“Then, let us think,” Armada said, surprising them with her voice. “Let us sit and rest and think. We do not need to fill the mountains with mindless talk.”

“Yes,” Tahrl said. “Let us sit here and rest. It is too soon to plan. We shall have more company. Moonlight said it will return by morning’s light. I hope it meant tomorrow.”

They returned to their small fire and let the day drift around them. Tahrl thought of Montmorin and the Earlinstien Mountains. He counted days to reach them and words to send. He tracked time to the Ivory Tower and what could be said to his family. If they wanted to send word, they would have to make for Windvale, north of the mountains. He would not be welcome in Edgewood. It would have to be Windvale. A turning of the moon would pass for word to reach the Earlinstien Mountains or the Ivory Tower. Another moon for any reply. All the while, the soldiers moving about the mountains.

There was a sound, and Tahrl felt as if he had scrambled to his feet only then discovering that his body still rested before the fire. There was sound, and Tahrl rested, listening to the whispered breeze. There was music on the air, and the sweet melancholy sound of Alexander’s flute to touch his ear. Without speaking, without saying a word, Alexander had taken out his flute and begun to play. They listened. Tahrl let the songs and melodies flow around him, and he tried to free his mind from thoughts or planning. Alexander had been right. The dragons were kind, and they were gentle. A dragon had spoken to them, fearing them more than they had need to fear it, and then Tahrl looked to the sky.

“Look,” he whispered, and the music drifted into silence.

Dragons filled the sky. He could not count them. They drifted

## The Etymology of Fire

and turned, gliding on great wings to hug and mold the clouds and the wind. The dragons circled, looking so much like birds that it might have been possible to be fooled except for wings that seemed to fill half the sky. The dragons were above them, and Tahrl felt he might touch them if only he stretched out his hand to the sky.

“You have touched them,” Tahrl whispered, turning, looking at Alexander. The flute was held slack between Alexander’s fingers and resting against his knee. Alexander looked at him. “They have found hope,” Tahrl said.

“They have,” Alexander said as if his voice was lost in the mists of time. “They have found me.”

With the music gone, the dragons slipped from the sky, drifting back to their homes and resting places in the far peaks of the mountains. They left the sky slowly as if they did not want to leave memory as if returning to their homes would be to leave the music behind, but at last, they were gone; the sky empty. The sun drifting finally to her bed, and the land growing dark. The stars drifted, and the moon appeared, spreading light in memory of the sun. The sky was empty. Alexander did not touch the flute again.



*Moonlight returned with the morning, drifting out of the sky, descending from the high peaks and spires that the dragon called home. Moonlight did not come alone. First one and then another dragon joined Moonlight in the sky, sailing with the wind, and sweeping in great lazy circles around the camp. Tahrl watched the dragons as the creatures circled, and then another dragon, much larger than all the rest, joined the others. It was a grand dragon slipping through the sky. Its wings seemed to fill the world as it drifted and flew far above their heads. Tahrl thought that he had seen dragons, remembering Edgewood where the monster had desecrated the town, remembering shapes far overhead looking so much like birds, and remembering Moonlight resting before them and speaking to them in broken Kianan. This new dragon dwarfed all the others, and Tahrl knew without thought or reason that this dragon was old. This dragon remembered the Crusade.*

The great creatures descended, slipping from the sky, coming to rest before them. First Moonlight and then another and another settled to the ground before them, and Tahrl did not know how he knew that the first one was Moonlight. The creatures were so much



## **The Etymology of Fire**

alike. They were thin with long fingers and grand wings and slender necks with wolf shaped heads. Their eyes were impossible. Their ears were invisible. They had teeth as sharp as anything Tahrl had ever seen. Their hides were musty and dark and every color of the earth. They were brown and red and gold all blended and spun together like a tapestry painted upon stone.

The grand dragon was the last to land, folding its wings, touching the earth as if it had always been there and they had only imagined it in the sky. The dragon watched them with eyes that were as dark and deep as the midnight sky. It studied them, turning its gaze slowly this way and that as if it had all the time in the world. Tahrl did not speak. He was standing, and he did not know how he had found his feet. The dragons did nothing, looking to the one dragon, resting as silent as the forgotten breeze.

“Be not afraid,” the great dragon said in all but perfect Kianan, and Tahrl felt his legs quake as if he might touch the land. The voice came from the dragon; even though, the creature’s mouth did not move as if the words were formed deep in its throat and slipped from between its teeth. “I am Skysailor,” the dragon said, “Preserver of the Windmasters, and I mean you no harm. You have traveled far and been through so much. I welcome you to my home.”

“I thank you,” Tahrl said, stepping forward, moving slowly, feeling as if he might trip and fall flat on his face with each step. “I am Tahrl Morgan ap Morin, and I wish nothing more than to speak with you.”

“Friend of the Montmorin?”

“Yes.”

“Forgive me, I did not know that any ties survived between the three children of the DiKena.” The great dragon moved, rustling its wings, and Tahrl was reminded of how Moonlight had all but danced on the ground before them only the day before. “You give me hope,” the dragon said. “Moonlight told me there were Kianan and Dryn together before my door, but I did not know of ties to the Montmorin. There has been so little to trust. So little to believe. I thank you for standing at my door.”

“My family has always sought to renew the old ties. We would wish to renew even more.”

“Such a thing is almost beyond imagining. I never would have dreamed.” The dragon turned its long neck toward Alexander and watched him with its exotic eyes. “Never until I heard a voice as I had

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

never dreamed find me in my bed.” Alexander held his ground; even thought, he looked as if he wanted nothing more than to turn and run. He held his ground before the dragon with the flute wrapped in its bindings and strapped to his back. “Please,” the dragon said, and Tahrl could feel Alexander’s need from where he stood. “May I see it?”

“I do not know,” Alexander whispered, facing the dragon, holding his hands awkwardly to his sides.

“You are the one among all the children of the DiKena who has touched the gentle magic, and I long to bear witness.” The great dragon shifted as if it would swoop down on Alexander. The other dragons, Moonlight among them, rustled and stepped and turned their wings as if they might take flight. “I would see that which you have become.”

“Please, I do not understand.”

“You have touched the gentle magic. The kind gift. That which is without thought or reason. The power that heals but cannot be taught. Such a gift has not been known since the fall of the DiKena. You are peace. You are hope. You are magic.”

“I do not wish such things.”

“They are yours.”

“I wish only to help.”

“Yes.”

“I am Alexander the Minstrel. My only desire is to bring people happiness and delight. To remind them of the world so that it is not forgotten.”

“Of course.”

“Stop it!” Alexander fought with his voice as if he was shocked to learn that he could speak. “I do not seek out such a burden.”

“The gentle magic is no burden,” Skysailor said. “It is hope.”

“No.”

“Understand, you are master of the harsh magic. It wreaths you like a thing alive. Your daughter as well. She wears the harsh magic like a crown.”

“I did not say that she was my daughter,” Alexander said.

“I am a Preserver of the Windmasters and Protector of the DiKena. You need tell me nothing.”

Alexander did not answer.

“Understand, you have mastered the harsh magic, but it does

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

not rule your heart. You have transcended it and touched the gentle magic that lies beyond.”

“Transcended is an interesting way to say that I abandoned wizardry.”

“Never abandoned. Simply no longer necessary. You have touched that which is beyond. You hold it in your hands. You speak, and we know.”

“What?” Alexander said when he could stand the silence no longer.

“Hope.”

“No.”

“Yes,” Tahrl said, remembering a wild form above Edgewood, remembering the screams of the people. They had stood around the funeral pyre, saying nothing, and they had watched him as if he had brought this agent of wrath and vengeance down upon them. “We have.” He had fled the Ivory Tower. The world had been quiet, and the night had been cold as ice against his skin. “I know how it sounds, but we have come seeking hope, bringing hope, finding it. Giving of it to each other. I stand here,” he said, facing the dragon, “and I believe my eyes. We bring music, and they hear it.”

Alexander looked as if he might laugh as if Tahrl had just told him that the world was round. The world was silence, and Alexander did not move. He watched and said nothing. The dragons huddled together as if the air was frozen and they sought warmth from each other. They looked like lost children. They were grand masters of the air. They were the protectors and guardians of the DiKena. Their ancestors had fought nightmare creatures of chaos and anarchy to protect the DiKena. The grand dragon Skysailor had lived through the Crusade. Tahrl watched the dragons. They looked as if they did not wish to speak or move as if they feared to break wide the sky and hasten the end of time. They looked to Alexander and were silent.

“Really, Tahrl,” Alexander finally said, shaking Tahrl free of the depths of the world. “Normally you only hear that kind of talk in stories.”

“People talk as if they are acting out bits from stories or fables all the time. They think it is necessary and so they make speeches, saying everything they remember from tale and legend. You know this.”

“I know.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

Alexander took the flute from his shoulder, moving slowly, turning it round and about in his hands as if he was looking at it for the last time and thought much of the workmanship of the leather bindings. His hands began to work the wrapping, and silver flashed from between his fingers, reflecting the light of the sun. The dragons moved, craning forward, and Tahrl felt them, watching, waiting as if they could not breathe. Silver danced and flashed with a gentle light, and Alexander raised his hands. Skysailor said nothing, moving so close the dragon almost touched Alexander, shying away as if the flute burned. There was silence in the world, but Tahrl heard music. He remembered the sound. He remembered melodies without end. There had been songs to fill the heart and soul with joy with laughter and with tears and sadness. There was divinity and there was despair. There was music.

“I thank you,” Skysailor said at last, pulling back into herself as if she would slip into a ball from which she would never seek to return. “Never have I imagined such a thing. I thank you.”

“And, you have given me much to think about,” Alexander said. “I do not know if you have given me a gift. Forgive me if I do not thank you.”

“You have given me so much.”

“Hope?”

“Yes.”

“We have come also seeking hope,” Tahrl said. “I fear I shall take back that which I did not know I had given you.”

“Your home was destroyed?” Skysailor said.

“Yes.”

“I am sorry.”

“Do not give me sorry. I must know. Why do the dragons rage?”

“We do not rage.”

“You do. I have seen it.”

“No.”

“With mine own eyes, I have seen Wrath fall upon my home.”

“No!”

“Then, help me.”

“I cannot.” The dragon looked away.

“Yes, you must or else you will fall. We suspect one among the Kianan is responsible. He takes fear, and he takes hatred. He says that the dragons rage, and the people fall under his sway.”

“Then, he is a deceiver and corrupter of souls.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“He must be stopped. He is trying to raise the Kianan against you. The Crusade will begin again. You must help us understand what he is doing or else you will fall.”

“I am sorry.” The dragon’s voice was empty. “I cannot help you.”

“Then, you will die.”

“The Windmasters do not rage. I know nothing of the schemes of the Kianan. I wish that I did. I would help you if I could.”

“Then, we must proceed without proof.”

“That is a dangerous road,” Alexander said.

“It was your plan,” Tahrl replied, looking to his friend. The flute had already been returned to its covers and wrappings. “We must contact my family and the Montmorin.” The words drifted away even as he spoke them as if he realized what was said only after it had passed his lips. Tahrl remembered a mansion set before the Ivory Tower so much like all the others, and he remembered looking down from his far window in the castle. He remembered saying nothing. “It will take time,” he whispered.

“Please, we do not wish to speak with the Kianan,” Skysailor said.

“You are speaking with us,” Tahrl said.

“I am not here,” the dragon said, faltering on the words as if searching for meaning in language that it had not touched since before Tahrl was born. “I am not here because the music called to me. I am not here.” The wind slipped between them carrying away the dragon’s words if it had not spoken anything at all.

“Because of hope?” Tahrl said. “To be what you once were? Guardians and protectors? If you would cherish that hope, you must speak with the Kianan. You must show them that you do not rage.”

“I must think,” Skysailor said, drawing back from Tahrl, rustling its wings as if it might unfurl them, doing nothing instead. “I must consult the other Preservers.”

“You will have more time than you need for thoughts and considerations. It is a long journey even for words to reach the Ivory Tower. We must travel north to Windvale. Send word to Earlinstien. Send word to the Ivory Tower. I do not know.”

“North?” Skysailor said, turning slowly, looking between mountains and clouds. “No, that way is treacherous. The mountains dangerous and impassable to Kianan or Dryn. You should return the way you came.”

“That will keep the northern range between us and Windvale. The Crusade is coming. We do not have so many luxuries as time.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“Another way, perhaps?” Armada said, startling Tahrl as if he had forgotten that she had not become a tree. “We know there is a pass in the mountains west of here. We never use it.”

“Why?”

“The Kianan control the western slopes of the mountains.”

Tahrl looked to where the sun was yet low in the sky. He could see nothing but mountains and snow, and he imagined soldiers with Vemarian’s insignia on their arms. They had brought down the Wrath with great swords and chains and hooks for rending even a monster’s wing.

“It would seem all roads are dangerous,” he said.

“Perhaps,” Skysailor said as if it could not stop the word from flowing from between its teeth. “Perhaps, if you had a guide.”

“What sort of guide?”

There were rumblings and echoes carried to them on the wind as if speaking to them of distant thunder. Tahrl listened, wondering at the sound, and then realized that it was one of the dragons. It was speech like none that he had ever heard before and reminded him of nothing so much as the distant howl of wind and rumble of ancient storm.

“Yes,” Skysailor said at last. “A guide who could show you the western pass through the mountains. A guide who could look down on the land and warn you of other Kianan.”

“A dragon?” Alexander said.

“Yes, a guide to see you clear of the mountains. One of the Winterbred to protect you.” Skysailor spread her wings as if she hoped to encompass the sky. “One of the Winterbred to be your guardian and protector once more.”

“We are grateful,” Tahrl whispered; terrified that he might laugh. “To the edge of the mountains.”

“Return to us with word from the Kianan and the Montmorin. We will be waiting. We may yet speak,” Skysailor said and was gone, soaring into the sky, and Tahrl could not remember the moment in which the great dragon had leapt into the wind.

“Speak with dragons,” Tahrl said, watching one and then another and another slip into the sky. “Stop Vemarian. Stop the Crusade.” The dragons circled one after another, turning, spiraling upward with great sweeps of their wings until they had found the sky. “We are mad,” he whispered, looking to Alexander, looking to Armada. “We are mad.”



*Moonlight returned with the morning, drifting out of the light as if the dragon had been born of the wind and the sun, finding the world as if the dragon had never seen it before. Moonlight found them with the sun still resting at her ease on the tall peaks and spires of the mountains, and the dragon watched them as they gathered their gear and packs.*

“Follow,” Moonlight said, and they did.

They traversed paths that took them south of the tall mountains that Skysailor and Moonlight called home. They walked for days with Moonlight floating on the breeze, and they left the western slopes of the mountains where the Dryn held sway. Tahrl rested uneasily at night even with the dragon to look after them. He could hear them. The voices of the troglodytes drifted to him in the dark and in the night. The harsh fall of stone against stone that was the troglodyte’s substitute for sight filled him. His arm burned. His shoulder hurt, and he wondered when the creatures would find them. They never did. Voices filled the night, but creatures of the dark never troubled them. Graths never appeared from impossible hiding places, and troglodytes never swept over them from out of the dark.

They reached the eastern slopes, following Moonlight, and Tahrl wondered when they would leave their guide behind. They would have to find the road that was somewhere before them, and they would have to take the long path around the mountains to reach Windvale. They could not turn south; it would take them too close to Stonegarden Castle where Vemarian trained his men and lead the troglodyte defense. Tahrl did not even know if Vemarian had returned to the cold and unyielding walls of Stonegarden. Vemarian could still be at Windvale.

Tahrl knew that he could not go there. Vemarian’s soldiers would be at Windvale even if their leader had returned to Stonegarden. They would be looking for him, and they would have his description. It was even possible that soldiers from Edgewood would have been transferred to Windvale. Tahrl could not enter the small town. Alexander would have to go and learn if the soldiers still looked for him. Tahrl would have to send word north and south from Windvale. Alexander would have to give messages to the traders who were always moving between Earlinstien and the Ivory Tower. Word would be sent; word would return, but it was too slow.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

Tahlr knew that they could not wait for words alone. They would have to travel with the caravans, and Tahlr remembered the road. It stretched so far. You could walk all the way from Earlinstien and TyCraig to the Ivory Tower. All roads lead to the great pinnacle that was the Ivory Tower, and he imagined standing before that monument, looking to the castle. He remembered the roads that would take him around the castle to the mansions of the traders and merchant families. He would go to the grand mansions of the Morgan ap Morin, and he would face his grandfather. Tahlr had not seen his grandfather since long before he had fled the Ivory Tower.

Tahlr could not return to the Ivory Tower. He could not face his grandfather. Alexander could turn that way. His grandfather would take the great minstrel into his home, and he would listen to what Alexander had to say. Tahlr could turn north, joining the Montmorin caravans returning to Earlinstien. Armada could journey with him and watch over him. Alexander would need no such protection. The Montmorin would listen. Urtha and Gran Malor would believe him, and they would speak with Tahlr's father before sending word south to the Ivory Tower. Tahlr would see his father. He had not seen his parents since he had left the Earlinstien Mountains to be schooled in the halls of the Ivory Tower. He had not seen his parents for more than half of his life. Armada would go with him. Alexander would be safe.

Alexander fell as if he had been pushed, tripping, falling without a sound. The dragon roared. Tahlr looked to his friend as if shocked from a dream. There was an arrow in Alexander's back. It had struck through his pack as if nothing could have protected him. Tahlr turned, looking, turning this way and that. The dragon was screaming. Armada was gone.

There was a noise as if the wind was being ripped by a knife. Moonlight caught the arrow with long slender fingers even before Tahlr had time to recognize the sound. Fingers twisted, and the arrow snapped. Moonlight roared, and Tahlr stood at the edge of the forest, looking at a monster. The Wrath had screamed with a sound that ravaged the soul. Tahlr could not move; could not breathe, feeling the frozen air burn his skin and dig into his bones. The Wrath stood over Alexander's crumpled and unmoving form with an arrow protruding from his friend's back. The Wrath would scoop Alexander up and bite him; teeth sinking into flesh. Blood dripping, flowing from between its jaws. Tahlr fell, scuttling backward as if



## **The Etymology of Fire**

he might somehow crawl away from the thing. Nightmare was before him. Broken shards and splinters of the arrow falling from its fingers. Vemarian was right. The soldiers were around them somewhere. They would stop the monster.

There was a sound like a scream carried on the breeze, and the monster did not move. It was huddled over Alexander and did not move. Alexander did not move. The arrow quivered so slightly it was almost lost to sight, and Tahrl knew that Alexander was still alive. As long as the arrow shook in time to Alexander's breath, he lived. The Wrath was above Alexander. It's nose was all but touching him as if it was watching him, studying him, sniffing him. The creature swayed as if it wanted to stretch its long neck and touch Alexander with the tip of its nose, but it could not as if Alexander burned as if Alexander had become a flame that would consume the Wrath.

Tahrl choked on the breath in his throat as if it had turned to sand and dust. He could not move. He wanted to move. He wanted to face the Wrath; push it away. The creature should not be above Alexander. It should not be there. It had done this to Alexander. The Wraths had brought pain and suffering into the world, and it had tempted Tahrl. It had teased Alexander, and now he would die with an arrow in his back. The monster should be raging. It should be shouting and crying; instead, it did nothing. It made a sound like the passage of a storm deep in its throat, but it did nothing. Its voice forgotten. Its scream a memory of the dawn. The soldiers would come and punish it for what it had done to his friend.

“Behold the weapon of weaklings and cowards!”

Tahrl jumped. He turned. He looked, standing without knowing how as if he had been struck by fire and lightning. Armada was there. A crossbow raised above her head. The bowstring obviously broken. There was a soldier. She had him by the arm. He was limping as if she had been dragging him. She threw the crossbow. It skittered and scratched across the ground, coming to rest before Alexander and the dragon. Armada pulled the soldier along behind her. He had eyes only for the monster hovering over her father. The soldier did not speak, and he did not move. Armada pulled him, dragging him forward, turning, grabbing him by the hair and by the shoulder. She half-threw, half-pushed, him toward Alexander. The soldier tumbled, slipping over the dust, coming to rest before the dragon.

The man tried to move; his leg shaking under his weight so much

## **The Etymology of Fire**

that he could not stand. He said nothing, and his eyes were only for the Wrath. The creature watched him with unmoving eyes as if the monster would study him like a bird impaled on a hunter's hook until the end of time. Tahrl could see it. The Wrath lunging forward, opening its jaws as it moved, and it would bite down on the soldier's head. It would snap the soldier's neck before he even had a chance to scream. There would be the sound of muffled surprise and then nothing. The soldier would be dead only the creature did not move. It did not strike. The dragon watched the Kianan soldier, hovering protectively over Alexander.

"Coward!" Armada said, moving on the soldier, kicking him as if he was nothing more than dry brush to be knocked out of the way. "Waiting. Hiding like a thief. Striking when our back was turned. You could not face us!" She struck him again. The soldier twisted on the ground as if trying to crawl away from her but failing.

"Armada!" Tahrl said. The word was a rock lodged in his throat exploding from between his teeth.

The Dryn swung her head as if she had forgotten his existence and cared only for punishing the soldier. She did nothing and then turned on Tahrl, moving toward him as if she would impale him on an invisible spear in her hands.

"What!" she said. "What would you have me do! I saw the arrows! I saw what they used!"

"There are more?" Tahrl said, thinking of soldiers hiding in the clumps of scattered brush and stunted trees that dotted the mountains. Armada said nothing, looking down at him.

"No," she said, turning with the word, moving back toward the soldier.

The man saw her coming and tried to crawl, moving around as if he might ignore pain. Armada was above him, kicking, reaching down. The soldier made a strangled noise that died in his throat as if he could not even scream. Armada had something in her hands; taken from the soldier. It was a short arrow of the kind he had seen Vemarian's men use against the dragons. She came back at Tahrl.

"Look at this," she said. "The tip is barbed like a flowering spoke. The head is a bulb." She held it before Tahrl's eyes. He blinked, trying to look away; he could not see. "There is poison here. There are strange marks like a fool trying to shape wizardry. This is wrath and corruption." She held the arrow before his nose as if it was a thing

## **The Etymology of Fire**

alive and she must break its neck. “They used it on Delan. They used it on my father.”

“Fire and blood,” Tahrl whispered, reaching for the flowering arrowhead with unsteady fingers as if the thing would bite him. “This is it. This is what they use on the dragons.”

“And, they used it on my father!” she screamed. “A weapon for destroying dragons, and they turned it on Delan!”

She moved so fast. The soldier screamed.

“No!” Tahrl was stumbling, falling forward.

“Stop.”

They did not move. Moonlight’s shout echoing around them as if they had been bound frozen in time. They looked to the dragon as it huddled above Alexander as if waiting for it to speak again. It did speak, but Tahrl did not understand the words. He could not follow. He could not understand. The dragon spoke, and Armada stiffened as if she had been slapped. She stood, releasing the soldier. She did not face the dragon, looking down, seeing her father, watching the arrow quiver like a feather in the wind. She could not look but refused to close her eyes. She looked as if she would hold her gaze on her fallen father until she died. Moonlight whispered words that Tahrl could not understand. Its mouth never moving as if the voice came from somewhere out of time.

Armada slumped to the earth, touching Alexander, tracing a hand against his back, looking to the arrow. Her father shivered and coughed under her touch as if he could not breathe.

“What?” Tahrl said.

Armada ignored him, tracing her father’s back as if there was nothing else in all of the world, and then she began to disassemble his pack, loosening the straps, taking it apart piece by piece. The arrow had pierced the pack. It had gone right through almost as if the pack had not been there. Tahrl could do nothing but watch as Armada ripped at it and pulled the seams apart. At last, she had the pack away, lifting it gently, and then she tore at Alexander’s shirt, pulling it apart with her fingers. There were plates and layers and hard leather just as Armada and his own clothes were layered with such armor, but she tore it from Alexander’s back as if it was soft cloth.

She stopped, looking at Alexander’s pale back, looking at blood that was red and crusted black. Tahrl could feel his life rushing for his mouth, wanting to be free of his lips to spill and slosh against the

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

dark ground, but he did nothing. He could only look and stare and do nothing. Armada looked up from her father's wound, but she did not look to Tahlr as she held one hand out to him. Her eyes were only for her father.

"Quicksilver," she said, but Tahlr did not move. She looked to him as if she were only just remembering that he was there. "Quicksilver," she said again, and her voice was anything but kind.

Tahlr stumbled forward, pulling at the dagger. There was so much blood. Alexander did not move. Tahlr could hear soft and strangled breathing as if someone was trapped under a great weight and even the effort to draw breath would drain the life from him. Alexander made no other sound, and the dragon was still there. Tahlr did not want to face that creature of madness and lost nightmare. He gave her the dagger. Armada did not even look at him.

She did something, working with the dagger, holding a hand to the arrow protruding like a sapling from the small of her father's back. Tahlr could not stand; he fell away, watching father and daughter. There was blood like black tar and burnt wood. There was the arrow. There was Armada holding the shaft as if she had hold of a weed that had taken root in a fallow garden, and there was a sound. Armada was humming; growing slowly from out of the depths of the earth. It became a low moan like a stricken wail that could strike out against the sun and the moon and the stars. The arrow moved beneath her fingers, and Tahlr remembered the barbs. They would pull free of Alexander's back like the roots of a weed dragging with them hunks and tendrils of flesh.

Tahlr wanted to scream, feeling the mournful wail and soulless moan spread out from around father and daughter. He could see it. The arrow pulled free. It would trail gore and flesh and blood. Alexander would die. Armada worked with the dagger. Tahlr could not move. The dragon was gone, pulling away from father and daughter as if Armada's voice burned.

The wail became a scream. The cry of hopeless rage. The arrow was free. Armada falling backward. The arrow held like a writhing thing. It shook. It grew tendrils that Tahlr could not see, but he knew were there. It was darkness. It was midnight. Armada slithered backward against the dirt, holding the arrow above her as if she were trying to strangle it. As if it was attacking her. Armada's voice changed. The wail was gone. The cry forgotten. Armada roared like

## **The Etymology of Fire**

a forest fire, and the arrow shattered between her fingers. Shards clattering to the earth. Falling like splinters of glass.

Armada stood, looking down as if she expected the world to open beneath her feet and swallow her whole. She brushed at her arms and at her hands as if trying to scrape away muck and filth.

“Fire and blood,” she said to the world, stepping away from the splinters and fragments, looking to the earth. “What was that? What was that? Fire and blood. That was no mage’s work. I’ve never felt anything like that.” She turned on the dragon. “What was that?”

“Corruption,” Moonlight said.

“What?”

“Perversion.” The dragon was shying away from them as if it was trying to put as much distance between itself and the broken arrow as possible. “Despoiled life. The Kianan would make such a thing? They would dare?”

“What?”

“I cannot,” the voice faltered. “I cannot stay. It eats at my mind. The scent alone would smother me.”

“Smell?” Armada looked back to the arrow. “The poison? You can taste it?”

“Yes.”

“Then go!” she said; her voice rising as if it might crack. “Fly!”

“I am sorry.”

“Run!”

“Forgive me,” Moonlight said and was gone.

“No,” Tahrl whispered, watching the dragon leave them in the dust. Tahrl felt his heart split, and then he could not breathe. “Alex!” He turned, falling to his knees, trying to crawl toward his friend. The arrow had grown from Alexander’s back like a withered tree. It had sunk roots. It had reached deep and tapped his soul. It had drunk of his life.

Tahrl stopped at Alexander’s side, looking at bare skin stained red, looking at blood dark as mud. The arrow was gone, but Alexander did not move. Tahrl could hear breathing flowing ragged like the wind struggling among trees and rock. He stretched out one hand, reaching for Alexander as if he would touch blood as if he would feel slick warmth beneath his fingers, but he did nothing. Tahrl could do nothing, resting on his knees. Alexander was before him with his face in the earth as if he did not know that he breathed grass and dirt, and Tahrl wanted to touch him and wanted to turn him so that

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

he would not be buried forever. Tahrl did nothing, remembering a dragon reaching for the sky, remembering nightmare that had savaged Edgewood. Tahrl stretched out fingers as if he expected Alexander to turn on him. Alexander would scream. Alexander would rage. He would bite off Tahrl's fingers so Tahrl did nothing.

"Alex."

"He will live," Armada said, wandering back to where Tahrl knelt before her father in the dust. "I think he will live." Her voice almost broke. "The arrow wasn't really made for him. It was for the dragon. It drives them insane."

"Moonlight told you this?"

"No." She slumped to the earth as if she had lost the will to stand and looked to the sky for the longest of times before she turned her eyes back to her father. "Something. The dragon told me something." Armada stretched out one hand, brushing fingers through the back of Alexander's hair, and his breathing softened as if he slept. "Moonlight knew that the soldiers hunted the dragons and knew that they were doing something. Not what but something."

"We cannot move him," Tahrl said with eyes only for Armada's hand in her father's hair. "We cannot stay here. Alex- why are we speaking as if he is not here!" Tahrl stood, turning, pacing, seeing the soldier and wanting to fall upon him like a forgotten nightmare. "We have done nothing! He is dying, and I did nothing!" Tahrl had scrambled, reaching backward while Moonlight had hovered over Alexander. Tahrl had fallen away while a Wrath had protected his friend. "We cannot do nothing!"

Tahrl could feel the words ripped from his throat and burn his lungs. He looked to Armada. She did not move, studying him as if she might find it amusing if he were to spontaneously explode. The soldier was there, unmoving. Tahrl turned, reaching for Quicksilver, finding nothing. He looked to where the dagger always rested against his hip as if the world had been twisted away from him and everything he had once possessed was now gone. Tahrl clawed with his good hand as if he expected to find the dagger there if only he searched hard enough. He stopped. Armada had the dagger, and he looked to her, turning his head as if he first wanted to see the world and study the sun and the mountains and the sky.

"Finished?" Armada said when Tahrl made no further effort to move. "I have more right than you to take that Kianan's blood, but I do not. Something Moonlight said."

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“We cannot stay.”

“I know. The blood will draw troglodytes as soon as it grows dark. We must be far from here. The Kianan, too.”

“Yes,” Tahrl said, looking slowly from the solider to the sky. He turned, studying mountains, looking north, glancing south. “We must go south. Make for the Ivory Tower. The soldier. The arrows. We cannot wait for messages. Alex must get help.”

“He needs not help. He is still a great wizard.”

“Felled by an arrow. Even the great may fall.”

“No, I know, but this is not the end. He will recover.”

“Why are we talking like he is not right there? Is he not dead? Is he blind? Is he deaf? He lies so still.” Tahrl stumbled back to Armada’s side and slumped against the earth with a hand to Armada’s shoulder to guide his fall. “We should do something. About the blood. Make him comfortable.”

“Yes.”



*They made a stretcher. They did nothing right away. They only sat there and rested and watched Alexander breathe as if the rise and fall of Alexander’s back was the only thing in the whole wide world. The dragon did not return. They made a stretcher from out of their blankets as if they would serve no other purpose ever again. Between them, they carried Alexander, holding edges of the blankets twisted and bound around their fingers and hands. It was awkward work with Tahrl’s arm still lashed to his side, and he thought of troglodytes. He remembered the feel of teeth pressing into his shoulder. He remembered how they had swarmed across the tower, and he tried to hold his end of the blankets. They stopped, resting, and then Armada went back for the soldier while Tahrl watched over Alexander and waited. He imagined the sound of stone against stone, and he knew the night would be filled with the clatter and echo of the troglodytes’ substitute for sight. Armada returned with the soldier, dragging him along half wrapped in a blanket that bound his arms and feet and hands, and then they rested some more.*

Tahrl looked to the solider while they sat beneath the sky, and the man did nothing. He was watching them, and he did nothing. He said nothing. He only watched them and quietly strained against the blanket that enshrouded him.

“Why?” Tahrl said, startling even Armada with the crack in his

## **The Etymology of Fire**

voice, but the soldier did not reply. “They were once guardians and protectors. They made no effort to harm us.”

“Wrath will destroy us,” the soldier said to nobody with a voice that was barren of thought or feeling.

“No, they will do nothing. They were protectors and healers. You made them monsters. You made them vengeance.”

“They were always destroyers.”

“Never,” Tahrl said, climbing to his feet, searching, looking this way and that for one of the dark arrows. “You made them monsters with your poison and your deceit. You made them.”

“I revealed them.”

“By corrupting them? By making a mockery of all they had been? To reveal is to show what is. You have shown us what you want them to be. That is not revelation. That is not truth. It is deceit. It is corruption. It is lies.”

“What was once Wrath? Do you know? Does anybody really know the past? They did not help us. They did not protect us. Where are the DiKena? Show me. They destroyed us.”

“You speak like one seeking revenge for a slight that you alone can perceive.”

“Show me a DiKena!”

“I stand before you.”

“Ha!”

“We are the survivors.”

“We are not them.”

“We are the children.”

“We shall fall.”

“Why?”

The soldier did not answer, folding in upon himself as if cold, and he pulled the twisted blanket as tightly around himself as he could manage.

“Asked and answered,” the man said. “The Wraiths will destroy us.”

“Because you poison them.”

“Revealing truth.”

“This is not truth. This is coercion. Corruption.”

“It is truth.”

“No!” Tahrl wanted to fall upon the man, stepping forward, reaching for him with his hands still clasped to his sides. He wanted to burn the soldier to the ground, leaving nothing but a dark stain of



## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

smoldering earth. He remembered Alexander lying against the earth as if he was already dead. The dragon had hovered over Alexander, guarding him, protecting him, and Tahrl had only seen Wrath. He had stood before what Vemarian wanted him to see, clawing backward and away from the monster, and it had been a monster. Tahrl stood before the soldier, wanting to kick, wanting to lash out and strike. He remembered Armada and the soldier's scream, and Tahrl stopped. He looked down at the soldier still trapped in the folds of the blankets, and he did nothing. "I have seen truth," Tahrl said, and the soldier did not answer. "What is your name?"

The soldier looked to him curled within the restricting blankets. He looked as if he was waiting for Tahrl to fall; waiting for Tahrl to strike. The man said nothing.

"Nothing to call yourself? How do you know when they speak to you? Do they ring bells? Do they throw stones? Do I get to name you? Should I call you something?"

The man was quiet as the night dark sky.

"What is your name?" Tahrl looked away. He looked to Armada, and he looked to Alexander lying among his blankets. Alexander was pale. His back was yet sticky and moist, and the blankets were stained. It was only a matter of time before the blankets started to smell. They would never be clean. "What should we call him, Armada?"

"Nothing," she said. "He has done nothing worthy of a name."

"Well, I don't think we should kick him just any old time we want his attention."

"Why not? It was a dozen years before I earned my name."

"And, before that?"

"Drae," Armada said without looking at him. "It means girl of a certain age. Don't ask me to explain."

"Well, does that suit you?" Tahrl said, turning back on the soldier. "Not even a name to call your own? Anything more must be earned?"

"Not very talkative, is he?" Armada said.

"No."

"We've rested here long enough. Let's make for those trees and high ground over there. I'll come back for the mule."



## **The Etymology of Fire**

*Alexander woke at last, coughing as if he was drowning, smearing small drops of blood between his fingers and against his chin. Tahrl went to him, resting a hand against him as if he might quiet the fit of coughing with nothing more than his touch. He could feel Alexander draw breath. It reminded him of the rattling of chains or a strong wind trying desperately to push open a shuttered door.*

“No, don’t try to speak,” Tahrl said. “You should rest. I know Armada said you will just shrug this off. But, don’t try to talk. Armada is here. Preparing defenses against the night. We’ll hide from the troglodytes just like at the tower.”

Alexander grew quiet. His breath moving slowly, and his eyes drifted to Tahrl’s shoulder.

“Better than the tower, I hope,” Tahrl said. “We’re not expecting graths this time. We turned south. Found a clump of trees. Didn’t know there were such trees in these mountains. Armada says we will be safe here. In a few days, we will track east. Return to Greenhome or whatever the Dryn call their city. You need proper rest. And, healing. Then, I don’t know. Word to Windvale somehow. Spread it to the caravans so that the news can travel north and south. No, say nothing. When you are ready, we will go to the Ivory Tower. I can’t think of anything.”

His gaze wandered, taking in the tall but slender trees that surrounded them like a tiny pocket of life in a barren wasteland. The light was fading. He did not know how they had managed to reach the trees. It would soon be full night, and they would not risk a fire or light of any kind. His arm ached and his shoulder burned from the effort of clinging to Alexander’s makeshift stretcher. Armada had vanished, leaving him with his wounded friend and the prisoner. He could feel her or more often than not believe that he could hear her moving around and about among the trees. The Dryn would guard them. They would be protected by magic and wizardry, and he remembered how the troglodytes had sought the top of the tower without being able to find it as if the spire simply did not exist in their world. The troglodytes would come, following the scent of blood. The night would be full of the pounding of stone against stone that was the secret of their sight.

“We must survive,” he whispered and then realized that Alexander was watching him. “We have something. Proof maybe. Poison. The dragon could not stay. It was driving her mad. Mad.” Tahrl closed his eyes, breathing deep, listening to the world weep. “They

## **The Etymology of Fire**

use arrows.” He said from behind his eyes. “Our friend here. I wonder if he is listening? Pretending to sleep? Our friend says it is only to reveal what is hidden. They make the dragons rage to show the world what monsters they are. Inventing the truth they want to believe. Can you believe it? We must spread the word. One of us must survive.”

Alexander coughed, trying to speak, choking and gasping on the sound as if words would destroy him, and then Armada was there. A hand placed to her father’s shoulder against his neck, and the other hand held to his face. She made a sound as if she was trying to coax a child to sleep, and Alexander grew quiet under her touch. She stretched out her fingers, brushing them against his face and then kissed him ever so gently on the forehead.

“You should have said nothing,” she whispered, turning toward Tahrl.

“I’m sorry. I did not think. You said he would be fine.”

“He will be.

“We must return to Greenheart.”

“Greenhaven! And, he needs only rest.”

“Yes, rest. I thought we could carry-on. Travel south to the Ivory Tower. Alexander would be fine. Now, I don’t know. I’ve had time to think. We should go back. Alex needs proper rest. The world can wait.”

“Yes, rest,” she said, holding one hand still to her father as if she might draw strength from the touch, but she could not. She did not move, holding her head as if she was too weary to move and the slightest effort would send her slumping over her father. She had been so busy preparing their wards and guards against the night, and Tahrl remembered Willow’s Point. She had been so weak, trying to hide it, trying to look strong before his eyes. They had waited so long while she recovered her strength. She had fought the graths; her shoulder and back had been scarred and dripped blood. She had fought the arrow free of her father’s back. They were all wounded, and they were all weak. Armada and Alexander had asked him to remain in Greenhaven so that they could move quickly through the mountains and need only to watch over each other, and Tahrl could not look at them. He could not face them. Armada did not move as if all strength had deserted her, and then she slipped from her father, moving as if half-asleep. She disappeared between trees; Tahrl could only guess that she returned to the work of protecting them.

## The Etymology of Fire

He said nothing; he could not even look to Alexander. They had asked him to stay with Teresa. He had wanted nothing but to speak with dragons, and now they were, all of them, wounded and weak. He could not speak.



*Two days would pass before Alexander would speak his first words* since being struck by the arrow. Two nights would pass sheltered by trees that stretched out of the earth like sticks draped with branches while all around them the troglodytes roamed. The sound came like a gentle drumbeat, building until it filled them, building until all the world was sound and Tahrl wanted to scream. He felt the pulse in his skin; rattling against his bones. He thought he would grow deaf beneath the crashing and grinding that sounded so much like stone against stone. The troglodytes were everywhere. They could see them passing beyond the trees; almost touching them. Never disturbing the green. In such ways as they could manage rest and sleep, the morning passed into light.

“We should move,” Alexander said with a voice that sounded broken and hoarse, and they looked at him as if they had forgotten that he could talk. “It is not safe here. We risk so much.”

“We stay until you are ready,” Armada said.

“I am ready.”

“No.”

“We should make for the Ivory Tower.”

“No.”

“It is too dangerous,” Tahrl said. “We must take you home.”

“We have not time for this,” Alexander said, but his voice ached and cracked even as he spoke. He coughed, cupping his hands to his face as if he might stop the world slipping from between his lips.

“I thought you said you were ready.”

He did not answer, holding his hand like a crumbled stone against his lips. His gaze was nothing, lingering on the fist that he held against his face as if he could hold it there forever, and he said nothing. Tahrl looked to the world past Alexander’s elbow, seeing trees and brush, and glimpsing the mountains beyond. He could not speak, looking past his friend, and he tried to make the words move. He sought his voice in his heart and in his chest, seeking fire and breath so that he might break the silence. Father faced daughter, and Tahrl said nothing. He knew nothing.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“What day is it?” Alexander finally said, but nobody answered. “There is a little less than a single turning of the moon until Summer Solstice. It will take three-halves of the moon for us to retrace our steps, and another full turning of the moon to reach the Ivory Tower. If we tarry at Greenhaven? If we send only word north and south?”

“It was always the plan to send word,” Tahrl said.

“Vemarian is moving.” They did not look to the solider gathered as silent as the night in his constricting blanket. “Word has been sent far and wide about Edgewood by now. The Kianan will gather to Vemarian’s call. The men and soldiers will be ready by late summer. They must move by the Fall Equinox, entering the mountains, confronting the dragons before the winter snows fall. If they do not.”

“If they do not,” Tahrl said, looking to the sky. “They risk losing momentum waiting for the spring thaw.”

“They need not do much before the snow. Only enough so there can be no turning back.” Alexander lowered his fist, looking to the soldier for the first time. “How many dragons have fallen at the prick of your bow? You have so many arrows. You have made more than one shot. How many fell before one survived to the edge of the mountains to ravage a Kianan town?”

The soldier said nothing.

“They do not even need to survive the mountains,” Alexander said. “They turn on each other. Your arrows. Your rage, and they turn blind upon their fellows. You savage their ranks so that they will be easier to take. All you need are stories to scare the Kianan. The wounding of Edgewood was a lucky shot.”

“I know nothing of that,” the soldier said.

“Of course not. You have been in the mountains, revealing dragons for the monsters you believe them to be. Right before the Fall Equinox, a dragon should fall upon Windvale. Or, maybe even Stonegarden Castle. That would drive the Kianan into a frenzy. They would be primed for spring.”

“They must be stopped.”

“Who?”

“The monsters; they will bring ruin down upon us all.”

Alexander looked to Tahrl and to Armada, and then he let his gaze turn back to the soldier who had been as quiet as the grave for

## **The Etymology of Fire**

so long they had figured that he would never speak again. Alexander lowered his hand as if he had lost the strength to hold it to his chin.

“We have until the turning of the seasons. There is not time for rest or for home. The Kianan flock to Vemarian’s banner, abandoning the court and the King. We must carry soldier and corruption to the Ivory Tower. Even then, I do not know if it is enough to save the King.”

Tahrl remembered once standing at the King’s shoulder. In better times and in better places, he had stood right to the King’s right hand, looking over the people and the court. The people had looked to him with quick glances and hurried looks as they addressed the King, and they wondered how this favorite and most valued adviser would speak. Tahrl remembered having thought such things as he had later stood back from the throne after he had lost so much in the court. He remembered how the King had refused to send him away and how the King had kept him so close at hand. The court and nobles had noticed as well, and they had spoken more openly before the King. They had raised their voices in the court as if they had need not to ask but might make so bold as to make demands in the very presence of their Lord and King, and Tahrl remembered that he was the reason that the great houses found cause to mock the throne.

“It must,” Tahrl whispered with his eyes locked on the past, and he remembered voices contradicting the King in his own court. Standing in the court, the noble men draped themselves in their ancestral banners and regalia, and they remembered what it had once meant to fight the chaos and nightmare that the dragons had wrought. They looked down at the merchant princes and traders who sought their own voices in court, and all saw how they could twist and lead the King because of one adviser that was not set aside. “We cannot fail,” he said, looking to Alexander, looking to Armada. “We must not surrender what has taken so long to form. If the King should fall, we risk the Montmorin, and the Dryn will be burned from their homes.”

“This is not revelation to our ears,” Armada said.

Tahrl closed his eyes, letting the world flow around him, and he remembered the clash of stone against stone. He wondered at the sound and where they would rest as they carried Alexander. They might be lost somewhere between far mountain spires without shelter or safety at hand, and the troglodytes would come with their lost

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

voices and crashing sight. Alexander would stand. Armada would fall. The blood had dripped from long cuts down her naked shoulder, and she had shivered not wanting Tahrl to see as she had tried to stand.

“We must rest,” he said. “We must recover.”

“While the forest burns and the tower falls.”

“There will be no rest,” Tahrl said, opening his eyes and looking to his friend. “Can you stand?”



*Two more days would pass before Alexander was ready to move.* Two more days before he rose from his blankets, staggering and almost falling, but he stood. They did not wait. Tahrl and Armada carried the silent soldier in bindings wrapped so tight that the man could not move. They moved slowly, traveling short distances, resting, holding the soldier between them. Alexander did not delay them. He walked with a long staff that Armada had made for him. The staff was tall and slender and smooth and somehow looked as if it were still alive and all they would need do would be to place the end firmly in the ground once more, and it would take root, spreading branches and reaching for the sky. They traveled. They rested. The sun faded, and the stars rose. The night was quiet. Expecting troglodytes, they found nothing but the dark. So, they traveled, retracing their steps as best they could, looking back to the high peaks where the dragons lived, but they found nothing. They were not greeted. They were not approached as if they held the dragon's bane. The arrows scared the dragons as they had driven Moonlight away. They carried madness and death with them as they passed south of the tall peaks and high mountains, and the dragons would not approach.

The Dryn found them as the days passed and the moon turned. A patrol almost two dozen strong found them with the sun low in the afternoon sky.

“We followed a dragon,” the one Dryn, Chrystal, said. The world filled her voice as if she did not believe who she had found in the far mountains.

“It spoke to you?” Armada said, gripping Chrystal with outstretched arms.

“No,” she said as if she did not understand the words that escaped from between her lips, knowing them to be as false as a mid-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

night sun. "It never spoke. It stayed beyond us. Flying. Circling. Always turning back when we did not follow."

"It was Moonlight," Tahrl said.

"What?"

"I do not know. I cannot. But, I believe that Moonlight lead you to us. One of the dragons knew that we were in need of aid."

"Moonlight?"

"Alexander is hurt, and we have a prisoner."

All voices grew silent, looking to the soldier still bound and staring at the creatures that surrounded him. They approached the soldier, encircling him, and he said nothing. His eyes were only for the ground as if he could not stand the sun or else knew that to look up was to look upon his doom.

"Here is truth," Tahrl said, gesturing toward the soldier, spreading his fingers wide. "We must reach the Ivory Tower. Show the King how we are all deceived."

"It is a far road to the Ivory Tower," Chrystal said, and Tahrl almost laughed, looking to the sky.

"That is why Moonlight brought you here," Tahrl said. "So many may take turns carrying our prize. So many may assist Alexander, and I may rest my shoulder for once in I cannot even remember how long. The Ivory Tower is no longer beyond our grasp."

"Was it?" Armada said.

"We have fared quite well of late almost as if the dragons protected us from troglodytes and graths as passed before their door. With so many, we need not fear troglodytes at all."

"You know little of the mountains," Armada said, "but you are correct. Such numbers as we now have need not fear the night."

"Remind me again why we traveled so few into the wild?"

"It is a long road to the Ivory Tower," Chrystal said, "and we are in need of supplies. We followed the dragon for many days never risking to turn aside."

"We are in need of supplies of our own," Armada said. "The cache at Feather Point, I think."

"We shall need to empty it," Chrystal said. "Word must be sent back to Greenhaven. We cannot leave it alone if others might have need."

"Agreed," Armada looked over the company of Dryn. "Perhaps a quartet can be spared to send word home. I am sure that between Delan and myself we shall not mind the loss."





*They turned south, following paths that Tahrl did not know, and the Dryn took turns carrying the soldier still wrapped in his blankets and dead to the world. They reached a far outcropping that reminded Tahrl very much of the time they had spent at Willow's Point, and they took food and water from hidden caves that the Dryn had dug into the side of the hill. They took as much as they could and more than they hoped they would need to reach the Ivory Tower. Leaving the shelter and cliffs so much like Willow's Point, they traveled among hills and mountains that were dangerous, and they camped in strange places that seemed almost not to hold all of them with the world stretched out far beneath their feet. They built no campfires as if they expected even meager light or traces of smoke would bring graths, troglodytes or worse down upon their heads, and Tahrl knew that the Dryn slept in shifts so that there was always a third of the company on watch. Once and again, Tahrl woke in the night, hearing the sound of stone against stone in the dark. It made him shake, and it made him shiver to hear such sounds. His shoulder burned with memory, and he wondered in the tempest of the night if he might ever know peace again. He woke once in the night to discover that more than half the Dryn were gone, and he could hear it. In the distance and in the night, he could hear the far cry of voices and the crash that was so much like an avalanche that was the troglodyte's sight. The Dryn had returned by morning, looking scarred and looking bloody, but they all returned. They heard no more of troglodytes for many days after that.*

He looked at them as they walked and the world passed all around them. They did not speak as if they knew that many more miles were before them and they must conserve what strength they could against the creatures of the night. They were quiet, but they did not despair of their journey as if they were filled with a quiet contentment that he could not possibly understand. They were leaving the forest and the mountains. They were heading for the Ivory Tower and the heart of the Kianan world. Tahrl remembered the stories he had heard for all of his life. The Dryn were monsters that seduced the Montmorin and stole men and babies. They were evil creatures of the wood that must be burned from their forests and made slaves. They could never again be allowed to harvest children and men. If the Kianan knew so many Dryn lived among the

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

trees before the Graystone Mountains, the forest would be burned to the ground. Every branch and every tree destroyed. Knowing the Dryn faced such fear as this from the Kianan, they followed Tahrl to the Ivory Tower anyway simply because he had asked. They followed Alexander, and they followed Armada without question or complaint as if it did not matter what dangers they faced. The world was danger, and they would stand before it. They would face rape and death if it somehow meant their sisters and daughters in Greenhaven might not live in fear.

Tahrl watched them and said nothing. They left the mountains behind them, striking the edge of the forest almost as if the woods were the ocean washing against the shores of the land. There was life in the forest, and Tahrl could feel it, brushing cool air against his face. He could hear the voices of the trees as they rustled with the breeze, and there were always birds and other animals adding their songs and calls to the wind. It was almost as if the forest was life and the mountains were death, and he wondered how far the troglodytes would venture into the woods if the Dryn were not there to hold them at bay. He wondered how dry and empty the forest would become if the troglodytes and cavern trolls were not opposed, and he thought of Edgewood resting at the opposite end of the forest. He remembered stories that were told of the Dryn. The Kianan feared the forest, and he could not help but think on how the forest would be feared if the graths and forest trolls held sway.

They kept to the edge of the forest almost as if they were keeping one foot in the mountains and the other in the woods. The Dryn were uneasy. He knew they were glad to be touching the woods and trees of their home, but they were not bound for Greenhaven. They were traveling paths that not even the Dryn followed. They were heading south, and they would leave both the mountains and forest behind them. They crossed the southern boundary of the forest much sooner than any of them had expected as if they had been dreading the crossing and none of them had wanted to think on it. They stood upon the open plain with little by way of cover or protection. The sun was far in the sky, and they rested for one last time in the shade of the forest that they all had known.

They traveled slowly; even though, the mountains and the forest were behind them, and they stayed far from the roads where the traders, Kianan, and merchants made their way between the Ivory Tower and the mountains of the Montmorin. Nobody want-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

ed to learn how Kianan would react to finding a band of Dryn almost twenty strong traveling down the road. There would be shock. There would be fear, and there would be anger. Word would spread faster than the wind of the vile creatures that desecrated the road.

They camped on the plains, staying far from any Kianan towns or communities, and they built only the smallest of campfires as if they were still in the mountains guarding against troglodytes and cavern trolls. They still carried the soldier between them and only let him stand and move on his own two feet when they were settling down for the night. The Dryn were quiet, speaking in only the faintest of whispers, looking over the plains, and studying the stars. In such ways, they watched the moon slowly change before their eyes. Each night, the moon rose, and each morning, he fell. As the nights passed, they watched him wax and wane, and the company marched south.

The Ivory Tower grew before their eyes. Each morning, Tahrl would turn south, looking for the sliver, straining to see the thread that reached forever into the sky. As they walked and as they wandered, the Ivory Tower changed. It was always against the horizon, but it grew from a thread into a column or pillar or as if it was the most slender of trees. Tahrl remembered the Ivory Tower, looking toward it, seeing the future. The tower was cold, and it had felt like glass or ice beneath his fingers. He had reached, stretching out slow and trembling fingers as if he had expected at any moment for the tower to crumble and fall. He would be crushed and would never see the great spire crashing against the landscape. He would never hear the roar and rumble that would echo on forever as the tower fell and fell and fell, and he wondered even in that moment how much of the world would be struck. He thought of Montmorin standing before their doors and watching great lengths of the Ivory Tower smash against their mountain homes.

The Ivory Tower was before them, and he remembered seeing it for the first time. His parents had been more than three moons behind him and still living with the Montmorin. He alone had been sent. He would reach the Ivory Tower, and he would study. He would cower before his uncles and grandfather, and he would never see his parents again. The Ivory Tower so cold, and he shivered just to look upon it. He had fled the tower in the cold and in the dark, and he had fled family, obligation, and home. The nobles and merchants and advisers had laughed at him as they had stood before the

## **The Etymology of Fire**

tower, and they had spoken words against the King for not sending him away. He had fled, taking nothing more than he could carry against the frozen night, so that the King might not lose the world.

It had been twin moons since the Dryn had found them carrying the soldier between them, and it had been even longer since Alexander had fallen beneath the poisonous arrow. Tahrl did not want to take another step, looking to the Ivory Tower, and knowing that they were less than a quarter moon from their goal. They must pass guards and gates who would wonder at the twenty Dryn in their company, and they must find a way to reach the King with arrows that were so vile they burned the mind. The King might listen but do nothing. They had to reach him. Tahrl looked to the Ivory Tower and could not move. As he looked, struggling for the strength to breathe, the world changed around him.

Moonlight found them.

*Chapter Six*  
**The Passing of Strangers**

*“You are pursued.”*

Moonlight had found them, drifting out of the morning light as if she were simply another aspect of the sunrise. Tahrl had woken suddenly, feeling the Dryn all around him, listening to the dark when there should have been voices. Tahrl had stood, abandoning his blankets, defying sleep, and he had found them looking to the north. He had turned with them, looking to the half-dark sky, and he had found the one shape that was more mystery than bird. He had caught at the morning air, feeling ice in his heart, feeling the frozen wind burn in his throat, and he could not speak. Desiring words, he almost choked on silence and the forgotten morning. They watched a dragon. It was as if the creature had been molded from out of the dark night sky by the light of the morning sun, and Tahrl knew that the dragon reached for them. It had flown from the very depths of the far mountains without rest or sleep to find them. Tahrl knew that the dragon would have found no safe refuge as it had sailed above the plains and tall grasses. Kianan would have looked, and they would have stared. They would have screamed and panicked and raised the alarm against the evil Wraith that would destroy them.

“Pursued?” Alexander said. “How?”

“By Kianan and horse,” Moonlight said, resting awkwardly on its long fingers and folded wings as if it expected at any moment to need to flee back into the sky. “They left the mountains. They follow you.”

Tahrl had watched the dragon approach; they had all watched in silence. The whispering of the Dryn had drifted away like wisps of smoke smothered by the breeze, and all the world had become silence. The dragon had come to rest before them, and Tahrl had known without understanding how that it was Moonlight who had found them.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

“You know this for certain? They follow us?”

“Yes, they watched you in the mountains. They knew you had this one of their brotherhood. They gathered men and horses, and they followed you.”

“This is most troubling,” Alexander said, raising a hand, brushing fingers across his shoulder and arm as if at the memory of pain.

If they were followed, Tahrl knew that the men and horses had no destination; only a direction. They would ride without thought, looking for Dryn and men. They would not know about the dragon, watching them, following them, flying through the long day and long night to overtake them and reach the small footsore band. Tahrl looked north, searching for far sight of the mountains, and wondering where soldiers gave chase. The soldiers would have sword and bow and spear, and they would trample the Dryn into the dust rather than risk being captured by the women’s voices and dragged back to the depths of the mountains. The morning was quiet. The soldiers would find them. They would never reach the Ivory Tower.

“How many?” Armada said. “How many follow us?”

“Enough,” Moonlight said. Its mouth never moved; the dragon’s voice rising from somewhere deep in its throat. “Two dozen riders. I do not know.”

“They follow us?” Armada said. “They do not make for the Ivory Tower?”

“They follow.”

“You know this? You watched them from the mountains? You gave chase to warn us?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I could not do nothing.”

“You have done nothing. Why did you not stop them? You knew they watched us. You knew they spread word and warning that we traveled south. You let them gather two dozen horses. You did nothing.”

“I could not- I could not,” the dragon said, falling back and away from them as if it might fall into the earth and the dust. “They would destroy me. Consume me. They wield fire, chaos and corruption. I could not- I dare nothing.”

“No, you could not. Forgive me,” Armada said, looking to one hand, raising fingers twisted together as if she held memory, and Tahrl remembered the arrow that had burned like the darkest night

## **The Etymology of Fire**

in her hand. "I understand." She lowered the hand, looking to where they kept the soldier's surviving arrows bound and protected from the sun. "How much time do we have?"

"They will be here in twin days."

"And, we are still some three days march from the Ivory Tower."

"They ride hard."

"We must reach the Ivory Tower," Tahrl said, looking, turning south. From the forest and the mountains, the Ivory Tower was little more than a silver strand of spider's silk stretched against the sky. It caught the morning sun, shimmering and shining, and reminded Tahrl suddenly of Alexander's flute glittering by moon and firelight. "We are so close."

"We are nowhere," Armada said. "They need not even find us. Only reach the Ivory Tower. What do they know? How much could they know?"

"They race the wind," Moonlight said. "They follow your memory."

"They must be reaching for the Ivory Tower. They could not know our designs. They cannot hope to find us. They need only poison the tower." Tahrl raised a hand as if he might reach for that distant thread stretching across the sky. He remembered the touch of that cold surface so much like glass, and he remembered how his fingers had slid across it as if it was as smooth as the wind. Standing in the morning light, he could not feel it no matter how hard he stretched his fingers, and he could do nothing more than lower his hand.

"No, they search for us," Alexander said. "They do not know what we may plan. What could they say against us? Do they even know who we are? Only that we journey from the mountains. They must run us down."

"Wasting time searching for us," Armada said. "Slowing them down."

"Then, we must race the wind." Tahrl felt the sky against his skin. Fire burned at his fingers, face and heart as he remembered the touch of Armada's fingers and outstretched hand in the mountains in the dark. "We must fly," he said, looking to Alexander's daughter.

"No."

"We must reach the Ivory Tower. At least one of us must survive and be heard. You and Alexander could fly. The King would listen."

"No," Alexander said. "The King would not give me an audience."

## **The Etymology of Fire**

“You are Alexander. Your word is respected. Your voice never questioned.”

“In matters of song and story. In history and legend. What has always been? Yes, they will listen then.” Alexander looked to the dragon resting awkwardly before them. “This defies truth.”

“It is truth.”

“Not the truth they will believe. It is not the truth that they can accept. Not from my words. I am a liar. I am a songsmith and storyteller. I am history and legend. I am not the nightmare at their door. They will not listen. They cannot listen. Not to me. Only to you.”

“No, the King will not listen.”

“Yes, Tahrl.”

“I am forsaken.”

“Why do you think you are here if not to speak for us?” Alexander said.

“The King cannot listen. Not even to me.” Tahrl remembered a mansion. He remembered the darkness and the night. It had been so cold as he had wandered the streets moving always away from the tower and leaving his home behind him. “I am not my family.”

“Yes, Tahrl, your family.”

Tahrl wanted to laugh, remembering the quiet world all around him. The halls were dark and old wood. Candlelight flickered in soft wax and oil. The scent of butter and fresh polish was everywhere. Remembering one final door, creaking softly at his touch, he had stood in his grandfather’s study.

“They will not listen.”

“Yes,” Alexander said. “They have never forgotten you.”

There had been a long table covered high with papers and books and writing, and his grandfather had stood by the window with the light of the world flowing all around him.

“Never. Better forgotten. They would have found me if they had only tried.” His grandfather had turned. He never smiled. “I know,” Tahrl said. “We must have my family’s support. We must speak. I have thought of little else.” His grandfather’s voice was as soft as the wind. “I fear- I must speak.”

“They will listen.”

He did not know his grandfather’s name.

“It matters not,” Tahrl said, looking to the silver thread suspending the world from the sky. “I cannot fly.”



## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“There may be a way,” Armada said with eyes only for the distant shadow of the Ivory Tower. “We shall fly.”

“What?”

“After a fashion,” she said and began to loosen the clasps and hooks of her shirt.

“I know your mind,” Alexander said. “Are you sure?”

“The world is danger,” she said as her coat and layers of soft armor slipped to the earth. “The world is death.”

“What are you doing?” Tahrl asked, looking to her dark shoulder, and trying to hold her eye.

“There is more than one way to fly.” She stepped from her pants, letting them fall, and stood naked beneath the morning light. “I will take no bit. You must guide me. I do not know the way.”

“What?” Tahrl could find no more words or the voice to speak them. He only stood as someone handed him a light robe and slender pack, and he stuffed the robe among remnants of dry and simple food without taking his eyes from her.

The world was Armada as she stepped past the others, looking to the far tower, and she stretched, leaning forward as if she might drop to her hands and knees except she did not fall. She became a horse, growing, stretching in an instant. Where once there had been a woman, there stood a mare. The horse was young and sleek; red and bronze and gold. She had strength and speed in her shoulders and the wind beneath her feet. Armada tossed her head as if shaking free the cares of the world and then turned her face to regard him. Tahrl almost dropped the pack.

“You must go,” Alexander said, stepping forward, touching Tahrl’s arm, and holding several long slender bundles out to him. “The arrows are proof.”

“I’m dreaming.”

“You must ride.”

“I will fall.”

“She will not let you. All the same, do not sleep.”

“Never again.”

“You must go.”

They helped him to Armada’s side, slipping the pack onto his back, and helped him somehow onto her back. He had time only to hold still and watch the others step away before the world dropped beneath his feet, and they flew across the land. The world rushed, and the world burned. The wind was in his face, roaring and scream-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

ing past his ears, and he thought he would die. Holding to her back, he could not breathe; the wind rushing past him so quickly that he could not even catch it in his mouth. He would die. He would falter, and he would fall, slipping from Armada's back. It was all he could manage to cling to her shoulders, wrapping his arms around her neck, and burying his face in her hair. She never had such hair. It was a mane of amber, bronze and gold to caress and stroke his face. It filled him. The scent and smell of the musty earth enveloped his world.

He could feel her, clinging to her back with all of his might. His legs gripped against her sides. She was strong. She was as warm as the sunrise. He could see nothing but the back of her neck and the whipping hair. He could feel her. There was nothing else; he could feel her racing the wind. Muscles working, stretching, moving; flowing with a powerful stride. Her skin was soft. It rippled and moved, stretching and relaxing as she ran. He could feel her breath and listen to the beat of her heart. He clung desperately to her, and he could feel her moving against him. They were so close. He could feel the sway and arch of her back as her legs worked and her hips moved.

Tahlr held to her. They were so close there might as well have been nothing to separate them. She wore nothing. He was pressed against her bare skin, feeling soft down and hair against his body even through his clothes. His face was forever pressed against her neck and her flowing mane. His fingers gripped. His legs stretched. Her body moving, racing the day and the night. He cried out, slipping, almost falling, but held somehow, clinging desperately against her. She did not stop. She did not even slow down, but he did not fall as if she could hold him gently in place even as she ran. Tahlr slept, giving himself up to her embrace, and never wondered how he did not fall.



*The city was before them. He did not know how they had found it. He did not even know how long he had been clinging to her back. He only looked up, lifting his head, pulling his eyes away from her mane, and he saw the Ivory Tower before them bathed in morning's light. They had raced the night. Tahlr only held to her back without trying to guide her as they approached the great city. The farms and fields surrounded them, falling away as Armada found the road,*

## **The Etymology of Fire**

and then they were approaching the Ivory Tower. The houses and farms grew like miniature villages growing about the great metropolis. People stopped in their work; he could see them. Farmers and tradesmen looked up from their chores at the passage of the magnificent horse lacking both saddle and bridal, and they looked to the man lying exhausted against her back. People looked, and faces turned. Tahrl could only hope that nobody should choose to give chase and try to learn more of the wild horse and inarticulate rider.

The farms gave way. The houses grew. The discrete settlements became more organized, and Armada raced through the outskirts of the city proper. The road was dirt lacking even gravel and could be recognized as a road only because so many feet, wagons and carts, had ground the earth into clay that it could be nothing else. There were more people around the houses and against the road, but Armada ignored them all, racing the center as if she would fly over anything in her path. The road began to rise, and then there were more people on the path. There were carts and horses and many people, and Armada raced around them all. People looked. They shouted, and they called out. They raised fists toward the wild horse and reckless rider who left them in a cloud of dark and dusty earth.

They almost had to stop, approaching the upper city with its great wall of iron and stone. They had to approach the gate, moving among people and horses and carts that did not want to give way. They were surrounded. The people were everywhere, watching, looking at the strange rider. Tahrl could not find his heart, looking up from Armada's back, turning his face to the road and the wall. They would have to pass under the gate. They would have to make their way past the guards. Behind the gate and beyond the wall was the great city. Before them were mansions, houses and homes built of wood and stone. Before them were the homes of the nobles and merchants. Before them was the castle and the Ivory Tower itself. They had to get past the guard. They had to show just cause to enter the grand city. Tahrl had no money. Once upon a time, he could have passed without a thought. The guards would have taken one look at his circlet, and they would have never even asked to see his papers. They would have let him pass without a word.

Tahrl only clung to Armada's back and let her move onward. Her pace was slow. Tahrl remembered the wind, but she had to move carefully before the door, stepping easily. Everybody watching the strange horse and rider. The line of people wanting access to the

## **The Etymology of Fire**

upper city did not move. Armada walked. Tahrl heard nothing but the tap of each foot against the hard earth and dark clay. Beyond the gate, the streets would be stone. They reached for the gate. Guards moving to stop them. Tahrl closed his eyes. A voice cried. People shouted. There were no words. Armada was past them, racing the wind. Tahrl risked a look. He could see people running. Guards reaching for startled horses, struggling to gain their backs. They would be pursued. Tahrl knew without reason that the other horses would never match Armada.

Armada shook, and Tahrl almost fell, gripping; fingers sliding through hair. All in an instant, Tahrl knew. Looking, turning this way and that, Tahrl placed a hand against her side.

“That way,” he tried to say; his voice scorching and burning his throat.

Armada ran, and they took one street and then another. Tahrl looked, studying paths and roads. He tried to ignore the people. They were everywhere, slipping from the street, leaving it empty for the mad horse. Word that strangers had breached the great city was spreading even faster than Armada could run. They had to find one street and one mansion out of all the others before enough soldiers and guards could be organized against them. They might still find sanctuary. They might still reach one street from among all the others before they were found.

At last, they found one path and one road. They reached a convergence of great streets and wide avenues. There were trees. There was even a fountain. Tahrl held tight to Armada, pulling at her mane, and she turned. There were no paths before them. They did not make for the road. They raced for a mansion as grand as any of the others. They reached for a gate and courtyard, and they found themselves in a small court surrounded on all sides by iron and stone. Gates slammed shut behind them. Armada turned, facing the wall, and turned again, moving almost in a complete circle. There was no passage from the court. Guards appeared, slipping from behind plates in the wall that slammed shut behind each man as he entered the court. The men held spears and long swords. While beneath the open sky, crossbowmen took up position, sighting down long quarrels into the court.

Tahrl gripped at Armada’s hair, trying to hold her, trying to sit tall as the men approached. Tahrl looked about him, trying to recognize faces beneath helms and plates of armor. The house guards

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

approached; spear points held toward them. Armada stomped with her forefoot, threatening to rear, and Tahrl knew he would fall. The house guards would strike if he fell. They would drive spear points into Armada's chest, striking between ribs and finding her heart.

"Nath," Tahrl tried to shout, feeling his voice give, finding silence behind his words; he could not breathe. The guards held a circle around them, pushing them against the closed gate. "Where is the gatekeeper? Nath! Where is my cousin?"

One of the guards stepped closer; spear point held first. Armada stomped at the ground. One foreleg jerked back as if she would rear and strike. Tahrl held to her mane; his legs slipped down her back.

"No," Tahrl cried, gripping hair.

The guard lowered his spear and pulled at his helm so that he might see more clearly. The others stepped closer, holding their weapons ready. Crossbowmen did not waiver. Armada tried to push backward into the wall.

"Tahrl?" the guard said; his eyes were gray.

"Hold!"

The gray eyes turned. Guards took half a step back. Tahrl looked to the voice. Nathan stood between two open plates in the wall, and as he stepped through, the gap snapped closed behind him. Tahrl wanted to cry, holding fistfuls of Armada's long hair in his hands. He felt his arm quake. He almost fell from her back. He held his voice.

"What is this?" Nathan said, stepping forward. The house guards did not speak. Three fell back to stand around Tahrl's cousin. Three stood with spears pointed at Armada's heart. "Who are you?"

"It looks like Tahrl Morgan," the gray-eyed guard said.

"It cannot be. Tahrl Morgan is forgotten."

Tahrl felt shards of ice like miniature sling stones strike all through his shoulders and chest. He felt he was biting into a snowball as the ice burned at his heart and lungs.

"I think it is him."

"It cannot be."

"It is," Tahrl managed to say; his throat so raw he thought his words would weep blood. "I have come in desperate need."

"Desperate indeed. The gate is behind you."

"No, I must speak." Tahrl struggled against Armada's back, trying to free himself from her shoulders, and he almost fell. The guard did not move. "I have words that he must hear."

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“You would bring cacophony and riddles into this house? You must speak with him? You once had a voice. The gate is behind you.”

“Tahrl?” The iron plates had opened once more, and another man stood in the gap. “Is that really the lost and forgotten Tahrl Morgan standing at our door?”

“It cannot be, Isaac. Tahrl Morgan is forgotten. I remember no cousin.”

“Then, we have met with a stranger begging our hospitality. He looks so frail and weather worn. We cannot turn away such a one in need.”

“I am this house’s gatekeeper.”

“And, I am this house’s steward, Nathan. Do not forget that. Come forward, stranger,” Isaac said, gesturing to Tahrl.

Tahrl felt long strands of hair slip from between his fingers, and he tried to move, stumbling, almost falling. Armada shivered. The gray-eyed guard stepped forward, catching him; the spear clattering against the stone.

“Easy.”

“You have been on a long journey and traveled far,” Isaac said. “You should rest.”

“I must speak with him,” Tahrl said, feeling the weight in his boots, holding desperately to the guard. “It cannot wait.”

“What is so urgent that you would breach the very walls of the Ivory Tower?”

“No, I must tell him. If I speak now, my words may never reach my grandfather.”

“Need we wonder what he would speak,” Nathan said. “I can guess without a thought.”

“How can you guess if you have forgotten him?” Isaac said. “Very well, your grandfather will want to speak with the forgotten one, anyway.”

The guard tried to help Tahrl walk toward the entrance to the inner court. The others moved toward Armada. She kicked the closed gate with one hind leg.

“Wait,” Tahrl said, remembering that he bore a pack, struggling to pull it from his shoulders.

“The horse will be well cared for,” Isaac said. “You know that.”

“Wait.” Tahrl had the pack open and tried to pull at the robe that the Dryn had given him. “Wait.”

Armada stepped forward as if she could not stand to be surround

## **The Etymology of Fire**

by so many people. She shook her head, pawing at the ground. The guards stepped even closer. Armada reared back on her hind legs and then simply kept going as if she would fall over backward. Armada stood before them. The horse gone. She was still the tallest person in the court. The guards stepping back; not wanting to hold weapons against a magician. The court was quiet. Tahrl had the robe free of the pack and held it out to her. His eyes turned past her bare shoulder and down her arm. Armada accepted the robe in silence and placed it around her shoulders. The only sound was the soft rustling of cloth as it slipped around and enveloped her.

“Well,” Isaac said and nothing more. He looked to Tahrl as if there was nothing else in the world and to look to the guards and the strange magic user would be to admit to things that could not exist, and Tahrl realized that things could still fall apart around them. The archers and crossbowmen still surrounded the small court, and their arms might yet grow tired. It would take only one finger to slip, loosing an arrow, skittering across the court, and the soldiers would fall upon them, wondering at the spell that had enraptured them.

Isaac turned, saying nothing as if he feared his voice or as if speech would free Nath to speak-out against them. Tahrl followed, not wanting the spell to pass or the soldiers to move, and only hoped that Armada followed after him. Isaac reached the wall, and metal plates slipped aside as if they knew the steward approached, revealing the court beyond, moving so easily they made no sound at all. Tahrl followed, feeling his head shake, and he crossed into the court. It was a great open space where many people moved and worked. Traders and merchants would gather. Caravans would be assembled. Goods would be examined and cataloged in the shadow of the mansion proper. The court was never quiet. The open square before the doors and buildings of his family’s mansion was never free of activity. Except there was not a sound to be heard in the great court between the mansion and the gate, and there was no activity as all eyes were turned to those who stepped through the hole in the wall.

Tahrl and Armada walked, following Isaac, surround by the house guard. Around them were traders and merchants, soldiers, guards and household staff. All had been drawn to the sound of strangers at the gate. Intruders had been allowed past the gatekeeper. Tahrl kept his eyes to the mansion; not wanting to look and not wanting

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

to stray. He did not want to recognize faces or eyes. If a voice spoke in wonder or surprise, then the people might fall. They would be swarmed and surrounded. The merchants would not be gentle. The guards would not be kind.

Then, Tahrl's eye did wander, looking for flags, seeking for symbols and banners along the high wall of the great court before the mansion. There were the trappings and colors of his family. There were the badges of the traders and caravans. There were the marks of the house guards and guardians, and then he saw one banner that almost made him fall, stumbling, tripping over his own feet. He grabbed for Armada, feeling her hand on his arm as if she were a great tree that could withstand even the fury of the hurricane. He wanted to turn. He wanted to speak; laugh and shout to the sky, but he said nothing. Fighting to hold still, he did nothing but turn and follow Isaac until they had passed through the court and into the mansion.

The doors were grand, and they entered a long hall of dark and polished wood. Beyond them, Tahrl knew that the court would begin to move. The people would begin to speak and resume the duties of the day, and all of their voices would be filled with the memory of the one who had passed back into his family's home. As the doors closed behind them, Tahrl could not hold still any longer. He leaned into Armada, almost pulling her down, and he tried to find her eyes.

"Did you see the banners?" he said, grinning as if he knew he would die. "Do you know what they mean? Those were the colors of the Earlstien. The Montmorin are here."

"The Montmorin?"

"And, not just any merchant or dreamcatcher from out of our extended family. Gran Malor is here. The Matriarch's voice. Urtha Malor's husband is here."

Armada said nothing, only holding to Tahrl as if she feared he would collapse to the floor.

"Do you know what this means?" Tahrl said, wanting to laugh, wanting to scream. "They will listen. They must. Gran will hear just as my grandfather is being told that we are here. Even as we are being brought to see him, grandfather is learning what happened at the gate. Isn't that right, Isaac?"

"Yes," Isaac said as if he wanted very desperately for them to move as if they must race whispers and echoes.

"Grandfather will know everything even as we arrive. He will



## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

know,” Tahrl whispered, leaning into Armada, watching the hallway grow long, watching light flicker and shadows stretch and grow. He could not remember the passage, and he did not remember how to move. “He must,” Tahrl said as if the words slipped from his throat. People ran and torches burned. He saw men and horses surrounding Moonlight. The people would scream, and they would shout. There would be chaos and there would be rage. “We must hurry.” He pulled at Armada as if she was the weight pulling him down and tried to stand.

“Yes, please, follow me.” Isaac did not look, turning, walking down the long hallway as if they were already after him.

Tahrl would never forget that hallway. It raced his mind even as they followed it, and Tahrl found the path somewhere beneath his feet. There would be a flight of stairs and another hall, and he knew that there would then be a door. Passing through, they would find his grandfather’s study, and his grandfather would be there, standing beside the long table covered with papers or looking out the window to the court below. His grandfather would be there, and Tahrl felt his feet sink into the wood of the floor as if he would never find the strength to take another step.

They did reach the door; Tahrl finding the strength to move somewhere between the moon and the stars where the light did bloom, and Isaac paused with his hand against the old wood of the door. There was silence as if Isaac did not dare speak and could but hope that Tahrl understood the risk and danger he had taken by bringing him to this door. Isaac said nothing as he pushed against the old wood, revealing grandfather’s study. There was the long table with its reports and manuscripts, and there were shelves all along the wall with books and loosely bound journals and more reports. There was the tapestry of grandfather’s grandfather who had first spoken of renewing ties with the Montmorin, and there was the first contract and treaty between the families Morgan and Earlinstien preserved in amber glass. There was the great window overlooking the court, and there was his grandfather, standing tall beside the table and looking as young as Tahrl’s own father.

Tahrl could not move, having passed into the study; Armada pushing him forward. He said nothing, and grandfather only looked to him; his eyes lingering over Tahrl’s face longer than any need should require.

“Please,” Tahrl said and nothing more. He coughed into the back

## The Etymology of Fire

of his hand as if he need do nothing more to free his voice, and then he coughed again as if he might die. A cup was presented to him, and he tasted water sweetened with lime.

“You are here,” his grandfather told him before he could lower the cup.

“Yes,” Tahrl said. “Please, I must tell you. You will not want to hear.”

“Then, perhaps I should begin.”

Tahrl said nothing; water slipping from between his fingers all but forgotten.

“Cavan Luc Vemarian has gathered many men to his banner. They fear the Wraths and Wraiths. Fear them more than graths or troglodytes or even cavern trolls. It was not troglodytes or trolls that attacked one of the settlements before the mountains.”

“Edgewood.”

“Edgewood?”

“Yes.”

“The people fear the Wraths and the Wraiths. They will strike into the mountains. The people and Vemar’s men. I do not know when. But, when they do, the rest will flock to the noble houses that support him. The great houses will side with him regardless of how it will affect trade.”

“And you?”

“I may be reluctant to strain our ties with the Montmorin; however, Earlinstien, Tycraig and Worthy will stand with the noble houses.”

“Or, risk reprisals.”

“Yes.”

“The King is isolated,” Tahrl said, tasting smoke in his lungs and in his hair.

“The King is quite vulnerable. If Vemarian should turn his sights that way, none would oppose him.”

“None?”

“As you say, the King is isolated.”

“No.” He could not breathe. The smoke tasted like blood. “What if Vemarian’s hand was forced this day?”

“Before he can strike the mountains?”

“Yes.”

His grandfather did not answer, looking to Armada; his eyes lingering on the tallest woman that he had ever seen.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

“What have you done, Tahrl?”

Trying not to cough, trying not to choke, he wanted to laugh.

“I have a dragon.”

“What?” If his grandfather had not already been standing, he would have jumped to his feet. He would have rushed around the table and shouted in Tahrl’s face; instead, grandfather only moved as if he was clutching at his heart to keep from falling. He did not speak or ask after the dragon; he only looked at Armada and looked at her and looked at her. He looked as if he had been standing with the guard and had watched a horse slip from its skin to leave a woman before his eyes. He watched her as if he expected at any moment for Armada to grow wings.

“No,” was all that she said.

“This is Alexander’s daughter?”

“Daughter?” his grandfather said as if lost. “Then, he really must be as old as stories. He filled your head with impossibilities.”

“No, Hath Malor did that.”

Grandfather let the words grow cold.

“Where is this dragon?”

“Before the gates of the Ivory Tower. Less than a day’s march if we hurry and Alex kept moving.”

“Alex?”

“There is danger.”

“Yes, there is.”

Tahrl could not breathe for smoke and flame. The doors would be shut; they would be escorted from the city and left with Alexander before the gates. Moonlight could not fly. She would be trapped; she would be dragged from the sky. Nightmare and chaos would course through her blood; she would scream and wrath would vomit from her lungs.

“This is not how I would have planned things,” Tahrl said and then wanted to laugh, hearing his own words, hearing the echo of Alexander’s voice. “We wanted to contact the dragons. Send word to you.”

“Open a dialog?”

“Yes.”

“Exchange gifts and pleasantries? Maybe, establish an embassy?”

“Do not mock.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

“Did you hear a word I said when you first stepped through my door? Do you understand that there is not time?”

“This is not what I would have planned,” Tahrl said, whispering the words as dry as dust. “It is not their fault.”

“It matters not.”

“Perhaps. But, as I said, there is a dragon before the gates. You may have noticed that the Ivory Tower yet stands.”

“None will care. They will hear only that a Wraith has reached the city.”

“I know what makes the dragons rage.”

His grandfather said nothing.

“This is not what I would have planned,” Tahrl said. “We did not bring the dragon. Moonlight found us to warn us.”

“Moonlight?”

“Yes, the dragon wanted to warn us that we were pursued. That Cavan Luc Vemarian’s men were trying to stop us. Because, we know how they corrupt the dragons.”

“You have proof?”

“Oh, yes.”

“So, you are pursued,” grandfather said, turning, looking over the table as if there was a map of the world. “How could you know of pursuit?”

“Moonlight told us.”

“The Wraith?”

“Yes.”

“Wrath told you?”

“Yes.”

Grandfather said nothing, glancing over the table as if he would not look at them, and Tahrl could not move. He wanted to reach for his grandfather, touch him or hold him, but he could not move. He could not even breathe. He could feel the approach of horses, and he could see Moonlight cowering in the dust.

The door opened, and Tahrl turned as if the door had burst and the room shivered and swirled all about him. Gran Malor stood in the gap in the world with his hand lingering upon the old wood.

“Brother,” Gran Malor ap Earlinstien said with his hand against the door.

“Brother,” Tahrl answered.

“They told me that you were here. They told me that the forgot-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

ten son of the house of Morgan had been found. But, I did not believe. I knew that I must see with mine own eyes.”

“It is good to see you as well. I did not believe that any child of the Montmorin was yet welcome by any house of the Kianan.”

“They could not stop me.”

“That is good. That is very good. The world may end, but the Montmorin would still go where they will.”

“Desire and need are one. It matters not if I stand on a road of earth or flame.”

“You stand on a road?” Tahrl looked to the floor between them. “I thought we were in my grandfather’s study.”

“We all stand on a road with many partings, gates and tolls. It is there even if we cannot see it. We stand upon it even when we are lying with our feet in the air.”

“Speak more such words and I shall accuse you of quoting from a minstrel’s stories. But, I know this road you speak of. We are old but estranged friends; never speaking.”

“You speak to the path beneath your feet? Really, Tahrl, you have been lost for far too long.”

“I am yet lost, brother. What turning of the path has brought you to the Ivory Tower?”

“Necessity and need. Yes, both together. With dangers spreading about the mountains, I have had much to say and many people to meet.”

“Then your road has brought you to me.”

“Has it?”

“Brother, I am in great peril and need.”

“Name thy need.”

“There is a dragon before the city.”

“Dragon?”

“Yes.”

Gran did not move as if the world twisted and spun beneath his feet as if he risked being thrown to the floor. He said nothing, looking at Tahrl as if he saw the monster rise like a shadow before the sun to cover the Ivory Tower. Tahrl imagined that Gran heard screams and echoes. Gran saw the people rise. He watched the fire fall. He faced the one Kianan who had spoken against the stories of Wraths and Wraiths.

“The dragon has risked its life coming here,” Tahrl said. “It wanted to warn us that we were pursued by Cavan Luc Vemarian’s men.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

Now, I must protect it from those men or else I risk repaying kindness with death.”

“There is a dragon before the city?” Gran said.

“Yes.”

“Trapped?”

“Yes.”

“So, the creature says,” Tahlr’s grandfather said.

“It speaks?” Gran said, turning. “You have heard it?”

“Only from my lost grandchild’s lips.”

“Can nobody else speak?”

“I can,” Armada said, and they turned to her as if she had appeared like a shadow falling out of the darkness.

Nobody spoke. Gran looked to Armada and said nothing. Tahlr knew what Gran Malor of the Montmorin saw. Armada was a shadow draped in darkness and drifting in light, and she was tall. She was taller than any woman of the Kianan or Montmorin. Tahlr knew that Gran could not be distracted or fooled like the Kianan; the Montmorin knew without the need for thought or reason what stood before him.

“The dragon spoke?” Gran said as if he had been among the Dryn for all of his long life.

“Yes,” Armada said, quietly.

“It is before the Ivory Tower?”

“It will be if my father makes for the road.”

“Your father?”

“Is the songsmith and storyteller Alexander, yes.”

“I know him. I know him well and will have many words with him for never telling me that he has a daughter.”

“Tell him yourself. He is but before the gates.”

“With a dragon,” Gran said, turning. “With a dragon.” He moved slowly, walking toward Tahlr’s grandfather as if thoughts spun and raced the seasons through his mind and he did not want to disturb them before they had traced one hundred years. “This is the fortune we spoke of,” he said to Tahlr’s grandfather as if he did not care that there might be others listening to his words.

“I have my doubts,” grandfather said.

“As do I; but, I believe there is a dragon before the gates and the Ivory Tower yet stands.”

“They will say it is a trick.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“Yes, I know. They will say many things. It corrupts. It seeks to divide.”

“Corrupt?” Tahrl said. “The dragons do not corrupt.”

“What do they do then?” grandfather said.

“The dragons create. They heal. They mend. They are guardians and protectors. They do not spread lies and destruction. That is for the Kianan.”

“Your words and the dreams of a monster are not proof.”

“Proof!” Tahrl could not breathe. He looked to his grandfather and saw nothing. The void took him and left nothing with a voice to stand against the fury and deceit of the Kianan. The soldiers would take the mountains, driving the dragons insane with their arrows and poison, and Tahrl remembered what the Dryn had given him before Armada had taken him. “I have proof,” he said, reaching, struggling, turning around in a circle as he tried to unhook his pack.

They watched him like statues even as he fought the pack free and slammed it against the table. Cloth and leather fought with him as his fingers sought through the pack. He touched slender wood and carved sticks, and then his hand was free, holding the wrapped sticks. The room seemed to grow dark even as the coverings slipped from the edge of one arrow, and then he struck the table. The arrows slid and clattered across the surface, smearing papers with stains so much like ink, and the room seemed to turn cold. Tahrl’s grandfather and Gran Malor looked to the table, watching the light shift and die, watching the sun swirl and shift as if all color and warmth was slipping into the arrowheads. Tahrl wanted to look to Gran. He wanted to watch his grandfather’s eyes, but he could not look away from the fall of stars spread before them.

“Put them away,” his grandfather whispered.

Tahrl trembled as if lost, and he reached across the table, searching for the cloth that had bound deceit and corruption. His hands shook, and the dark midnight made his fingertips burn. He could not move, looking to destruction, feeling it before his eyes. The dragons would roar, and they would rage. Hands holding dark midnight would not shake as arrows would be fitted to bow, and then madness would fly. Tahrl thought of the soldier without a name holding these slender shards of death, and he wondered at the words that had kept him alive.

Armada folded the arrows in their cloths and their wrappings, and Tahrl could not remember her crossing to the table. He did

## **The Etymology of Fire**

not remember her touch at his shoulder as she slipped the hidden destruction back into the pack. She said nothing as she closed the pack, leaving it upon the table with her fingers drifting away, and she said nothing then as she slipped to the floor. Her face struck the edge of the table with a sound like the fall of a sack filled with rocks and mud.

“Armada!” Tahrl was beside her, pulling at her, lifting her head, trying to find her eyes.

She looked to him, saying nothing, and Tahrl remembered the mountains. He remembered Willow’s Point, and he could see nothing but Armada trying not to tremble or limp as she walked. They had spoken nothing. Armada sleeping as if she had died, and he held her now in his arms, remembering long nights in the mountains with nightmares and memories ripping at his shoulder.

“I am weak,” she said, and Tahrl wanted to cry at hearing the hollowness and whispering stillness of her voice.

“What was that?” Gran Malor said, kneeling on the floor beside them as if he wished to help but could not move or risked burning away should he touch them.

Tahrl said nothing, looking to Gran, wanting to scream, wanting him to feel the dragon’s rage. He held Armada and said nothing. He remembered the night, and he remembered the horse that Armada had become. He had touched her. He had held her, gripping so tight they had almost been one. He held her and remembered burning stone. He could not image what power it had taken to make the mountain ruins burn and melt. He knew only that they had lingered at Willow’s Point because of fire and stone, and now they had raced the night to reach his grandfather. He did not know the ground they had covered or what magic it took for Armada to slip her shape and race the moon. He knew only that he had unsheathed the arrows, and Armada had needed to save him again.

“Let us help her,” Tahrl said.

“Yes,” Gran said as if he had just been shaken from a dream or dark nightmare. “There are cushions in the corner.”

“Armada, can you stand?”

“I do not,” she said, trailing words like wisps of smoke from the corner of her mouth, and then she seemed to realize that Tahrl held her. She fought to stand; fingers digging into his shoulder. He almost fell. Gran was there, and Armada found her feet. They moved



## **The Etymology of Fire**

to the corner, finding the cushion, and Armada slipped into it as if she was made of mud.

“Armada!” Tahrl said. “I am sorry. Are you well?”

She said nothing, glaring at him, and Tahrl could not hold her gaze. He found his grandfather at the door, speaking with Isaac, and then the steward disappeared.

“They will bring tea and wine,” grandfather said, moving to stand before them. “Do you need anything? There is bread. I think there is cheese.”

“Nothing, thank you,” Armada said.

Grandfather turned, moving back to the table, looking at the pack and the nightmare it held.

“So, the Kianan are deceived,” he said.

“Yes.”

“The dragon gave you these?”

“No, they belong to one of Cavan Luc Vemarian’s men. He is with Alexander before the Ivory Tower. You can ask him yourself why he goes so armed into the Graystone Mountains.”

“One of his soldiers,” grandfather said without looking at them, and his eyes were only for the table as if it held all the secrets of the universe. Grandfather lingered over the pack and the dark arrows it contained, and his fingers drifted over paper and wood as if he might reach for the cloth and leather of the pack. “It’s not enough”.

“No.” The word was a sigh, escaping from the secret places of Tahrl’s heart.

“Not enough?” Gran said.

“They will not want to believe. They can deny the truth of one voice.”

“It is not one voice,” Gran said, standing.

“It is not enough. Have you forgotten all that I have said? Have you forgotten why you are lost, Tahrl? Why you fled the Ivory Tower? We face the raging ocean. I stand on the shore day by day, wondering if the storm should choose this day to smash us to pieces.”

Tahrl could not speak.

“They are not so united as you might think,” Gran said. “Fear drives them, yes. It consumes them, but they are not so bound to the one who claims to protect them. Give them reason to doubt Cavan Luc Vemarian. Give them cause to turn once more to their King.”

“The noble houses are united behind Vemarian. They fear nothing.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“They fear the great houses. They fear merchants and traders. They fear you. It is why they are united.” Gran Malor paced slowly toward Tahlr’s grandfather as if he knew he faced the wild ocean or raging forest fire. “Remind them why they fear you,” he said. “You say that it is not enough. You say there is nothing to be done, but I see it in your eyes. How to use this deceit wreathed in old cloth upon your table to crack the noble houses.”

“Perhaps,” grandfather said and nothing more. His gaze drifted, turning, and he looked to the window as if he sought light or moon or storm.

Tahlr wanted to breathe, finding nothing in his chest, feeling his lungs ache and burn, but he could do nothing. With a hand touching almost to Armada resting as if half-asleep on the cushion, he could only look to Kianan and Montmorin standing before him silent as the midnight sky. They faced each other as if they were strangers meeting for the first time and wondering if the other held the future or a sword.

“Then, I will force the issue,” Gran said, turning, crossing to the door as if nothing could stop him. “Law,” he said, and Tahlr could see another Montmorin standing just beyond the door. “Gather the guard. We are leaving. Only what we must carry. Arm them for battle. I want them ready in less than an eighth. Tell them it is to be a hard march to a stand-up fight against Kianan horse and veterans of the Troglodyte Defense.”

Law stood frozen but only for a moment; his gaze sweeping the room.

“Yes,” Law said as if he had been struggling against bonds and was suddenly free. Without another word, he was gone, and Gran Malor turned back to the room.

“What would you do?” Gran said, facing Tahlr’s grandfather. “Would you have me face the Kianan alone, brother?”

“There is still time.”

“Time?” Gran crossed the room to stand beside Tahlr and Armada. “When you face Cavan Luc Vemarian and the noble houses, you speak only for yourself and your family. I speak for the Montmorin.”

For one moment that seemed to last for all eternity, grandfather looked as if he might stumble and fall with the weight of all life’s souls pulling him to the ground. His fingers trembled, brushing, tapping against the table, and then he stood as if the chains were gone.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“Isaac!”

The door opened.

“Our Montmorin guests ready for a swift departure and long battle. Give them whatever assistance they might need. And, ready the house for a siege. I fear I cannot spare you any men,” grandfather said this to Gran Malor. “When word of the dragon spreads, the noble houses will use it as cause to strike against the family Morgan. Isaac, raise the white flag.”

“Sir?”

“Yes, the white flag, and send word that I request an audience with the King. Urgently.”

“Yes, sir,” Isaac said, glancing once to the room, seeing Tahrl and Gran Malor and the strange magician slumped on a cushion, seeming to pause for that one moment, and then he was gone.

Tahrl shivered, feeling his face burn, feeling fire and ice race his skin. All the great and noble houses feared the white flag. There were men posted always watching for the flags and signals that would be raised by the various houses as they passed news and information one to another. They would read and study and add their own voices to the conversation. Depending on the message of the flags, word would be sent to the various heads of households asking how the signals should be answered. The white flag was a challenge demanding answer. There was no time to send for instructions; only time to send a runner that such a flag had been raised. Every flagman had standing instructions how he should respond if he saw the white, and he would raise red or gold depending on the house that had raised white.

“You have my answer, brother,” grandfather said, turning to Gran Malor. “You must hurry if you would escape the upper city before it is locked down. There will be blood in the streets by nightfall.”

“Yes, we must all prepare,” Gran said as if he would turn back to the door but did nothing. “It has been long since Montmorin last stood against Kianan. Many have harbored resentment on both sides. I fear such ill feelings will soon be vented. It is good that we do not stand alone.” Gran turned, looking to Armada. “Tahrl, will you be ready?”

“I do not know,” he said from Armada’s side, remembering the mountains and Alexander’s daughter shivering as if she might fall. He wanted to reach for her, taking her hand and holding it with all

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

of his might, but he could not move. He could not touch her, and she said nothing.

“While the hospitality of this house will soon be lessened, Alexander’s daughter is most welcome to remain here,” grandfather said. “I can assure you that for as long as the walls hold she will come to no harm here.”

“Thank you,” Armada said as if she could not speak and had to force the words past a thousand years of decay. “When I have but rested, I shall stand by your guards and defend the door.”

“No.”

“You are a guest.”

“If the noble houses of the Kianan will rise against you as you say, they will field magicians,” she said. “You will find my assistance most welcome, I think.”

“That is true,” grandfather said. “The noble houses have always disliked the house of Morgan because of our ties to the Montmorin and because of my grandson. The white flag will rally them against us, and they will send magicians to end the fight quickly.”

“They will be surprised.”

“I will have to take your word for that.”

“And, what shall we find beyond the Ivory Tower, Tahlr,” Gran said. “The minstrel Alexander in the company of a Wraith? What surprises face us?”

Tahlr could not look to Gran Malor. He struggled for words, losing them between his teeth; his eyes lost to Armada. They could not see her, imagining that she was nothing more than a rogue magician. They would guess. Gran Malor already danced around words, fearing the thunder and storm would break the support of Tahlr’s grandfather.

“The dragon is guarded,” he finally said, looking to the wall.

“Is it?”

“As we have said, Alexander will make for the road, staying far back so as not to be noticed unless you are looking for him.” Tahlr closed his eyes. Armada said nothing. “There are others to protect them. Friends to Armada. Sisters, if you will but not of blood. Even Alexander lacks the time for so many children. They protect Alexander. They watch over the soldier who yields those arrows. They guard the dragon. Not enough. Only twenty. They will fall before Cavan Luc Vemarian’s men.”

“That is interesting,” Gran said.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“Twenty more like Alexander’s daughter here?”

“Not exactly,” Tahrl said. “Few if any are magic users like Armada.”

“Twenty soldiers. On foot?”

“Yes.”

“Not enough to stand against twenty of Vemarian’s horsemen.”

“We must hurry,” Gran said.

“Yes, we must all prepare,” grandfather said. “The flag will have been raised by now.”

“Yes,” Tahrl said but could not move. He looked to Armada, wanting to reach her, stretching out long fingers and touching her arm as if she was glass. She turned toward his touch, looking as if she had not slept in a quarter turn of the moon, and Tahrl wanted to cry. He wanted to fall into her, taking her into his embrace, but he did nothing only touching her arm with fingers sliding down to grip her hand.

“Go,” she said.

“Yes,” he whispered, wanting to say otherwise, feeling the word against his teeth. “Watch yourself,” he said, standing, letting his fingers drift away as if he might never find her again. Turning, he looked to Gran Malor. “Let us go.”



*The court was quiet. The court that had never before in all of Tahrl’s memory been lost to sound and voices was as silent as the midnight sky. There had always been people and traders and tradesmen around and about the grand court between the mansion and the gate. There were always visitors and family and honored guests. There was the guard and household staff. There were always packs and packhorses and caravans, and there were always goods to be taken to market. The court before the Morgan family estate was always full and busy and loud. It was never quiet. The people never moved as if they were waiting for the sky to fall. Tahrl watched them. From the back of a horse that had been provided by his grandfather, Tahrl watched the people and tradesmen. He followed them with his eyes as they worked with such frantic but strangely quiet activity as if they felt the weight of the world all about them.*

It was like watching a dream unfold as the people moved and the guard gathered. The people worked, locking away trades and goods, stabling horses, sealing windows, gates and doors, and they moved

## **The Etymology of Fire**

all this time without words, speaking only when necessity dictated some word or command. The guards formed groups and ranks as if they knew exactly where to go without needing to be told. The Kianan household guard moving to prepare the mansion for a siege. The Montmorin guard preparing to escort Gran Malor ap Earlinstien far from the safety of the mansion. They probably didn't even know why they were preparing to move or where they were preparing to go. They were all ten and twenty year veterans of the trade routs and caravans. Guarding Gran Malor was an honor they had sought for all of their lives. They would go where he commanded. They would fight any who tried to harm him. It made no difference that they would stand against Kianan soldiers to protect a monster. It might even make them more eager. Like the Dryn, they too must wonder how long before the Kianan turned on them.

At last, the guard was ready. At last, Gran Malor ap Earlinstien was before them. The guard would march. Tahrl and Gran Malor would ride, and then they abandoned the court, moving out through the gate. The Kianan guard watching from the walls, but there was yet no danger. It was too soon for the noble houses to have mustered against the family Morgan. The houses and families would be watching and waiting. They would be wondering why Tahrl's grandfather had chosen to raise such a flag of open conflict as the white. The houses would want to see how alignments played out and how the King would respond. Seventeen houses had already declared their opposition to Morgan while only five had chosen to stand with them. The street before the Morgan family estate was empty. The only sound was that of the Montmorin guard. Tahrl looked back to the mansion, wanting to study the defenses, wishing to view the house guard. He saw soldiers behind his eyes filling the square and facing the mansion. They would bring fire and ladders and jumping catapults. They would face the mansion. They would burn it and tear down the walls all because he had returned. Armada would die because he had wanted to speak with dragons.

Tahrl looked back to the city. Streets were empty. Gates and doors were closed and bound. From the top of a wall or the roof of a building house guards would be watching the progress of the Montmorin. Beyond the random guard, banners and signals fluttered and flew. Flags were raised; others were lowered. Tahrl could not hope to follow such conversations, but he knew the Montmorin guard appearing to abandon the family Morgan had to be dominat-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

ing the fluttering conversation. Tahrl looked to the mansions and the empty streets, and he waited for the gate and the wall. So little time had passed since Armada had forced their way into the upper city. The gate would still be closed, and the city watch would still be holding the way against any who might wish to pass. Tahrl imagined the guard holding the gate against them, and he knew that they might be turned back to his grandfather's home. Tahrl would scream, and he would shout as the gates held against them. The Montmorin would push, and they would beat at the door. They would struggle against the city guard, and they would fall. The city guard holding strong while soldiers and men poured out of the surrounding mansions to defend the city. The Montmorin would be slaughtered, and the noble houses would need no more excuse to fall upon the Morgan family mansion. Out beyond the Ivory Tower, the Dryn would wait, wondering what had become of Tahrl and Armada, and then the horsemen would fall upon them. Alexander would be killed, and the dragon would be driven to ravage and rage all because the gate might be held against them.

Tahrl could not breathe as they approached, and the gates remained closed. The city guard would recognize him as the one who had breached the wall, and they would not let him pass. The Montmorin approached, and the guard would never let them pass. Tahrl watched the signs and he studied the flags as they drew closer. Somewhere behind them, the flags did change. Somewhere maybe as far away as the Ivory Tower itself, the message had been given to open the gate and let the Montmorin pass. Tahrl felt his heart; he tasted life and blood as they passed the gate and entered the lower city. There were people here; there were always people. They wanted access to the upper city even if the gate was bared to them, and they were prepared to wait until the end of time if that is what it took for them to find a way. They were simply not going to wait quietly.

The people watched. They studied the Montmorin guard appearing from out of the upper city almost as if they had been expelled. Eyes followed them, and the muttering of voices teased the air. Shouts were raised to the locked gates, falling away quickly as they could find no purchase there. The people would turn to the Montmorin, following them, watching them, wondering why the alien people had abandoned the Ivory Tower, and Tahrl knew that these people surrounding them were who Vemarian sought to sway. These

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

people feared troglodytes and cavern trolls and the twisted graths. These people believed that the dragons raged. It would take so little to turn them. Even as Tahrl rode among the Kianan, feeling their eyes, hearing their voices, it would take but a word, and the people would be upon them. So, Tahrl left the city, feeling it fall away from him, looking to the streets becoming dirt and dust. The houses and buildings growing farther apart until they followed streets no more, and it was only the path and open road before them.

Somewhere before him was Alexander and Moonlight. Somewhere beyond the road there were Dryn. Beyond streets and houses and farms, Alexander had said he would be waiting for word of his return, but Tahrl found only fields and tall grasses. He looked, turning this way and that, searching the edge of the path and the road. He did not know. He could not guess how close Alexander would dare bring the dragon to the Ivory Tower. They might be seen; they would be seen, and the alarm would sound. Tahrl looked, searching, moving always forward, and the Montmorin would follow. He could feel them, hear them, breathe them. The Montmorin would follow him forever simply because he had asked, and they did follow him into folly and ruin. He did not know how to find Alexander, and it was only time until the Montmorin accepted that he had lead them blind into the fields. Armada would have known. Without worry or doubt, she would have pointed over the fields of old wheat and tall grass, and she would have said that they would find her father there. Armada was not there. She had fallen; her head striking the table. The echo of her chin against the polished wood filled him.

He could not look. The Montmorin were behind him. The Kianan were behind him, watching and waiting. He could feel their eyes as if they did watch him from the city, knowing he would expose the monster, and they would come. They would destroy the dragon that had only ever been their guardian and protector. They would consume rage if only he would lead them to wrath and destruction. Tahrl closed his eyes, not wanting to see, not wanting to loose Wrath and unleash Wraith. Armada would have known. She would have faced wrath and destruction, knowing it would consume her, but still she would have faced it. She had grasped darkness and rage. She had touched it and fallen. She had tempered it, knowing it would shatter her, as they had watched unable to move, as they had simply studied the corrupting arrow as if they had reached the end of days. Tahrl looked to the fields and the grass, and he followed



## **The Etymology of Fire**

where Armada would have pointed; even though, all the host of the Kianan could have been watching.

Tahrl found Alexander, and he found the Dryn deep in the fields and far back from the road. Tahrl went ahead of the others so the Dryn would not think they were set upon by the Kianan, but still they met him with bows and long spears appearing from out of the fields of tall grass almost as if they had been invisible. Tahrl raised a hand to hold all still, saying nothing even as he heard the raising of Montmorin weapons and arms behind him, and just for a moment, he saw it. Dryn and Montmorin falling upon each other and turning the fields red without ever knowing that they were there to protect each other. In the next moment, Alexander was before the others, and the Dryn lowered their swords and their bows.

“Where is Armada?” Alexander said as if nothing else mattered and a score of Dryn did not face twice that many Montmorin with drawn sword and raised spear.

Tahrl did not answer; he could not answer, feeling the words crash against his teeth as Armada had cracked her face against the wood.

“Where is she?” Alexander said, again.

“Safe,” Gran said from beyond Tahrl’s shoulder. “She is in the house of Morgan ap Morin and no hurt shall come to her there.”

“She is hurt,” Alexander said, and around him, bows and spears were raised from the earth once more. “You try not to say so but your words reveal themselves.”

“She is not hurt,” Gran said. “Not injured or wounded in any way with the exception maybe of her pride. She was exhausted by her trial to reach the house of Morgan as Tahrl tells me. I saw her, and she needs no more than rest and sleep. Do you think I would leave your daughter’s side if I doubted her safety? You must remember me better than that, Alexander. We are as close as family.”

This time it was Alexander who said nothing, and the bows did not waiver or fall.

“I am sorry, Alex,” Tahrl said, surprising himself with his words. “It is my fault. I had to convince them. I revealed the arrows. Armada concealed them. I did not think. I did not realize. It was so much to ask of her after the journey to the tower.”

“It is so much like her,” Alexander said, and the Dryn spears and bows disappeared. “She gives all of her heart without thought as to what little she may be saving for herself. Fool. Reckless child.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“She will be fine.”

“Yes, if only she will stay, but I am sure that circumstances will not encourage this.”

“Grandfather raised the white flag.”

“Did he now? Really?” Alexander looked past them as if he could see over all the fields and tall grass to the Ivory Tower. “That is unexpected. Most unexpected. How many stand with him?”

“Not enough. Five.”

“Seven,” Gran said.

“Seven? I counted only five.”

“There will be seven by now, and twenty-one against.”

“They will need Armada,” Alexander said. “If only she is given time enough to rest.”

“What of yourselves?” Gran said. “I was promised to be introduced to a dragon.”

“You were not promised in vain. A dragon I can deliver but not now. I could not risk her this close to the city. We shall be discovered. We want to be discovered. Daena, Lyncia and Jacintha are watching over Moonlight far from here. We must do what we can to keep them safe.” Alexander said nothing more as if the words would fall like dead things remembering only the forgotten light and dark nightmare. “There is one other we could introduce you to,” he said. “The reason we are here.”

“The one who wielded the arrows? Yes, that one I would meet.”

“That one I can provide; although, I would not expect much by way of answers. You will see.” Alexander turned, speaking to the Dryn in words that Tahrl did not understand, and the soldier was revealed.

They held him still bound and gagged as if he had been shackled for so long that he would not know how to stand on his own or even find the voice to speak. The man stood without looking as if it had been some time since he had seen anything more than shadows and fog.

“Yes, I understand,” Gran said, slipping from the back of his horse and moving to stand before the soldier. “May he speak?”

Alexander did not answer, looking between Kianan and Montmorin as if he half expected Gran Malor to turn on him for holding the soldier so bound. Alexander only waved his hand, and the Dryn slipped the bond from the soldier’s mouth.

“What have you done, sir?” Gran said to the soldier who looked

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

as if he might choose never more to speak. The man looked to Dryn and Montmorin as if the binding had been taken from his eyes instead of from his mouth, and for that moment, Tahrl wondered if the man still had a voice with which to speak.

“Nothing but the truth,” the man said; his voice little more than a rasp of breath.

“What truth?”

“The truth that you do not wish to believe. That the monster- that despoiling thing does not wish you to see. Blind. You are blind.”

“To what?”

“That thing would destroy you,” the solider said, pulling at the bonds that only a moment before had been the only thing holding him up, and he glanced back over his shoulder as if he knew where the dragon was hidden beyond the fields and tall grass. “The Wraths will come. The Wraiths will fall upon the Ivory Tower.”

“They are here, I think.”

The soldier pulled suddenly as if the world burned and he must escape his chains of fire. The Dryn held him, pulling the slack from his bonds, and he almost fell. Standing, he could not fall.

“No, not like this,” he said. “Do not mock. They will come to blacken the sky and darken the tower. The King will fall.”

“You have seen this?” Tahrl said. Nobody spoke. “With your own eyes, you have seen? What I have seen has encompassed truth and illusion. I know which is true. Do you? Who told you what is true?”

“I have been told things,” the solider said with hunched shoulders and folded back as if he would scream as if the world was a great weight forced upon him that he fought to resist. “I have seen with my own eyes that which I have revealed with my own hands.”

“So, you reveal truth?”

“With my very hands.”

“How do you know?” Tahrl said, remembering Armada gripping an arrow like a thriving thing that thrashed and gripped at her. He had watched her fall without even a voice to raise, but now it burned. “How can you know you reveal truth instead of spreading illusions and lies?”

“Because I was given these things by people who have seen.”

“What? The truth?” Tahrl said. There was silence. “Someone spoke the truth? Who spoke? Was it Cavan Luc Vemarian?”

“You say that almost as if it were a lie.”

“Do you not think so?”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

“You are blind! Blind! The Wraiths will destroy us! The Wraiths corrupting everything! Even now. Even now, they turn us against each other.” As he whispered these last words like dry rasps of wind beneath the sun, the soldier held forth his bound and swollen hands. “Even now we are but blind.”

“So blind am I that I imagine the poison and corruption you wield? Poison corrupts, did you not know? It does not reveal. It corrupts.”

“It is not poison.”

“Really.”

“It is reflection. I pull down illusion with these weapons and my own hands. Revealing truth.”

“What truth?”

“The Wraiths will destroy us.”

“That is truth?”

“Yes.”

“This is what they hide behind the illusion of peace and friendship?”

“Yes.”

“They would consume us,” Gran Malor said as if it was a threat. Tahrl turned as if he had forgotten that the Montmorin stood so close at hand. The soldier did not even breathe. “So, you cast your arrows, revealing truth.”

“No, I have failed,” the soldier said. “You are yet blind.”

“Then, I am blind for all I can see are those who still call Montmorin and Dryn savages and monsters. When will I feel an arrow in my back? When will my truth be turned to illusion and corruption?”

The soldier said nothing, looking only to his toes.

“I would face illusion with my eyes,” Gran said, turning to Alexander. “I would see a dragon.”

“You will do more than see a dragon,” Alexander said. “I promise you words with one, but first I must promise you pain and blood. Are you prepared to stand against Kianan soldier and horse?”

“We are here,” Gran said.

“Then let us draw the Kianan down upon us.”

Montmorin and Dryn moved back toward the road. They stopped with the path and the Ivory Tower before them and began to prepare for Vemarian’s horsemen. Montmorin and Dryn worked side-by-side, raising spikes and digging long spears into the earth. They looked to the road even as they worked, watching for sign of

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

horse or rider, and watching for sign of merchant or farmer. Anyone might be upon the road and might take notice of the strange group of men and women preparing for an attack as if they were deep in the mountains or on the far trails waiting for the bandits and raiders to come. So close to the city, none need prepare such defenses. Kianan passing on the road might take word to the Ivory Tower, and the city guard or the King's own men might decide to learn why such defenses were necessary.

Tahlr watched the road even as he worked, looking for spark or trail or dust, searching for anything that might tell of the approach of horse or soldier. There was little enough he could do even as he refused to do nothing. The Montmorin were all veterans of the trade routes. The Dryn were survivors of the troglodyte-infested mountains. They knew how to prepare barricades and walls out of the open plains where no defense seemed possible, but still they faced two dozen horsemen. Their thicket of thorns would be breached no matter how tightly they drew the circle. Horsemen would turn this way and that, looking for sign of the monster, discovering too late that the dragon was nowhere to be found. All the horsemen would care about would be Moonlight. They need but prick her with one of their poison arrows and everything would be lost. They might not even need that. Vemarian could go to the city and say that he had discovered a dragon so close to the Ivory Tower. It would not matter that the dragon could not be found. It would not matter that the creature did not rage. Fear of the monster would be enough. Hysteria would take them. The Kianan would flow from the city. They would rage, and they would burn. Moonlight could not hide. The Kianan would find her without even knowing that she was there.

Tahlr stopped, looking to Alexander, saying nothing. The others did not stop. Voices and words of Dryn and Montmorin sweeping all about him almost as if it did not matter that Dryn did not understand Montmorin and Montmorin did not understand Dryn. They worked, and they understood each other without a grasp of language. Tahlr did nothing. Alexander found him, watching him.

"What do you hope?" Tahlr said, and Alexander chuckled as if he must resist the urge to laugh.

"Strangely enough, I do not hope," Alexander said. "I do not need it. I do not want it. I have no use for it."

"The Kianan will not listen."

"Oh, they will. But, first they will fear, and then they will rage."

## **The Etymology of Fire**

And, then they will grow tired of rage. It leaves one so drained. So empty. But, fear and rage will sustain them as it has sustained them for so many years because- I do not know why. Because they know nothing else, I guess. Because nobody has stood and said that it need not be that way.”

“Voices are lost,” Tahrl said, biting at the words, tasting blood. “Words are drowned out.”

“I know,” Alexander said. “I don’t pretend to have answers. I tell stories and sing songs. I carry music for any that I can find to listen. I spin and weave and dance. I almost said just then that I bring hope. I do not know. I tell stories without answers. Only questions. Only seeking life. I would live. I would die to live. I would have you live.”

“Now, you will say that I am lost.”

“No, you did.”

“Because I fled the Ivory Tower? Because I failed to change the Kianan? Because I was drowned? My voice lost?”

“But, you spoke. Your words drowned out because everyone was afraid to be the first to listen. No, each fearing that he would be the only one to listen. The others turning on him. Yes, that sounds better. Almost believable, in fact.”

“Almost.”

“The people look to those they feel are stronger. They turn to those they feel can protect them. We need them. The lords and heads of families. We need the King to speak.”

“Tried that.”

“Yes, but things happen in their own time. Words spoken. Words drowned. Such words leave traces and echoes. Look. I see Montmorin and Dryn working together. The House of Morgan ap Morin has raised the white flag.”

“It is not enough. The House of Morgan ap Morin shall fall.”

“Perhaps. You are funny, Tahrl. The House of Morgan shall fall? But, you went to them anyway.”

“No.”

“Your grandfather is prepared to stand against the combined might of the noble houses because you spoke to him.”

Tahrl looked from the earth and the grass to the Montmorin and Dryn raising together a thicket of thorns. He looked past them, and the road stretched as far as the eye could see. At the edge of the mountains, the path was cut, twisting and spinning as it lost all

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

semblance of order. One path curved around the Graystone Mountains in an arc that reached to Cavan Luc Vemarian's home. There, the soldiers trained. There, the dragons were destroyed. The other path wandered and slipped about the eastern edge of the forest before the mountains. A small town rested there in the shadow of the forest. People had slept quietly before the cry of wrath and rage had shocked them from sleep. The path was split, and horsemen now traveled that road, looking for a dragon, looking for him.

"I do not want to hope," he said.

"No?"

Tahlr could not breathe.

"We care nothing for hope," Alexander said. "Desperation drives us, I suppose. Certainly, not despair. We must do something- what? I do not know. We must because the alternative is unthinkable."

"Such is a poor man's excuse for hope."

Alexander said nothing, turning as if he saw the passing of horses, looking to the road and the long path. He stood with his back to the Ivory Tower as if he could not face it, and Tahlr knew that Alexander must be thinking of his daughter trapped within the house of the family Morgan. The men and soldiers of the noble houses would come, and they would strike the home of Tahlr's grandfather. The world would burn.

"We should have stayed longer at Greenhaven," Alexander said, looking to Tahlr. "You could have been happy even if only for a little while. Ede could have shown you a great many things."

"Alex."

"Not like that. No. She did not need you. Not like that. Not now, anyway. And, you are a little young. Her daughter is older than you."

"Alex, you said you did not want to speak of grandchildren."

"True; but, there is so much we could have done to temper your cares and lift your pain before the mountains swallowed us. Did Ede introduce you to anyone or take you to those who could have shown you kindness?"

"Alex."

"I know; I should not ask. Out of respect, I did not eavesdrop then, and I should not pester you with such questions now. What is done is done. What was left undone is nevermore."

"Why such words now?"

"I would have you die to live."

"And, I do not wonder that you care nothing for hope."

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“No, you do not hear me, and I would not speak more plainly. Simple words sound stupid and are very often ignored. But, people very often speak as if reciting a speech because that is how they know it to be done in stories. The problem being that speeches put people to sleep. I should know. I am a storyteller.”

“So, you hope I will speak for the dragons believing that they might not be destroyed.”

“Or risk despair. Something like that, yes.”

“You said you have no use for hope, and yet you carry it wrapped in silk at your shoulder.”

“Yes,” Alexander said; a hand drifting absently to the silver flute.

“Poor man’s excuse for hope.”

“Yes.”



*The riders found them in the twilight of the day with the sun fading and the shadows growing all around them. There had not been time. The fence and thicket were not complete. The Dryn and Montmorin had known that they would be left with hollows and weaknesses in the wall, and they had prepared as best they could with the sliver of time that had been given to them. Tahrl did not know who had been the first to notice the approaching riders. One had looked and then another and then another. They all knew the sound, recognizing the distant thunder of horses; they felt the earth tremble and shake. They took to their tasks. Montmorin raising hooks and long spears; Dryn spreading arrows and raising bows. Tahrl held still, looking, watching; his hand upon Quicksilver as if he might hurl the blade and blind all of their enemies with its light.*

The horsemen were upon the road, trailing dust, and they traveled with a great thunder that shook Tahrl almost from his feet. The horses raced, and they would find him. They traveled so quickly that they must see nothing but the road. The Montmorin thicket was too far back from the path and too obscured by the tall grass for it to be noticed. It had been silly to hide Moonlight so far from the Ivory Tower and to stand the Dryn and Montmorin as decoy. They would not be noticed, and the horsemen could only travel on to raise their alarm. Alexander could have brought Moonlight to the very foot of the tower, and none would have noticed. Only somebody did notice. The horsemen turned, leaving the road, turning back toward the thicket as if they would envelop it. Someone down the line of horses



## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

must have been spotting and at last must have noticed the Montmorin and Dryn. He would have signaled to the others, and the line would have been broken. It turned back, bending upon itself. Tahlr wanted to fall away; he would be lifted by the crash of horses, and he would be swept into the sky like a feather before the wind.

Montmorin raised spears like a wall, saying nothing; they had fought raiders and bandits so many times before on the trails. More Montmorin raised great wooden shields like canopies that would protect against arrows and stones. The horsemen came on. The light fading. Everything was bronze and dirty red dust. The horsemen circled, moving in a great wave around the thicket; Montmorin shifting and moving and turning spears. Horses tightened their grip, moving round and round the Dryn and Montmorin wall, keeping them disorientated, probing for weakness. At any moment, the first horse would jump, trying to clear the thicket. Spears would bend. A gap would form, and the other riders would push, driving the thicket asunder.

Tahlr watched the horsemen, turning, looking, trying to follow the spin and motion as he waited for the end which did not come. The horses slowed, drawing ever more closely to the Montmorin, and then they stopped all at once without sound or command to break the tread of horses against the earth. Riders turned, looking at Montmorin and Dryn, and spears were raised to point to the center of the circle. One man rose above his saddle as if he might stand upon his horse's back so that he could better study the circle, and Tahlr knew him. Without sight, without sound, Tahlr would have guessed who stood at the head of this band of riders. There could be only one choice. It seemed so long ago that Tahlr had stood facing the fire among the ruins of Edgewood, but he would never forget Cavan Luc Vemarian.

"Montmorin of Earlinstien," Vemarian shouted from his perch atop his horse. "What brings you so before the walls of the Ivory Tower?"

There was nothing. Horses shifted and stomped their feet. Soldiers settled their spears, watching the circle, keeping their eyes upon the center. There was not a word spoken.

"I am the fire against the darkness," Vemarian said. "I am the leader of the troglodyte defense. The welfare of the Kianan and the King is my concern, and I ask you why you stand before the Ivory Tower so prepared for war?"

## **The Etymology of Fire**

The answer was rising; Tahrl could feel it. He knew that Gran Malor would not stay silent. Gran would speak, and all would be muddled or lost. Vemarian was not looking for words with a Montmorin. He was seeking a dragon, and he would cut down all who stood with it. Tahrl looked about, turning from Montmorin to Dryn, and he took an arrow, pushing his way toward the rider. Dryn and Montmorin eyed him not wanting to shift ground and make a space for him to stand so close to the enveloping horses. Tahrl held the arrow above his head like a brand of fire to stand among the thicket of spears; his fist gripping so hard that the arrow might break and his fingers would burn.

“Answer this, deceiver!” Tahrl said, shouting as if his voice would crack, holding the arrow high. “Answer this, liar! Answer this, corrupter! Slaughterer! Murderer!”

Vemarian stood. The horses silent. Riders did not move. Montmorin ready with shield and spear. Bows held waiting to speak.

“Answer yourself,” Vemarian said. “Answer to the city guard.”

Cavan Luc Vemarian dropped back into his saddle and pulled at his horse’s reins. The horse moved, almost rearing back, almost tossing Vemarian to the ground, and then horse and rider were gone, making for the Ivory Tower. The other horsemen followed, uncurling from around Montmorin and Dryn until there was nothing left but the dust and roar of their passage.

The light was fading, and Tahrl could not see. He shook, holding the arrow, feeling his fingers tremble, and the others did not move. He felt the forest of bright spears all around him holding still as if the storm were only momentarily silent and the fury of the wind would break upon them at any moment, but the horses were gone. The riders did not return. Tahrl stood, watching the light drift to dark, and then he saw moonlight shimmering off of the long neck of the Ivory Tower like silver midnight or white lightning.

The forest shifted, slipping away, and the Montmorin moved, letting the circle spread like a coiled thread finding peace. They began to pull at the thicket and uproot the long spears that they had labored so hard to prepare. The Dryn worked with them without a word needing to be said as if they had trained together all of their lives, but Tahrl did not watch them. He could not take his eyes from the great swaths of long grass that had been trampled into the dust by the passage of Vemarian’s horses. They stood in a pattern out of forever so much like a split in the world to encircle the Dryn and the

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

Montmorin. The Kianan made such patterns in the dust, and they would flatten all of the world if that one liar and deceiver could not be silenced. Without bothering to look away from the shadow of the Ivory Tower, Tahrl knew that Alexander stood at his side.

“If only it were over,” Alexander said, looking to the far tower in the slender moonlight.

“Such things are too much to wish for,” Tahrl said. “We may only hope for time.”

“He will need answers. That is what saved us, I think. He cannot know if we have been to the Ivory Tower. He cannot know even if we have a dragon. He will make first for his allies among the noble houses.”

“Yes.”

“The white flag will confuse him, I hope.”

“It just might make it harder for him to incite the people to hunt down a lone dragon, but we cannot hope for such things.”

“We must move.” Alexander turned, and Tahrl followed him, dragging his gaze away from the far tower reaching forever into the sky. Gran Malor stood among the Montmorin and the Dryn, watching outcast and minstrel as if he might say much but held quiet. “I thank you,” Alexander said, stepping toward Gran. “If it had not been for your guard.”

“We do only what is right,” Gran said. “Any who would not have come to your aid is not family. But, I have not done all in simple charity. I seem to recall being promised a rare meeting.”

“On that note, I may indulge you, and you shall not be disappointed. But, you must forgive me my lack of thanks and gratitude for there is still much I must ask of you this night. You who have already suffered a long march and preparations for battle must now march once more and far from the walls of the Ivory Tower if you would meet my other companion of the road.”

“Please, Alexander, we are Montmorin. We are veterans of the trade wars. We travel far and through much hardship only to be met by ax and blade. This day and night? This is nothing.”

“You may not think so come morning.”

“I think I will,” Gran said. “This is necessary. The Kianan are falling. Fear chases them like an avalanche. We must catch them if we must. We must show them that they do not falter and that they do not fall. Nothing chases them. How long are you going to hold onto that, Tahrl?”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“What?” Tahrl said, feeling the world fall away. His fingers gripping, and he realized that he still held something.

“That arrow,” Gran said. “There is nothing special about it. I saw you scoop it up from among the Dryn’s spread. It is not like the one that you showed me in your grandfather’s hall.”

Tahrl raised his hand, feeling his fingers ache, remembering a dark stain that had filled the world and had dropped Armada to the floor. The arrow had pulsed and it had ached like a thing that could never live but did anyway. Folding it away, Armada had cracked against the edge of the table.

“It served its purpose,” he said, feeling the soft wood like a simple thing between his fingers.

“I suppose it did at that.”

Chrystal came forward then as if having suddenly been given permission to interrupt, and she took the arrow from Tahrl, holding her hand out slowly as if reaching too quickly would have broken the fingers from his hand. The Montmorin and Dryn were soon ready; the thicket being much easier to take down than it had been to assemble, and they followed Alexander through the dark and tall grass. They moved slowly through the night with only the slender moon and distant stars to provide them light, and Tahrl realized that their passage left almost no trace against the grass. Dryn were the first and last to move of their party, and they worked whatever simple tricks and sway they held with the life of the plains to heal the mark of their journey across the fields and through the tall grass. At last they stopped with the moon gone and the stars drifting slowly above them, and there was a space before them as if all the world had been swallowed by leaf and root and feathered twig. All were quiet as if expectation drove them and none could draw so much as a breath through the chill of the simple dark.

“Here we are,” Alexander said, and there was a sound and rustle as of great curtains parting. A shape moved against the dark, pulling free of the tall grass as if born from out of the heart of the earth, and a hush pulled at the Montmorin as if the air was so cold it burned. A neck, slender and long, stretched into the sky, and a face looked down at them from the circle of darkness as if there was no color in the world.

“I am pleased to find you safe,” the voice said, “and I see that there are more of you than when we parted. You have found Montmorin. You have found what you seek.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“I would not go so far,” Alexander said. “We have found allies, but we have not as yet found freedom. This one I promised introductions.”

“Did you? Then, I am introduced. I am Moonlight.”

Gran Malor stepped forward as if he expected at any moment for the world to turn to flame. He looked to the dragon, seeing a creature of gray shadows and dark dust under the pale starlight, and he said nothing. In that one moment, Tahrl wondered if his friend would turn. He wondered if Gran might cry out to his men with fear that he had not even known he had carried within his soul, and the Montmorin would then fall upon the dragon. They would take the creature, seeing Wrath and fearing Wraith, and they would carry its carcass back to the Ivory Tower. Such might the Kianan and Montmorin find new alliances and be healed. They did not attack, and they did not strike. Three Dryn drifted out of the tall grass and deep shadow that surrounded Moonlight and joined back with the others.

“And, I am Gran Malor ap Earlinstien,” Gran said as if startled from sleep by the step of the Dryn. “And, I have wished for all of my long life to meet you.”

“And, I too have waited all your long life to meet you; although, I must confess that I have not waited all of my life,” Moonlight said. “Not you. I did not even know you had a name until just now.”

“Well, I assure you,” Gran said as if all the words were tripping over each other, alternating between their desire to be the first spoken and to wait until the shadowy creature was understood. “I am well worth the effort of meeting.”

“I believe you. Montmorin, Kianan and Dryn stand together before me, and I believe you. There is hope.”

“Hope?” Tahrl said. “That may be a little much to expect at this point. All of the Ivory Tower stands against us. We cannot yet count upon hope.”

“Not all of the Ivory Tower, Tahrl,” Gran said. “There is still your family. The people will wonder. Hearing that a Wrath out of the ancient world stands before their door, they will wonder why their homes have not been burned to the ground. Your King may yet listen. Have faith in hope if only for a little while longer.”

“I cannot,” Tahrl said, turning, facing the Ivory Tower, and he saw a sliver of silver that reminded him so much of Alexander’s flute stretched into the night. “By morning, my family will be under

## **The Etymology of Fire**

siege. All of the guards and soldiers of the noble houses will be at their door. Will my family stand? I do not know.”

“They do not stand alone.”

“No, if only it is enough. Hysteria will swallow the Ivory Tower, and the city will burn. Not all of it but it will burn, and the people will tire. They will go back to their lives as the great families and the noble houses battle it out, and the people will hope that such bickering does not bring all the world down around their ears.”

“The King will stand,” Alexander said.

“Yes, he will bring order but for which side?” Tahrl said. “That we cannot know.”

“So, we wait.”

“Yes, we wait while fates are decided and the world changes before our eyes. What we have started. We now stand helpless.”

“We have done so much. Now, it is our turn to rest. Soon enough we must move. In the meantime, there is nothing we can do but cling to a poor man’s excuse for hope. I think that is what you called it.”

“Yes, something like that.”

“Something like that.”

## *Chapter Seven*

# **Secrets of Smoke and Flame**

*The Ivory Tower burned; smoke billowing in lazy columns from the lower city and spreading like dark clouds beneath the sun. For two days, Tahrl had watched the smoke rise and the people burn. In only two days, the Dryn and Montmorin had moved three times, hoping that they would not be found. Tahrl watched. Alexander waited. Moonlight was quiet among the Montmorin and Dryn. Everything had been quiet after Vemarian had turned to the city as if he knew he had time to learn what secrets awaited him there, and then nothing had happened. No word reached Tahrl from the Ivory Tower. No soldiers came searching for them. The people and the city had been watchful as if they could feel the flood racing toward them and all they could hope was to be ready to hang on. Then, the world had changed. The Kianan could be seen filling the roads until they burst like flood waters crashing through the rocks. The people tried to hold to the road even as they spread outward, and they turned and looked even as they fled. Watching them from the tall grass and surrounded by the Dryn, Tahrl knew they looked for sign of the monster even as they fled.*

At last the flood of people had slowed. There was only so far that blind panic could carry them. They would have heard scream and rumor of monsters. They may have even seen flame. At last the people had stopped. If a dragon had attacked, it was gone. The people knew they should return to their homes. It was only then that the real fires had started as the crowds and mobs had organized and had begun to work under the orchestration of the noble families. There would be riots, and there would be hysteria as Vemarian's men worked to ensure that the Ivory Tower would be poisoned against Tahrl's family. In the days that passed, Tahrl had even seen mobs pour out of the city to search for the corrupting and deceiving band of Dryn and Montmorin who had brought a dragon so close to the Ivory Tower. At last even these groups had dwindled. Anger

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

and blind panic only sustained them for so long especially while their homes burned. If a dragon had come, it had gone, and the fires needed still to be dealt with regardless of who had actually set them. Watching the smoke and dreaming of flame, Tahrl worried for his family living where the homes were made as much of stone as wood and where the soldiers would be more organized and determined. The streets would be filled with the engines of war as friends and enemies fought to control the square while Tahrl's grandfather watched from the high gates of his home. Tahrl could only wonder if the walls had crumbled and fallen, and he could not know if Armada had stayed to her bed. At last, Gran Malor had decided to have one of his men return to the Ivory Tower and risk a message from Tahrl's family. For another day as the smoke drifted and another as the clouds faded, they had waited for word from the Ivory Tower, and they waited, losing time, counting days.

They were found at last but not by the Montmorin messenger or by Kianan soldier but by one woman dressed all in white. The Dryn seemed to notice all in an instant that there was a stranger so close at hand as to be almost among them. They formed ranks against the visitor who had appeared with the twilight sun slipping into dust behind her, and the Dryn wizards pushed to the front because none of them had ever stood face to face with a magician before.

"I am Master Mariama," the magician said as if she stood before a class of unruly children, "and I know why you hide."

"We do not hide," Alexander said, standing from among the Dryn. "We have nothing to hide."

Moonlight raised her head, looking down at the one in white robes even before the magician could speak; before the magician could point out that they were deep in the fields and far from the Kianan. Mariama said nothing; she only looked over the heads of the Dryn to where a dragon held her gaze. In that moment, Mariama showed not a hint of surprise for suddenly finding herself faced by a creature out of ancient legend and finding herself half-surrounded by women who had not stood openly before the Kianan in more years than any of them knew.

"Some say you have come to corrupt us," Mariama said without taking her eyes off of Moonlight.

"What do you say?" the dragon replied with the words rumbling from deep in her throat as if they took shape in the depths of her heart.



## **The Etymology of Fire**

“I would listen before I speak.”

“But, you do not stand in the heart of a crystal cave. You do not ignore the words, letting them slip from you unheard. You listen. The words echoing. They find purchase and cluster together, molding your thoughts even as they form in your mind.”

“I do not ignore them. That is true. But, they do not rule me.”

“They need not control you. Their job is already done.”

“And so my mind is already made for me?”

“If that is what you believe.”

“No, you’re contradicting yourself,” Mariama said after a long moment, holding still as thoughts raced and words formed. “You’re trying to confuse me.”

“Am I?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I was wondering that myself,” Alexander said. “She has come in peace, Moonlight. Why?”

“Question her so?” the dragon said. “This one says she has an open mind. May even believe it. But, look how she approaches. Listen to what she has said.”

“I am but cautious,” the magician said.

“Why?”

“Because I do not know and I would learn.”

“The echoes have already taken hold. The paths of thought are set. You must do much if you would wish your voice escape the tracks in your head.”

“You do not help your cause,” Mariama said. “There are those who say you have come to corrupt us. To trick and deceive. They say you would destroy us. I have come to judge. I am here to decide if they speak true, and everything you have said and done right here and right now is consistent with deception.”

“Of course it is.”

“You do not deny it?”

“The voices and words have been well planted and seeded. There is nothing I could say. There is not one thing I could do to contradict the voices in your head. Understand that?”

“Everything is an attempt to corrupt?”

“Yes.”

“Everything is an effort to deceive?”

“Yes.”

## The Etymology of Fire

“Then, why are you here? If all paths are futile, then where is hope?”

“I am looking at hope,” Moonlight said. “You are here without soldiers or hatred or anger. You are here, and you speak.”

Mariama said nothing, looking to a dragon, studying a creature that had attacked villages and homes. Tahrl remembered the monster that had struck Edgewood, and he knew the master magician must have heard such stories. He watched Mariama, remembering the mages who had come to the Ivory Tower. The side of Balthazar’s mansion had burst in a silent explosion that had sent Armada tumbling through the sky.

“Yes, I am here,” Mariama said. “I would speak.”

“Good,” Moonlight replied.

“I have no answers. I do not like the words you have said. Cavan Luc Vemarian will yet look for you, but I will not tell him this path.”

“Thank you.”

“I would speak more words with you, but not now. Not now.”

As quietly as she had appeared, the master magician disappeared back into the dark and the night.

“Well, that went about as well as we could have expected,” Alexander said, turning to look back at Moonlight. “Why did you do it? Why confuse her? Antagonize her?”

“Her mind was made-up,” the dragon said. “I sought only to introduce her to options.”

“I have no love for the magicians, but I hope you succeeded. She’ll report back to the others. Maybe Vemarian. Maybe the King. Definitely the other magicians. I hope you succeeded.”

“I hope that I succeeded, too.”



*They held to their camp through the long night, watching for sign of Vemarian’s soldiers. It would have been easy to move as they had moved so often in recent days, but they held still. They stayed to the ground where the magician had found them, hoping that no others should follow her path. Tahrl knew that they wanted the master magician to be able to find them again; after all, they had nothing to hide. The Dryn were uneasy, watching the far roads and the near paths, wondering how one magician had crept so close without being noticed. The Montmorin looked to the Ivory Tower, following the drifting clouds of smoke that still rose from the city, and*

## **The Etymology of Fire**

wondering what had become of their messenger, but the scout did not return. The Montmorin were unsettled, waiting throughout the long day for word from their fellow, but the magician returned first. She was not alone.

“Nathan,” Tahrl said, moving among the Dryn with eyes locked to the cousin he had last seen within the grounds of his family’s home. “What happened? Why are you here?”

“She brought me,” Nathan said, looking to Mariama. “You wanted news of the city, did you not? It is why you sent the spy, is it not?”

“Yes,” Tahrl whispered, wanting to scream, picturing Nathan at the gates before the wall. Nathan would loosen a slat. He would unlatch a door. Tahrl did not know. He would not know. “What news then?” Tahrl whispered, imagining smoke flowing from the Morgan family mansion, picturing the stone pitched red with blood.

“The King has ordered all sides to silence. His men hold the peace in the upper city. The family is fine. Our enemies could not breach the wall though they tried. They tried. The street is blood. The court is black from burning, but we stand. The King’s silence holds.”

“That is good. The King has taken sides.”

“No, the King has not. He has commanded silence. The people listen because the city burns. The noble houses still stand all about the Morgan family home. They wait only for the King to loosen his hold. The rioting and flames of the lower city have had their desired effect of diversion.”

“That cannot be. The King must choose. The city has not fallen. Dragons do not rage.”

“You know this?” Mariama said.

“Yes.”

“I have seen Edgewood,” the magician said, and Tahrl did not answer. “Where is your prisoner?”

Tahrl said nothing. They had held the soldier. They had carried him, dragging him when nothing else had worked. When the Dryn had found them in the mountains, they had forced the soldier to walk when they could. The man had not helped, trying to slow them, forcing them to care for him. They had forced him to eat and to drink. They had forced him to live. He could barely walk. He could hardly stand anymore, shaking with the effort to keep from slipping to the earth.

“He is safe,” Alexander said.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“Is he?” Mariama said with eyes locked to Tahrl as if nothing else existed in all the world.

“Yes,” Tahrl said; his voice scratching.

“You say that with such confidence.”

The Montmorin had understood. The solider had brought fear and anger. He had twisted the world so that the Kianan would hate and rage against all the peoples of the world. They knew what it took to drag truth out of the shadows and dark. The magicians claimed to be champions and protectors to all. They believed they were above it all and attempted to act in much the same way that the dragons must have behaved in ages lost to memory and time.

“Some things are necessary,” Tahrl said. With the Dryn and Montmorin all around the soldier, they hardly needed to keep him tied-up anymore. “Not what we want. Never what we desire.”

“What have you done, Tahrl?” Nathan said.

“I’m not proud.”

“They told me you had proof. They told me you had done things. Hurt people.”

“Yes, proof, dragged from out the very depths of the mountains. You have seen it, Nathan, yes? We have left what proof we dared with grandfather. The rest we have. Poison? Corruption? Surely, you looked, Nathan? After Gran and I had left?”

“No.”

Tahrl’s heart caved in upon itself, and he wondered how he could yet stand. The soldier could barely hold his feet. Tahrl had kicked him. The man had ambushed them and tried to kill Alexander. Tahrl had wrapped him in blankets and cloth to the point it had been hard for the man to breathe, and Tahrl had let Armada hurt the soldier for what he had done to her father.

“You revel in your stupidity,” Tahrl said. “It was not a secret for grandfather to keep. If you had but asked.”

“There was no time,” Nathan said. “Not enough to prepare. Not enough for stupidity. There was violence by nightfall. And, there was blood.”

“The family is fine. You liar. What has happened? Standing with a magician. What little did it take to claim your heart?”

Nathan reached as if he would scream. He stretched out his hand as if he might lunge for Tahrl but did nothing. Tahrl fell back, flinching, but did not fall as if surprised that his cousin did not lose himself to rage. Nathan stood as if fighting with himself as if he

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

knew that he stood before a magician who might still judge him and find him wanting.

“I would never betray,” Nathan said as if exhausted. “I am the door!”

“I am sorry. I do not know why- why are you here?”

“I do not know. She brought me. The noble houses had stopped fighting. I did not see that I had a choice.”

“She’s using you,” Tahrl said, looking to the magician, remembering mages before the throne.

“I know. I suspected. I did not have a choice. The soldiers had gathered. There were two of them before the mansion. Not masters like this one. They had come with the soldiers. Your friend? The one who had been a horse? She stopped them. Stopped them both. I had never seen anything like it.”

“I knew Armada would not keep to her bed.”

“Armada? Yes. She did so much. More than any other to drive back the noble houses. Caught the attention of the magicians. Master Rufus came first. To talk. Armada was content to talk. Then, this one came as well. Then, I was called for. Now, I am here.”

“And, Armada is still at home? Is she well? Did they take her?”

“She is fine as far as I know. Would not consent to go with the magicians. As I said, they are content to talk.”

“I am impressed.”

“I am grateful that the magicians have shown reason,” Alexander said as if speaking to Tahrl and Nathan, but his eyes were for Mariama who returned his quiet gaze.

“There is much we would know,” she said, “but we do not act rashly. Not without need. But, we will know.” Her eyes were for Alexander. Her gaze wandered over the Dryn. “Where is your prisoner?” she said as if picking at flecks of dust that had come to rest on her robes.

“Safe.”

“Hidden?”

“We do not hide.”

“But, you do not want to be found. Curious dilemma, don’t you agree?”

“It is sometimes necessary to act in a self-contradictory manner.”

“Some things are necessary. Yes, I think that is what the man said. Where is your prisoner?”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“He is here. He has yet his part to play. Kind of a broken refrain saying he reveals truth. It’s all he does. Reveal truth.”

“Does he then? Reveal truth?”

“Well, yes, but more truth than perhaps he intended. He wanted us to know that the dragons rage but not that they rage because of him. Gran, you might as well let your people bring our guest forward. Wouldn’t want Master Mariama to have to ask after him again.”

There was silence and then a ripple of movement among the Dryn and Montmorin as if a predator was swimming against the tide. Gran Malor stepped forward with the solider at his side. The Dryn parting. The Montmorin stepping back. The solider quaking as Tahrl knew he would, shivering, standing with his hands loosely tied as if he could not be trusted to keep from waving his arms in the air.

“He is coming with me,” Mariama said, having given the solider nothing more than a cursory glance.

“No,” Gran Malor said.

“Really? You think not? To me, he looks as if he might do with a decent bed and some food. Nobody will listen as he looks now. He is coming with me.”

“My friend said no,” Alexander said.

“That is most disappointing. I had actually been beginning to think you had his best intentions at heart. Wanted nothing more than for the pain to stop. End of suffering. Nobody will listen.”

“Except you.”

“I came to listen, and you shouted in my ear. Why should I offer you the other one? Look at him and none shall listen. None shall give you pause.”

“They already have.”

“Because the city has not burned completely to the ground? Because the King has ordered silence? I’ll tell you what I can do. I can take this man to the King. The noble houses will not have their man back. I am a magician. I can do that.”

“Not a good idea,” Tahrl whispered.

“Why? Because you will not be able to control what he says? You who once knew the King so well. Have you so little faith in him to recognize truth even among lies? Then, why are you here?”

Tahrl said nothing, looking at the magician all dressed in white robes. She wore a circlet of silver and gold in her hair that he real-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

ized he had never noticed before even as he realized that the silver and gold strands had been woven into her hair the last time they had met. She stood and said nothing, answering Tahlr's silence, and he remembered dragging the soldier through the mountains. They had kept him wrapped, pulling him over rock and earth even as the blankets had frayed and torn. Ignoring the smeared color that had crept into the blankets in sticky and damp patches like the seeping of crushed berries into a cloth sack. The soldier stood but barely. The magician watched Tahlr as if she might spit, striking him down with lightning and fire, and it was only her interest in discovering the truth beneath their actions that held back the raging fire in her eyes.

"Let him go," Tahlr whispered, feeling charred earth in his throat.

"Really?" Alexander said, and Tahlr could not move.

He could not face his friend who had crumbled to the earth with an arrow in his back. Alexander had coughed blood. He had been pale and cold to the touch. He had been so quiet even after he had finally woken from the dark and poisoned dream. Alexander had said nothing as they had dragged the soldier over the hard ground. He had not protested or suggested that the soldier be allowed to stand. Alexander had simply watched as they pushed and pulled and left the soldier bound and gagged. Alexander had watched with a hand to the bandages wrapped about his chest, and he had said nothing.

"Yes, really," Tahlr said; words scratching at his lips and teeth. His eyes to the ground as if he studied the stars in the sky. "Let him go."

"Have your answer," Alexander said, and with a gesture that nobody need bother to understand, the soldier was allowed to stumble forward and stand at the magician's side.

"Yes," Mariama said, watching the Dryn shift and sway as if they were currents in a river that might suddenly jump its banks and swallow the world whole. "I do believe I have."

She reached for the soldier, and the ropes fell away as if they had grown old in an instant and could no longer hold their shape. The soldier only stared as if he had forgotten how to move or else expected at any moment for the Dryn to reach for him and drag him to the earth. Mariama's hand graced the man's shoulder, and he flinched almost as if he expected the world to explode. He turned slowly, stumbling, with eyes for the Dryn and Montmorin. He caught Tahlr's glance, and then his face shifted as if he had forgot-

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

ten everything. His eyes changed. His lip curled, and he smiled the slow smile of someone who believes he has been granted the secrets of the world.

In that moment, Tahrl felt the dagger Quicksilver at his side, and he wanted to let it free. He wanted the blade to strike out and take the soldier in the back in much the same way as the arrow had pushed Alexander to the ground. Tahrl stood, and he did nothing, wanting to scream, wanting to shout, wanting to smash a rock into the man's head until the world was slick and black.

Nathan watched, turning as if to follow the magician with her freed prisoner, but he did not move. His face shifting, looking, studying the Montmorin and Dryn as if he had never seen people before, and then he looked back to Mariama as if he did not know if he had permission to follow. He turned back to Tahrl, quaking, shivering in the late afternoon light, breathing as if he knew to speak would be to shatter the world.

"Is that all?" he said. "Kianan and women and Montmorin? They are creatures of the wood, yes? These women are almost as old as legend?"

"After a fashion," Tahrl said, feeling the storm build behind him.

"I thought. I suspected. From that one at the mansion. The one who had been a horse. I knew there was more to her than rogue magic."

"Much more."

"It's our blood. Cannot help ourselves. Trying to reunite the world. Really, Tahrl, why didn't you bring a Wraith along while you were at it? Or graths and troglodytes or cavern trolls. At least, you should have brought a Wraith. Everyone believes you have."

"They would be right."

Nathan laughed, looking over his shoulder to where Mariama still walked with the soldier.

"You truly are an agent of chaos, Tahrl, but where is the monster? I am almost disappointed. My mind feels no more lost or corrupted," Nathan said and stopped as if the breath had turned to stone in his throat. His eyes had drifted past Tahrl's shoulder, and Tahrl knew what held his gaze without even needing to turn.

"You may call her Moonlight."

"It is an abomination," Nathan whispered as if his eyes might weep blood.

"She is nothing of the kind."



## The Etymology of Fire

“She?”

“Yes,” Tahrl said and remembered when he had first seen the thing with great wings. It had drifted out of the sky. It had forsaken Edgewood, ripping their hearts from out of the very wood and stone. It had screamed. It had cried. It had roared nightmare into their dreams. Moonlight was a child of grace. “Yes,” Tahrl said again as if startled from out of the wind. “She is Moonlight.”

“I must go,” Nathan said and turned without words to follow the magician with her prize.

“You surprise me, Tahrl,” Gran Malor said when Nathan had drifted from sight. “You have forgotten how to negotiate. There was still much we could have gained by holding onto that corrupter of truth.”

“No,” Tahrl said. “There was nothing left. We have all suffered.”

“Some more than others, but I suppose it was still a smart play. The magicians may yet take our side because of this. They may yet take our side.”

Tahrl did not answer. He did not want to turn. He did not want to look and see Alexander or face the assembled Dryn. At last, he did move, turning back to the others and walking among the Montmorin and Dryn.



*They moved camp for the first time in days waiting only long enough for the magician Mariama to disappear from view before they began making preparations to go. Not a word was said as if everybody knew their task and there was no need to speak what might be overheard. Tahrl did nothing; only watching the distant spot where Master Mariama had finally vanished from sight with the prisoner they had carried all of the way from the deep mountains. They had bound him. They had dragged him, carrying him to the Ivory Tower, and now he was gone. Their proof taken from them. All they had were some arrows that could have been made anywhere, and a dragon that for all anybody else might believe had enslaved them all. Tahrl did nothing. He did not speak. He did not look to the others until at last he turned without looking to anyone's eye and waited for the Dryn and Montmorin to be ready to move.*

They marched quietly as if expecting at any moment to be overheard and discovered. They settled at last with the sun low in the sky as if they would stake claim to this new ground, but they moved

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

again as soon as the sky was dark. They traveled for a long time through the night, moving in a great arc around the Ivory Tower as if they might eventually walk all the great way around the city and the tower. At last they stopped without words; people speaking only when necessary, and nobody speaking to Tahrl.

Tahrl was quiet throughout the long day, keeping to himself, avoiding the eyes of the Dryn, and avoiding Alexander most of all. He looked only to the tall spire of the Ivory Tower as if expecting at any moment for the world to be filled with flame. The charge of soldiers and townsfolk sweeping over them in a rage to wipe the world clean, but nothing came. Tahrl did not speak. He did not look. He did not listen to the voices of the Montmorin and Dryn speaking quietly to one another as the day passed and the night followed.

The magician Mariama found them as if she had been following them with a map. She walked among them as if she stood among friends, and none stood to block her path. They watched her. They followed her as the magician walked through their camp, but they did nothing. She stopped before Tahrl, looking down at him, and Tahrl did nothing. He watched her as if he did not see her and was only interested in the clouds and the sky.

“It is time,” the magician said.

Tahrl felt the world give way as if he would melt and slip unformed into the earth and the dust. He could not look, studying the ground, looking to leaves and grass and earth. He tried to breathe, finding the air was sand and mud, feeling the wind burn as if his heart might explode. He looked; his eyes stinging, and he saw white robes drifting on the breeze.

“Why?” he whispered, feeling gravel rip at his throat, feeling he would cough blood.

The magician stood for a long moment as if studying the others, and her gaze drifted at last to Moonlight. She watched the dragon as if studying a great work of art or else admiring the clouds before a terrible storm.

“There is going to be a grand council,” she finally said. “Kyre Morgan has asked that you attend.”

“A grand council?” Tahrl said, gripping the earth as if he feared he might slip into the sky. “When?”

“This very day if you can be bothered to attend. If not, they shall gather tomorrow. But, I would not keep them waiting. The grand council does not meet often or without reason.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“Yes, of course, a meeting between the great and noble houses is not easily arranged. I will,” Tahrl said, rising, trying not to hope, looking to the others and finding them watching him. “I will come.”

He gathered his things, taking very little, with all the others watching, and then he went with Master Mariama, walking among Dryn and Montmorin as if he was somehow apart from them. Tahrl turned once, looking to Moonlight, finding her resting against the ground as if she might do her best to hide.

“This is a good sign,” he said as if speaking only to Moonlight. “The council would not convene if they were not ready to hear us. We may yet wish for hope.”

Moonlight did not answer, and Tahrl turned away as if his own words stung and the world would crumble because he had spoken with faith. He saw Alexander, and he saw Gran as his gaze passed quickly over faces and past the gathered Montmorin and Dryn. He said nothing, and they did not answer. He looked to the magician, watching, waiting, and he followed her away from the camp, leaving the world behind him. They walked for a long way. Tahrl following white robes. Master Mariama saying nothing. At last, they found a journeyman magician all dressed in robes the color of gray fog waiting and watching over several horses.

They rode the rest of the way back to the Ivory Tower, traveling quickly through the lower city. The streets were mostly deserted, and smoke still streaked the sky. The people were waiting. They could still feel the storm all about them and did not know which way the fire might yet break so they kept to their houses and homes as best they could and waited for what might happen next. They passed into the upper city without so much as a pause at the gates as if the guards had spotted the magicians robes from a distance and did not want to cause any delay. There were guards and soldiers at the street corners. Patrols marched the paths and roads. There were no other people about as if all the great city had gone into hiding while the armed men stood so much among them. At last, they reached the Morgan family home. The street was empty. The stone was blackened and marked as if great machines of war had stood in the square and burned, but all sign of them was now gone as if great care had been taken to make all such things disappear.

They approached the Morgan family estate, and Tahrl saw that far less care had been taken to clean away the signs of battle. The walls had been marked and scarred. There were fragments of wood

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

and stone and metal from where siege climbers and delving engines had stood against the wall. There were fragments of armor and broken arrows; there were shattered splinters of knife and sword and ax. There was stain and shadow dripping down the wall, and there was the stench. Looking up, Tahrl saw one face and then another watching them from the top of the wall, but they did nothing as if they were content to watch and study the three who approached. They reached the gates; Tahrl looking, watching, finding faces along the wall. He could not find one, and he looked for Armada, knowing she would be upon the wall if she had any strength at all. He looked and studied, but he could not find her even as they entered at the gate. They watched for the door to be closed and still he could not find her among all those who looked down upon them.

Tahrl remembered the soldiers who had last looked down on him, and he remembered the guard who had slipped through the slats to face him with pike and spear. Armada had backed away ready to rear and strike them, but she had not. He wondered what the soldiers thought of her now that she had stood with them upon the wall and she had fought the magicians to a standstill. She was not upon the wall. He had seen her weak and shivering, and he had said nothing because she had said nothing. Alexander had only watched in silence, but he had not seen her stumble. Her chin striking the edge of the table, and then she had crumbled to the floor. She had then faced magicians, and she was not upon the wall.

The slats were pulled away, opening the gate, and Tahrl crossed into the great courtyard with two magicians following behind him. The ground had changed, and the land was different. There was sign and mark that the court had been filled; wounded guards and men had been brought here. Weapons had been readied. Fire had fallen. Flame and destruction had been hurled over the gates and wall. The stone was stained dark with old blood, but the mansion stood. The people were quiet, but they were there. Nathan was there, waiting before the door as they left the horses behind them.

“Where is she?” Master Mariama said as if she stood alone with Tahrl’s cousin. “I have brought him as I said I would. Where is she?”

“Behind you,” Nathan said, and Armada was there, standing with the horses they had just abandoned as if she had been watching them for forever and a day.

“So,” the magician said, turning, walking to stand before Armada. “So, there you are.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“Yes,” Armada said.

“I have brought him as promised.”

“Thank you.”

Members of the household staff came and took the horses, speaking in such soft whispers that they were all but invisible. Armada did not move, watching the master magician, and Tahrl noticed that there had been three horses led away. She had not been among them, checking, watching in disguise, and he remembered being so close to her, feeling her soft coat against his skin. He had watched her change, becoming human, becoming animal, and he wondered if Master Mariama would have known if Armada had been one of the horses.

“This was not your idea, then?” Tahrl said. Mariama did not answer. Armada’s eye did not flicker from the magician. “Who called me here if it was not the will of the magicians?”

“Kyre Morgan wished for you to attend the council,” Mariama said without looking away from Armada. “In the interests of peace, I have brought you.”

“So, you have taken sides.”

“No.”

“But, I am here. You have aided my grandfather. You have spoken with dragons.”

“And, I would learn truth,” the magician said, turning, facing him. “I seek knowledge and the end of suffering.”

“Which can be accomplished by having everyone do what you tell them,” Armada said.

“No, it is not like that at all.”

“What is it, then? You do not teach by ordering. You do not learn by dictation.”

“You are wrong. We do not do as you say. We seek only to help.”

“I am sure you believe that.”

“Please,” Tahrl said, but they did not look to him. “We are here for a reason, are we not? You have not brought me all this way just to stand in the court and pretend you do not need to breathe.”

“I can take you to grandfather,” Nathan said.

“Thank you.”

They entered the mansion, passing through the great doors, and Tahrl saw that the world had changed. Braces of wood and iron had been brought in so that the door could be secured when needed. Windows were banded and bolted against fire and soldier and

## **The Etymology of Fire**

sword. It was dark; light slipping in through narrow slats in the metal and wood of the windows. Hard blankets covered the paintings and drawings, and everywhere was the stench of musty earth and damp smoke. Tahrl moved, following Nathan, as if he had fallen out of the sky and all he could breathe was old earth as could only be found at the center of the world or at the bottom of graves. He did not even recognize when he stood before grandfather's door; he only waited for Nathan to move but nothing happened.

"He is waiting, I'm sure," Nathan said, pushing at the door, and Tahrl did move.

His grandfather, the Kyre of the Morgan family, was there. The table was still scattered and littered with papers like so many lost and forgotten stories. The room was cast in shadows even with wide vents in the window plates to yield the sun. His uncles were there. Thorne was tall and broad shouldered, and he could stand with the strongest of the caravan guard and not be found wanting. Theodore was tall and angular as if he spent more time in smoke filled rooms haggling and plotting over trades and routes.

"As promised," grandfather said, rising from his chair at the table.

Tahrl could not move, and yet he found himself stumbling into the room as if he might be swallowed into the floor without a sound. His grandfather came to him, walking with the energy of one who had not slept in days.

"Much has happened, Tahrl," his grandfather said, standing before him. "Much of it good. Much of it not so good. You learn who your friends are, but these are not lessons we did not know. We are not children, after all."

"The forsaken one returns," Theodore said without looking from the table.

"Not forsaken," grandfather said. "Never forsaken. Put aside, perhaps? Left in the quiet of a forgotten field until grown. Until we have need."

"Or, a weed growing in the garden that must be dealt with."

"But, perhaps I'm not the weed," Tahrl said, feeling the quaver in his voice and hoping they did not hear it, knowing that they did. "Perhaps, I am the fruit or the tree, and Vemarian's spies and deceit are the weeds."

"You've stretched that analogy thin," Theodore said. "You're brought much trouble upon us, but father is right. As much as I

## **The Etymology of Fire**

would doubt it, he is right, and much has happened. Your friend,” Theodore said, looking away from the table, turning to the window. “She is most interesting.”

“What of her?” Tahrl said, remembering what Armada had said of slaves in the mountains, picturing torch and flame turned against the forest. The dragons forgotten. The stealers and kidnappers of men and small children filling all the minds of the Kianan.

“Before all of the excitement began before the walls, she had much to say,” grandfather said. “While she rested or rather while we were still able to keep her from joining the revelry outside, we discussed many things.”

“Such as?”

“Oh, many interesting things. Much to ponder and consider. But, not now.”

Grandfather handed him a report, and Tahrl read of the fall of Cavan Luc Vemarian’s fortress near the Graystone Mountains where the troglodyte defense was run.

“We control Stonegarden?” Tahrl said. “Is this true? Do they know?”

“I suspect it is the reason they called for the council. Yes, it was their idea so maybe they know about Stonegarden. Perhaps not. The King has brought great pressure against the noble houses to quiet the blood and finish this with words. We shall learn what they know of Stonegarden. If not, I shall not keep it secret.”

“Of course,” Tahrl said, folding the parchment over and again between his fingers as if he wanted to keep the thought of it alive against his fingertips. “It will be quite the shock to learn that they have lost so much. We may yet survive this.”

“Yes, we may,” Theodore said. “If we are careful. If these words are true.”

“If they are true.” He could feel the words brush against his fingers as he graced the parchment not wanting to look at it. “Control of Stonegarden. I never would have believed we had so many loyal men there. Willing to overthrow their captains and commanders.”

“Not so hard to believe. The great houses do not like the men lost to the troglodyte defense. Men who should be guarding the caravan routes.”

Tahrl crushed the parchment.

“Stonegarden,” he said. “Whatever shall we do with it?”

“We have some thoughts on that subject,” grandfather said,

## The Etymology of Fire

“but that is for another time. For the King to decide. We must first weather the noble houses and survive the grand council.”

“When?”

“This very day if it can be arranged. Messages and instructions are in motion. You should prepare.”

Tahlr said nothing, nodding his head as if pushed by a breeze so slight that nobody could see it. They watched him, and he said nothing, looking to the table and the room. He would need the arrows and the voice of the dragon. He saw nothing. There were papers and reports, but the arrows were gone. He had held one above the table, feeling it against his palm, and Armada had folded the cloth back around them. Armada had somehow banished the quiet voices from the room, and then she had fallen. Her head striking the table. She had slipped to the floor.

“I would see her,” Tahrl said.

“Of course.”

They had helped her to the cushions, and she had struggled as if she did not want them to know she was weak. She had tried to stand, and she had done nothing. The arrows had been upon the table, and he had revealed them. He had freed them from their wrappings, and Armada had crumpled to the floor.

“If she can be found,” grandfather said, and Tahrl looked to him. “If that one can be made to stand still long enough to rest. She has been most stubborn and unforgiving of our attempts at hospitality.”

“She does not trust us,” Tahrl said, whispering words and then drawing them back almost as if his voice laid bare the world. The forest would burn, and the trees would fall. As long as there were only stories and nothing was known as truth about who lived in the forest, they would be safe, and Ede’s daughter would live. “We have given her no reason to embrace our hospitality.”

“We shall do what we can; after all, are we not family with the Montmorin?”

Tahlr said nothing as if words would tip the woods of Greenhaven into flame.



*Armada found him as he dressed. As Tahrl found himself clean for the first time in he could not remember how long, Armada pushed open a door without knocking and found him mostly dressed but unprepared for company.*



## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“Armada,” he said; shirt rumpled and clasps forgotten.

“Yes.”

“Yes,” he said, lurching toward her as if he was tangled among his clothes and attempting to move would leave him sprawled across the floor. “It is good,” he said, standing still with quaking fingers, feeling his hands turn back to his cloths and finding the clasps uneven and undone. “It is good that you are well.” His fingers stopped even as they attempted to straighten his shirt. Her look was one he did not recognize as if she were amused by a child trying to stand in over sized clothes. “They say you did so much. They say you held the magicians before the wall.”

“It is easy to humble magicians. They understand nothing of power or logic.”

“That is good. I do not understand what you mean, but that is good.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I have not known you to stand much with logic.”

“Then, there is still much you do not know about me. They told you to fear me, didn’t they? My sisters? They said I was not to be trusted.”

“No, I would not say I was told that.”

“Then, what did they say?”

“Nothing you have not heard yourself.”

“Then, it is a wonder that you can stand before me without fear. You are more stupid than strong. I will give you that.”

“Thank you,” Tahrl said and was silent. Armada stood before him. They were in chambers that Tahrl had not seen since he was young and had not yet taken up permanent residence in the far rooms of the Ivory Tower. There was the long table. There were basins of water that had grown cool to the touch. There was the clothing that he had been given to choose from. Nothing was his; he had simply chosen. There were cloths and towels, and Tahrl suddenly wanted to dump one of the basis of water over Armada’s head.

“I don’t,” he said, wanting to turn away but standing still. She had been so warm. Her coat had been so soft, and she had been so strong. He had felt her running all through his body. “I never thanked you, did I?” he said. “For saving me from the troglodytes. For saving me from that magician Balthazar. For saving me from the forest troll.”

“Sure, you did,” she said.

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“I’m sorry.”

“You were right, you know? About the dragons. About the mountains. About needing to reach the Ivory Tower.”

“I don’t recall saying those things.”

“Neither do I.”

“Then, why did you say?”

“No reason.”

“But, we may agree on one thing. There is hope. Not a lot. But, a sliver. A splinter. We control Stonegarden. Vemarian’s home. We control Vemarian’s home.”

“Yes, I heard something of that.”

“We go to a grand council. And then I don’t know. It all depends on the council and the King. I don’t know. Hope for Moonlight and the other dragons. Maybe, hope for the Dryn.”

“I don’t hope for the Dryn.”

“I know. It is so much to take in. Can we believe? Is it true? Dare we breathe?”

“No.”

Tahrl felt the very air lift from his skin, leaving the world cool and cold, and he felt that he need not take another breath. Nothing would be necessary because the trees would fall and the world would burn.

“Then why are we here?”

Armada said nothing.

“You may say you are here to protect the fool. Or, maybe your father wished this of you, and you would not disappoint him. But, I know. You chose this. You came. Don’t say it was nothing.”

Tahrl’s hand brushed against a clasp, and he remembered a shirt, feeling it, touching it, trying to smooth the rumpled fit. He did not look, turning, fiddling with the clasps, trying to make them work. Armada was behind him. He took a step, fumbling with his hands as if he wished that he was alone. She said nothing. She was there, standing like a forgotten tree, and said nothing.

“Don’t say it was nothing.” Tahrl had the shirt apart. He had the pieces together, folding one over the other and then clasping, running fingers slowly over soft cloth. “I wanted to know,” he said, holding his hands still. “I wanted to know you were well.”

“Have your answer.”

Tahrl turned.

## The Etymology of Fire

“What kind of answer is that?” he said. “None at all? I am glad all the same; even though, you care not at all.”

“That’s an exaggeration. You confuse foolish hope with care for others. I care for others. I would give the life from my heart. My mother. My sisters. My nieces. Children. Daughters all. Do not say that I care not at all.”

“I wouldn’t say such a thing.”

“You have. You throw your life away for foolish hope, calling it love of others, but it is still the work of rash fools.”

“We have all been foolish, have we not?”

“No, you have been stupid. I have been foolish for following you. Protecting you.”

“Why?”

“It is what they wished.”

“Then, I am glad that they wished it. What of you? What would you wish?”

“Nothing.”

“Then, your wish has come true.”

She dumped the water over his head. Wiping at his face, shaking, trying to breathe through damp fingers, he tried to follow her, but she was already gone.



*Cavan Luc Vemarian was waiting for them in the long hall of the assembly with the lords of the noble houses gathered all around him. The lords and nobles watched with a silence that drained all light and life from the hall as the men of the great houses gathered. The Kyres of the houses entered, gathering at the table, facing the noble houses, and they kept their voices to themselves, letting the silence drift and grow. Tahrl watched, sitting at his grandfather’s side, and he saw that even the magicians had come. Master Rufus was there between the two groups without a cushion or even a chair. The magician stood, watching them all and leaning against the wall as if what might transpire between great and noble houses was of no consequence at all. The two groups ignored the magician in turn as if they cared not at all that he was there or as if they simply acted as if he was cloaked by an enchantment hiding him from sight. The lords of the noble houses watched the gathering of great houses. The Kyres of those houses watched the lords in their turn, and none spoke. Even after all had gathered, finding seats, and watching*

## **The Etymology of Fire**

the other across the table, the hall was silent. Tahrl knew they were waiting for Vemarian's uncle to be the first to speak, which he finally did breaking the spell that had permeated the hall, making Tahrl jump, shaking the roof as if it might fall.

"We are here assembled to see if we cannot resolve the conflict that was begun by the Kyre of House Morgan," the Lord Vemarian said. "What do you say Kyre Morgan?"

"I say I did not begin this," Tahrl's grandfather said. "I sought only to aid my grandson as he had been threatened by your nephew Cavan Luc Vemarian."

"Your grandson Tahrl Morgan was forgotten and forsaken, was he not?"

"Never forsaken and never forgotten."

"He lost all welcome, did he not? All right and honor lost, was it not so? He shamed the family Morgan."

"And yet he stands before you. He is fed, and he is rested. My grandson is under my protection. Are these the signs of one who has been forsaken?"

"He has brought danger to the Ivory Tower."

"Yes, your nephew."

"My nephew was attempting to stop the danger and protect the city."

"And how would he have done that? He had brought enough horse to swarm my grandson's camp. If I had not moved to protect him. If Gran Malor ap Earlinstien had not sent his personal guard to my grandson's side, what would your nephew have done?"

"He would have stopped the Wraith from bringing chaos and destruction."

"Oh, yes, the Wraith. I had forgotten. I have not seen it. The Wraith that has lain siege to the Ivory Tower. It has burned. It has ravaged. It has destroyed. That Wraith, yes?"

"It will," Cavan Luc Vemarian said, and all were silent. His hands were on the table. His eyes were for the wall beyond Tahrl and his grandfather, but he did not appear to see anything.

"Do we listen to this?" grandfather said. "It is truth you will say, I know. It is Wrath and it is Wraith that will come. Destroy us all, you say?"

Cavan Luc Vemarian said nothing.

"I have heard the words. We have all heard. Your beaters in the

## **The Etymology of Fire**

lower city, stirring the embers, but spare me your lair's tale. We have heard it."

"It is truth."

"We do not tell tales," Vemarian's uncle said. "The Wraiths ravage. The Wraiths burn. Ask that one what he has seen with his own eyes."

Tahrl kept his silence, gulping on air, knowing it was not his place to speak, waiting for his grandfather's voice.

"I know what my grandchild has told me. I know what he has shown me. And, I ask you what we have not seen. I remind you that the Ivory Tower does not burn. In spite of your best efforts."

"It will burn," Vemarian said.

"Yes, you tried, but the people could not be sufficiently inspired. Why is that? Oh, yes, because the creatures did not appear. They took your word and stretched it thin."

"Because your beaters spread their tales of empty skies," Vemarian's uncle said.

"Just as yours said the skies would burn. In the end, I think, the people simply grew tired. There was fire and confusion, but the people decided to see to their own rather than march after something that wasn't even there."

"It was there, whispering, corrupting."

"Spare me! None here believe your stories. Save them for the people if you can find any who will yet listen."

"It is truth!"

"What truth?"

"The Wraths and Wraiths will destroy us!"

Master Rufus said nothing only raising his hand, but all eyes were upon the magician as if he had shouted with a voice of lightning and thunder. He held an arrow that Tahrl recognized instantly in the magician's hand. Tahrl remembered how the thing had seemed almost to pulse as if it breathed light and fire and dark midnight. They had not been able to look away. They had stood in his grandfather's study lost to everything but the arrow until Armada had smothered it, and then she had fallen. She had crumbled to the dust, and all Tahrl had been able to do had been to watch. He remembered standing, looking to the arrow, thinking he should do something but thought had not turned to action until Armada had lain on the ground. Master Rufus stood with such an arrow in his hand, and all eyes were turned to him. The arrow was wrapped in a ribbon of

## **The Etymology of Fire**

white cloth like a streamer that encircled the thing and slithered down the magician's arm. Tahrl stood, waiting for the light to transfix him, watching for the dark to creep around the corners of his eyes, but nothing happened. The ribbon held the arrow smothered, and Tahrl found that he could breathe.

"I would be very curious to know who made this for you," the magician said.

"No, you don't," Vemarian said.

"Oh, yes, I would," Master Rufus said. "Even if it was one of the council, I would seek out truth. I would know truth."

"You would put on a show. Say you seek truth. But, in the end find nothing."

"Then tell me who made you this."

Cavan Luc Vemarian was as cold as stone.

"No," he said.

"Because it was not one of the council? Because it was a rogue mage?"

"That is what you wish the answer to be. Protect your precious order."

"As you wish to imply that it was a magician. The penalty we exact for dealing with rogues is immense."

"There are those among your order who do not agree with you. I stay their names to protect their rank and standing."

"Or, to protect your own family. Consorting with rogue mages," Master Rufus said as if the words tasted like fire. "It is beneath you." He made the arrow disappear among his robes and said no more.

"There is still the matter of the dispute," Vemarian's uncle said after the silence had drifted and died. "There is the question of reparation."

"Yes, there is," Tahrl's grandfather said. "We have suffered much wrong because of your nephew's scheming and dealings. We demand nothing less than his head."

"What?"

"Your nephew has done more than unjustly tarnish the Morgan family name. He has acted cruelly toward all the Kianan race."

"I meant my reparations!" Vemarian's uncle said.

"I don't see how you have earned any."

"Vemarian family blood has been shed!"

"To answer that, I would turn no farther than your shoulder. He

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

took an oath, did he not, to protect all the race of the Kianan? How has he honored that oath?”

“Everything I have done has been to protect our people!” Vemarian said.

“Quiet your nephew. We are tired, you see. Tired of your lies. Tired of your mastery. We swore oaths to support you. We gave you men because you promised to protect us. What have you done with your promise?”

“I need answer you nothing,” Vemarian’s uncle said.

“So, you say,” Tahrl’s grandfather said. “So, you always say. And, we give you men and supplies and funds because you are supposed to know more. The noble houses are best experienced and prepared to protect us. To lead us. So, we give as we have always given. Now,” he said, looking down the line of faces of the great houses. “We wonder. We doubt. You take our men who could be guarding our trades and caravans.”

“Your men protect you,” Vemarian’s uncle said. “You know not the dangers you would face if not for the men you give us.”

“And, yet our caravans are attacked by bandits and raiders. We are protected?”

“Yes.”

“So, we give you men. So, your own men guard only the noble houses. Your families. Your estates.”

“That is not true.”

“Oh, but it is. You forget that it is not our men who serve? They send us messages and reports.”

“You would betray us?”

“You abuse our trust. Take our men. Spread stories of danger to solidify your position. Yes, stories.”

“The danger is real,” Cavan Luc Vemarian said. “It is you who threaten us all. You who court monsters.”

“So, we come full circle. You want. We want. We disagree on where the danger lies.” Tahrl’s grandfather indicated the Kyres of the great houses all assembled. “We want more of a say in where the danger lies, and we will. As you may have heard, we control Stonegarden.”

Cavan Luc Vemarian said nothing, looking as if he wanted to scream, and his uncle was silent.

“We have heard,” Vemarian’s uncle finally said.

“You may have our men,” Tahrl’s grandfather said, “but they owe

## **The Etymology of Fire**

their ultimate allegiance to us. You should have kept more of your own there. It took but a word. Stonegarden is ours.”

“You will not keep it.”

“Yes, you are right. Stonegarden belongs to the King, and it is for him to decide what is to be done with the place. Perhaps, he will choose someone more in line with our interests to run it. All I know is that it will not be you.”

“Don’t be a fool. My nephew is the best qualified to lead the troglodyte defense.”

“Oh, I think I can offer the King an alternative.”

“The people will not stand for this.”

“They will because you are not going to inflame them. You have too much to lose.”

“Nothing that cannot be regained.”

“Except the trades. You are forgetting we do not like your control of the situation. The Kyres of the great houses are in agreement. We will recall our men from your service, and we will cut the trade routes. How will you cope without the services and trade we provide?”

“We have dealt with hardship before.”

“But, for how long?”

“You will suffer.”

“Not so much as you would think. You really believe that you are the only ones who want things? Why, we could hold out for years just trading among the great houses. Then, there are others. The Montmorin, for example.”

“Montmorin?”

“Oh, yes, why should we stop doing business with them just because of you?”

“It won’t work.”

“I’m prepared to find out.”

Cavan Luc Vemarian’s uncle was silent, staring across the table as if he might cause it to explode. He did not speak, and he did not speak. The others watched him as if they were waiting for the world to end. The lords of the noble houses looked as if they wanted to overturn the table, throw chairs at the Kyres of the great houses, and attack them with the weapons they most likely had hidden among them, but they did nothing because of the magician.

“We do not need trinkets and bobbles,” Vemarian said.

“Be silent,” his uncle said, turning, looking at him, and Vemarian



## **The Etymology of Fire**

looked as if he would speak. When his uncle's eyes did not waiver, he looked as if he would scream.

"This is about the future," Vemarian whispered as if it would have been a shout had he faced anybody other than his uncle.

"So, you have said." His uncle turned from him slowly as if he was pulling free of a great weight. Vemarian's uncle looked across the table to Tahlr's grandfather and said nothing. Tahlr wondered how much longer Cavan Luc Vemarian would hold still. "We have no desire to disrupt trade."

"Nor do I," Tahlr's grandfather said.

"Perhaps, we can reach an agreement. Perhaps, we could speak more on this tomorrow."

"Yes, we could continue our discussions tomorrow. Except."

"Yes, as a sign of good faith, my nephew will submit himself to the King's will."

"This is an outrage!" Vemarian said, standing. The other nobles pulling at him and trying to make him sit! All the time, they watched the magician. "This is a catastrophe! The Wraiths will destroy us! The city will burn! The Ivory Tower will fall! I have seen it! The future is ashes!"

The nobles did not wait or stand on ceremony; they forced Vemarian from the hall, pushing, kicking, and half carrying him away. His uncle was the last to leave, waiting for the nobles to remove Vemarian, and his eyes never left Tahlr's grandfather. Tahlr said nothing, holding still, waiting for Vemarian's uncle to speak and shatter everything, but nothing was said. At last, Cavan Luc Vemarian's uncle left the hall.

Tahlr looked to his grandfather not wanting to breathe. They could still hear the sounds of Vemarian's struggle fading into the dark. At last even the magician left so that there was only Tahlr and the Kyres of the great houses alone in the hall.

"It's over," his grandfather said.

*Chapter Eight*  
**The Forgotten Road**

*The Morgan Family estate remained ready for a siege as they returned from council. Repairs had been attempted, and the worst of the blood and grime had been cleared away. The court was yet quiet, but it was no longer empty of all but guards and soldiers. It would still be much time before the traders and caravans returned, but the court before the mansion would be ready for them when they did return. Tahrl ignored them all, making for the mansion and the halls and chambers, and he did not stop until he had found one room from among all the others. Sinking into a cushion, covering his eyes, he did not want to breathe. He did not want to move as if he knew he would simply begin to shake and tremble and he feared that he would never stop. He looked up from his hands without knowing why and found Armada watching him. She said nothing, and Tahrl wondered how she had found him. He looked round as if noticing the room for the first time and recognized it, wondering how he had found it after so many years. Armada stood, watching him, and said nothing.*

“We did it,” he said with a voice of gravel and stone. “I don’t want to believe. So much that could still go wrong. Details to be settled. But, we did it.”

Armada did not move as if to breathe was to bring the whole world crashing down. Tahrl felt the trembling in his shoulders and hands, wanting to cry, wanting to scream, wiping at his face and his eyes.

“We did it,” he whispered between his fingers.

“Good.”



*The only light came from Tahrl’s lantern as he made his way down long halls of stone and iron passing doors that were little more than blocks of wood. He wondered at the dark and wondered what*

## **The Etymology of Fire**

it would be to put out the light. He stopped, pondering the dark, imagining nothing but the shadows that would play at the mind if there was no light. He almost dropped the lantern, and then he was moving again with the light all but racing over the stone and dark halls. He stopped at last, looking at one door, reading marks that had been burned into the wood but were so faded and gray as to be almost nothing. Pushing at the door, working the lock, he found somebody chained to the wall with long loops and locks so that he might move about just a little and rest on the stone. Cavan Luc Vemarian did not move as the light brushed over him as if he had been so long in the dark that he could not see. Tahrl watched him, letting the light flicker and play over Vemarian, wondering if the man would move.

“Why?” Tahrl said when he could stand the silence no longer. Vemarian did not move; he did not seem even to breathe.

“I told you.” The voice sounded dry and burned like a husk of paper that had been tossed into the fire.

“That is what you wanted them to believe,” Tahrl said. “That is not why.”

“Ask your masters then.”

“I am forsaken, remember? I call no one master.”

“Kyre Morgan would disagree, but that is not who I meant.”

“Who then?”

“You know.”

“No.”

“Do not torture me, Morgan. Do you think the King is listening in this dark cell? If you should speak truth here, he will not hear of it.”

“What truth?”

“To the end. To the end. You hold to the last. If you were here, Tahrl, would you confess?”

“None force my hand, Vemarian. When Alexander asked me to help, he put no compulsion on me.”

“Alexander?”

“Yes.”

“Then, there may yet be hope if you have not faced them. Fight it, Morgan,” Vemarian said, trying to stand, choking on his words. “Fight it.” He stood, shaking as if he might fall. “Your mind is still your own. Fight it, Tahrl Morgan. The voices in your head. The echoes. If they do not hold you, there is hope.”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“And, I say that none control me. I have known Alexander for many years. Do not say that he would now seek to use me.”

Vemarian collapsed as if all the strength had been drained from his soul, and he began to laugh with a sound that would not stop.

“I have failed,” Vemarian finally said with the light running off his face. “The Kianan will fall.”

“Is this all about the dragons?” Tahrl said, wanting to smash Vemarian with the lantern, wishing to see him engulfed in light and flame. “Even now, you hold to your lies? You would destroy them? You would destroy us?”

“They will destroy,” Vemarian said, jerking, trying to stand. “They will. I have seen it, Morgan. I have seen it.”

“You are blind.”

“No.”

“You speak your lies for so long that you have come to believe them?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No,” Vemarian whispered.

“You are nothing, Vemarian. You have nothing.”

Cavan Luc Vemarian did not answer.



*Tahrl found his grandfather in his study. He didn't say anything as he pushed past the door as if he did not want to disturb his grandfather or draw his gaze from the window. His grandfather did turn without a word having been spoken, and he looked to Tahrl. He watched Tahrl with a look almost as if he was seeing his grandchild for the first time.*

“You sent for me?” Tahrl said when he could stand the silence no longer.

“Yes, Tahrl, I thought you should know. The King has agreed with our choice for Lord of Stonegarden.”

“Who?” Tahrl said, feeling the world shift and shake, and then everything slipped into place. “No.”

“Oh, yes, congratulations.”

“Why?”

“Tahrl, you are quite uniquely situated. You have ties to the Montmorin. You have spoken with Wraths and dragons. I think that is the name. And, you have ties to one other.”

## The Etymology of Fire

“Who?” Tahrl could feel the door behind him through a gap in the air. He could not touch it, but he could feel it like a curtain slowly billowing away.

“Your friend,” his grandfather said. “The one I understand first appeared as a horse. She is quite interesting. Yes, quite interesting.”

“What did she tell you?” Tahrl said, feeling gravel in his throat, imagining the forest swept with smoke and flame.

“Many things. We had much time to talk while we could still force her to rest. Her family you could say is the secret to Stonegarden. Their experience with the troglodytes is what finally convinced the King to approve our plan.”

“What did you tell him?”

“As much as I needed to tell him. You haven’t been away that long, Tahrl. You know the King. You know he can be trusted.”

“Is this wise?”

“Tahrl, you know all of this. You are acting as if you do not want the honor.” His grandfather watched him, tracing his face and his eyes; Tahrl tried to hold his gaze, feeling his breath catch and burn. “What did you expect, Tahrl? Who do you think you are?”

“I hadn’t thought.”

“What? Return to the Ivory Tower? Resume your research as if nothing had happened?”

“No,” Tahrl said and then nothing as if he could not feel the words. “I hadn’t thought. I never thought. I left the place in the dark in the night. I never thought.”

“Now, you can think. A meeting place of Kianan, Montmorin, the Wraiths or is that dragons, and the others. The people of the forest.”

“We must move carefully.”

“Quietly, yes, but not secretly. Secrets will not work.”

“I want to protect them.”

“Of course,” grandfather said. “We are Morgan ap Morin. We have much experience with this kind of thing, you will agree? The Kianan and the Montmorin were not always friends. Now, they are. Now, we are.”

Tahrl said nothing.



*Tahrl found Armada away from the camp and the light of the fire. She was resting on the ground with her legs stretched out before her and watching the stars and the sky. She took no notice of Tahrl as*

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

he came up beside her, and he wondered for a moment if she even knew he was there. He sat, facing her, and listened to the sounds and voices of the camp carried to him on the dark and the breeze.

“You’re almost home,” he said only to be answered by the sounds of the distant camp. He looked to her, seeing her face only in the darkest of outlines, and he could not see her eyes at all. “It’s hard to believe,” he said, catching the cold on the tip of his tongue. “One more day, is that all? One more day and you will be back in the forest. Or, will you stay on the road with the ambassador’s group? Go through Edgewood.” He looked to the stars as if trying to follow her gaze. “I wish I could. See Edgewood again. But, I must stray from the road. Balthazar must be seen. And, then my new home. My new home.”

“You would see Edgewood one more time?” Armada said, and Tahrl caught at the air as if he could not breathe.

“Yes,” he said. “No, I don’t know.”

“I would not see Balthazar again. So, I go where the Kianan ambassadors would go.”

“And then where? Home?”

“The mountains call to me. The needs against the troglodytes.”

“Of course. Always the troglodytes. My curse to Stonegarden. The troglodytes.”

Armada said nothing.

“We never talk,” Tahrl said as if surprised to hear his own voice.

“We’re talking now.”

“No, I mean. No. We never talk. All of that time in the mountains and we never talked.”

“You will find it does not do to talk out of turn in the mountains. It attracts the troglodytes. Better to conserve one’s strength.”

“But, that never stopped us. We disagreed on so many things. You saw me as a burden. You don’t like me.”

“I never said that.” She was a shadow in the dark.

“But, we never,” he said. “I know so little about you. And, I would know. You are your father’s daughter. I would know.”

“I’m sure my sister.”

“I do not know your sister,” Tahrl said, remembering the touch of Armada’s tongue against his face. “I’m sure she won’t be at Stonegarden.”

“I will be.”

“What?”

## **The Etymology of Fire**

---

“At Stonegarden,” Armada said. “Stonegarden, what a name. Somebody has to train your men, and I understand troglodytes as well as anybody.”

“You will?” he said, almost standing. “You will?”

“Not right away, of course. There are still details, I understand.”

“Yes, there are always details. But, you will?”

“Yes.”

“Yes? That is good. That is very good.”

“I know.”



*Tahrl found the forest stretched out before him as if there was a boundary or division in the world. Behind him and all around him were the fields and lands of the Kianan. The Ivory Tower was at his back lost somewhere in the distance and haze. Before him was the forest that the Kianan never entered because it was the realm of monsters and evil creatures. Before him was a world that was discussed with hushed voices and whispered words because nobody wanted to believe. Tahrl watched the forest and the mountains stretched out beyond the leaves and the wood.*

“It seems so strange,” he said.

“What?” Alexander said.

“That we are here,” he said without turning to look to his friend. “We shouldn’t be. Here. We shouldn’t be on our way to confront a magician named Balthazar.”

“We have every right to seek Balthazar. We have our instructions from the King himself.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know,” Alexander said. “Besides, it is Masters Rufus and Mariama who will actually be informing him that he must stop his experiments with graths. You are finding it strange that we made it. Survived the mountains. Survived the Ivory Tower. Armada and the Kianan ambassadors on their way to Edgewood and then Greenhaven.”

“I wish,” Tahrl said as the words caught on his breath.

“Yes?”

“I wish things were other than what they are. I wish for other things.”

“Don’t play wishing games with me, Tahrl. You’ll lose. You wish

## **The Etymology of Fire**

to return to Edgewood. See it again? Live there before the people started whispering about you. When dragons were only legends.”

“No, I don’t know. If dragons were only legends, then why shouldn’t I live back at the Ivory Tower?”

“There are many things I wish,” Alexander said. “Many things. But, there is something else I wish. An audience of small children. Laughing. Smiling. Ignoring me as likely as not. But, listening. Enraptured all the same. And, the funniest thing about that wish is that it occasionally comes true.”

“You know, Alex, you really can be annoying sometimes.”

“I know.”

“Well, come on. Are we ready? Let’s get this over with.”



**Also by Keith D. Jones**

---

*Tourist Hunter (2016)*

*Pyrrhic Kingdom (2013)*

*The Faire Folk of Gideon: Pin the  
Tail on the Donkey (2001)*

*The Magic Flute (1999)*