

Chapter One

The disappearance of King Darkpinion came as a shock to us all. But in my most secret heart, I am glad. For in those final years he was changed... Changed in ways that struck fear into the hearts of his subjects, and deeply troubled those of us who used to call him friend. I think—I believe—that if his reign had gone on much longer, some great and abiding tragedy would have come to pass.

—Sadi Lotuspetal, Protector of Watir, Founder of the Order of Sages

The Autumn air lay damp and heavy, as oppressive as the ruddy orange light of Fyre Moon. The remote sphere lurked above the clouds, casting the world below in uncertain gloom. Somewhere in the northern frontier of Sylaros, two figures stood upon an expanse of fire-blackened earth. Behind them, across a wide belt of open country, the watchfires of Fort Eagle twinkled in the darkness. In front of the companions lay the Wilds, a living wall of mutated jungle. It stretched in a ragged line running north to south, extending far beyond the range of vision. From deep within came a cacophony of sounds both familiar and strange: clicking, buzzing, growling, and otherworldly chittering.

Mirta Tailwind stood tall and lank, her hair a common shade of brown, flecked with the gray of middle age. Nevertheless, the uniform of the caretaker's guild hugged every curve of her sinewy frame. Neatly folded wings adorned her back, the plumes a mix of blacks and browns—fairly typical coloring for a Sylari, if somewhat plain. A harness of three throwing knives nestled beneath her left arm, elegant handles pointed forward, ready to draw at a moment's notice. In her right hand she gripped an ugly, broad-bladed machete.

Next to the caretaker stood a young Sylari woman of the highest birth—Princess Allele, third-born daughter to the king of Sylaros. Her hair fell to the tops of her shoulders, straight and black as a night bereft of stars. Unlike her companion, there was nothing plain about the princess's wings. By virtue of their coloring alone, the feathers were exquisite: lustrous black vanes run through with striations of golden-brown, lightening to shimmering metallic gold at the tips. However, Allele's coverts and alulae—the short feathers visible above the line of her shoulders—stuck out stiffly in odd directions, creating an unpleasant bushy effect. Also, the radial bone of her right

Comment [TLL1]: I do love epic fantasy books that have "historic" quotes or epigraphs. Such a great technique to add depth to the world.

Comment [TLL2]: Great way to establish that this is not Earth right away to a new reader like me.

Comment [TLL3]: Whose range of vision? This whole paragraph is third person omniscient. It feels like what you get in a movie when the camera pans across the landscape before zooming in on the tiny figures below. Which is probably OK for the beginning of the book, but I'll keep an eye out for any POV switches later on (in case you're not consciously doing it and need it pointed out).

Comment [TLL4]: Familiar to whom? So far we don't have a character whose eyes we're seeing through.

Comment [TLL5]: A character emerges!

Comment [TLL6]: I love the surnames

Comment [TLL7]: A striking figure!

Comment [TLL8]: Highest contrasts with third-born because they're in the same sentence... if she were truly highest, she would be first-born and heir, right?

Comment [TLL9]: Such great imagery and language!

wing had a permanent crook, preventing it from laying flat against her back, no matter how tightly she squeezed.

These deformities aside, three years in the College of Knightsages had forged Alelle's body into a thing supple and trim, as strong and graceful as the blade of Draykin steel that hung at her hip. Her eighteenth naming day had come and gone the previous summer, without fanfare. She'd spent the day practicing waypoint combat with Lord Falrym. And although she still ranked but a novice, her training had progressed to the point where she was allowed to wear her spell glove wherever she went—as she did now. Three sackets of shards dangled from eyelet holes in her belt, including a spell shield. Scant armament for an excursion into the Wilds, but formidable enough, if things didn't get completely out of hand. If they did, well... She'd been taught how to kill with a shield, if she had to.

<< SOME TEXT REMOVED FOR BREVITY OF SAMPLE >>

"Well?" Mirta prodded after several moments.

"Do you think it's safe?" Alelle asked, pretending ignorance. How could it be? This was the Wilds—the most unpredictable, dangerous place in all of Xil. An unnatural jungle sprawling across the heart of the continent, every inch of it polluted with wild magic.

"The Wilds are never safe." Mirta's fingers tightened around the handle of her machete. "But we're not far from the settlement. These outskirts are heavily patrolled. Chances are, we won't meet anything we can't handle... between the two of us."

Aelle turned and looked skyward, casting a dour look at the moon. The fortress of Enokir, Guardian of Fyre. Its surface pulsed with an uneven patchwork of orange and red light—precisely like a bed of coals glowering at the bottom of a hearth—veined with fissures of black and gray. Autumn was Enokir's chosen season. A season of tumult. Of increasing cold interspersed with periods of mild sun; of rains, and fog, and tortured clouds. A season of transition, and of decline, calling to mind the slow fade from life toward death. The Great Trickster cherished this transformation. His moon was likewise ever-changing in its character, able to flare at times like a miniature sun, illuminating the middle of the night. Or, like tonight, it could shrink to a sullen ember, casting a mysterious haze that deepened the shadows and blotted out the stars.

Aelle suspected he was withholding the light just to spite her. And why not? All the Guardians seemed to relish making her life difficult. Even Hepheydron, Guardian of Aire, patron of the winged Sylari race. Alelle was supposedly the Guardian's champion—her chosen Protector—and the bearer of the Guardian's Kiss, with all its

Comment [TLL10]: Nicely done, contrasting beauty and deformity. And also great job introducing unfamiliar words.

Comment [TLL11]: Interesting hint to the magic system

Comment [TLL12]: Intriguing

Comment [TLL13]: Great job summarizing exposition... and introducing it at the right time.

Comment [TLL14]: Fragments can be confusing at times but I think these are great and add a different cadence that is nice here.

Comment [TLL15]: Nice way to introduce some aspects to their religion here.

You know, for a Book 2 you are doing a great job of letting me dip my toe into the world and take a look around without dumping me into the deep end.

Comment [TLL16]: Internal thoughts. So this is more like third person limited. I don't think it's bad for you to move from omniscient to limited, as long as you don't suddenly headswap to say, Mirta's thoughts in the same chapter.

Comment [TLL17]: I'm confused by this pronoun. It made me reread the previous couple of sentences.

attendant blessings and curses. But in the three years since Alelle had passed her trials and entered the college, she had yet to discover the nature of her gift, or what any of it truly meant. Her hand went reflexively to the stone teardrop hanging around her neck by a fine silver chain. Called the Wisdom Stone, it was a gift from the Anurian mystic, Jeni Flybane. A reminder to seek balance in all things. Tonight, balance was far from Alelle's thoughts.

She turned back to face the jungle. Anything could be hiding in those black shadows. Anything. She nodded to Mirta. "I need to see him. This may be my only chance."

"There's our way in." Mirta gestured to the narrow opening of a scout's trail, little more than a thin band of dirt cutting into the undergrowth. New green vines and bright red brambles choked the entrance, as though the jungle had tried to strangle it shut in the time since it was last used—probably yesterday. Mirta set to work with her machete. The omnipresent chorus of animal sounds dipped by half as she began to chop. Undeterred, the caretaker soon cleared a hole wide enough to squeeze through.

Aelle held her breath, then took her first tentative step into the Wilds. The moment she crossed beneath the canopy the air became noticeably warmer. Reflexively she curled her spell glove around the shield sacket on her belt, the glove's fingers stiff with inset strips of telepathium wire. The tightly wrapped bundle contained a mix of shards representing the four basic elements, Aire, Fyre, Watir, Krystal. Each had been carefully selected to form a precise balance of Aetheric energies. Once cast, they would combine in harmony to produce something her teachers called a *chimera*—a semiautonomous entity of incredible power and versatility.

<< SOME TEXT REMOVED FOR BREVITY OF SAMPLE >>

"That was stupid," Alelle snapped. "Are you trying to get us killed?"

Mirta rounded on her, powder-blue eyes flashing in the torchlight. "Shall I drag you back to town, as is my sworn duty? Eagle's crest is much safer, the royal encampment safer still. Your bed awaits whenever you wish!"

"No," Alelle said quickly. "No... I'm sorry."

"We're still alive," Mirta huffed, wing feathers bristling. "In the Wilds, that's all that matters. Let's go." She turned and barged down the trail, hacking at a vine dangling in her path.

Cursing inwardly, Alelle hurried to catch up.

Comment [TLL18]: At this point I feel like I'm starting to lose track of all the names of people who are not actually in this scene. Lord Falrym, Enokir, Hephedron, and now Jeni Flybane. If they're not in the scene (not described), they're harder for me to keep in my head. (Is it necessary to mention her here?)

Comment [TLL19]: Internal thoughts (limited third person)

Comment [TLL20]: I wasn't sure exactly what "it" referred to since there have been a lot of nouns.

Comment [TLL21]: Oooo cool! Love the elements and the magic system so far. Can't wait to see it in action. This is the best part of fantasy novels. :)

Comment [TLL22]: So this is interesting so far, but one thing that is missing for me (possibly because of not reading Book 1) is character motivation. There are hints... like Mirta asking if she's sure she wants to do this and telling her they can go home whenever they want. But I still don't know why they're going into the Wilds.

I also don't know why they don't just fly over it. They have wings. But again I think this is just a lack of familiarity with what they can and can't do. Maybe her deformity prevents her from flying? Or maybe the Wilds magic prevents flying, period. Or just that they don't want to be seen by flying scout patrols?