

*Chapter 2: They Came from the North*

Alba Aula was a castle made of brick and stone, but it was very much alive.

Since the days of the Royal War, when the Royal Family reclaimed their throne from the hands of the usurpers, the members of the family in whom the Light Magic dwelled were buried in the graveyard. There they lay behind the castle's keep amongst the marble gravestones and flowers left by loved ones.

But the Light Magic didn't depart along with the person's soul to the Above and Caelum. Instead, it seeped into the environment where the body of the deceased lay. If they died in Ina Desert, their Light Magic became a part of its sands. If their body lay at the bottom of a lake, the life of the magic was breathed into the waters. And if they were buried within the walls of Alba Aula, their magic became a part of the castle itself, giving it the same life and consciousness that the Light Magic has when present in a living being. The act of burying the Royal Family within the castle had given it a will and an intelligence, able to change its form to suit whatever purpose it needed, even if its inhabitants did not yet know what that purpose was. In times of peace, it was the shining white star with towers reaching to the sky that I knew and loved. But according to the old stories and legends, during times of war it became a fortress, with high walls and ramparts filled with slits for the archers to fire their arrows, with catapults and narrowed halls that twisted in a maze to confuse the would-be invaders.

And now the walls were beginning to rise.

I turned to Edwin and saw a look of bewilderment and terror on the boy's face, an expression that I too must have worn. I grabbed the back of his shirt with my mouth like I was a cat carrying its young and made a break for the castle. I could begin to hear the confused murmurs and shouts of the servants as they too noticed the walls that began to loom above them.

Children clung to the dresses of their nursemaids as they watched the texture of the keep's walls change from a sparkling white to dull, hard brick.

The better to keep out invaders, the stories said.

Edwin glanced back at the spot we had abandoned and reached out for his book that still lay there. But there was no time. I had to get him inside the keep, inside with his parents and the knights before whatever was coming got here. I charged through the main entrance, not daring to look behind me as the shadow from the walls continued to grow, spreading its darkness over the grass and stone walkways.

The interior of the castle was in an uproar. I had thought the day Edwin disappeared had been unusual, but it was nothing compared to this. Servants ran frantically to and fro in the halls just outside the great hall, calling out for their families. The knights and soldiers rushed about, finding their weapons and armor, gearing up for the unknown threat, hurrying to their stations. I watched as several of the Gryphon Riders donned their feather-embellished helmets and headed for the stables where their mounts were kept, and the Wyvern Squadron members charged for theirs as well. The stench of fear and sweat was in the air. My ears clanged with the sound of crying frightened children and weapons sliding in and out of their scabbards and armor clanking and knights shouting out their commands from beneath their polished silver helmets.

And all around us, the high arched ceilings and generously wide hallways were beginning to narrow.

"Excuse me!" I tried to shout above the din. But no one responded. Not even my status as one of the dragons could elicit their attention. They were all too caught up in their respective tasks of preparing for battle. "Where are the King and Queen?"

“Maybe they’re in the Great Hall,” Edwin suggested, nearly having to scream to be heard above the roaring all around us. He slipped through the rush of people and I followed, leaping over the crowd with a gigantic bound. I landed at the steps in front of the massive oak doors, and Edwin pushed them inward.

The Hall was dark. The windows had disappeared altogether, leaving no source of light save for the dome at its ceiling’s center, which cast a blood-red light on the floor. And the thrones sat empty. “Mother! Father!” Edwin ran into the Hall, unable to see that they weren’t there in the darkness like I had.

I followed after him to the center of the Hall. “They’re not here, Edwin!” But he was already nearly at the throne, and when he saw their absence he turned back to me. His eyes left mine and travelled to the dome above my head.

The red light fell directly on me, basking me in its eerie glow. I slowly followed Edwin’s gaze. The glass of the dome too had transformed. Where there had once been five heroes, only one remained: the Guardian of Time. The light had dyed his white cloak a crimson red, and his sword, previously in its scabbard, was drawn.

Blood was to be spilled this day.

“Come on,” I whispered to Edwin, trying to swallow the unease the transformation of the dome had caused. “We need to find your parents.”

He and I made our way to back where we had come, and as if on cue the oak doors swung open, revealing Alyssa and a squadron of knights behind her. She was wearing the full Dragonbound regalia: the silver breastplate with her dragon’s gem, the diamond-shaped ruby, at its center, the white and grey bracers on her arms, and the chainmail-lined red tunic that matched Furion’s scales. The white feathered cape, fastened by a smaller version of the ruby on her

breastplate, flowed past her shoulders. And her Dragonblade hung in its scabbard at her belt. “With me!” she shouted to us. “The King and Queen are in their bedchambers. Hurry!”

We dashed towards the group, joining their ranks as we hurried through the halls to Edwin’s parents. The servants still rushed about as they found their families and headed for the shelters within the keep. The halls grew darker. The windows were shrinking and disappearing completely, replaced by dimly-lit torches that grew out of the walls. The air became cold and damp as contact with the outside world was cut off. The castle appeared to be sealing us in like we were corpses within a tomb, but I knew better. It wasn’t us who were being sealed in.

Alba Aula was sealing something else out.

We rushed up the stairwell to the living-quarters floor. The stones dug into my feet as they twisted and shifted, imprinting their stony texture on my scales. The entire stairwell had begun to spiral and narrow as we passed through it. Edwin and Alyssa leapt off of the twisting steps with the knights close behind them. I tried to keep pace, but I was losing my breath. The walls were closing in all around me, all the light outside fading away. I felt as if my body was growing and swelling to meet the walls, and although my mind tried to tell my body that it was the other way around, that it was the walls that were getting smaller, my heart pounded in my ears and I couldn’t breath. Oh Dominus help me, I couldn’t breath.

“Riella!” Edwin ran back to me despite the frantic shouts of the knights. “You can’t stop here!”

“It’s going to be alright,” Alyssa tried to reassure me. “The walls won’t close in on you, they know better.” It was easy for her to say. She still fit comfortably within the halls, but I was at least ten times her size. And while the walls and ceiling still weren’t close to closing in on me, it sure felt like they were.

Edwin put his hand on my snout, and I thought back to the day I first met him, to the day when he stood outside his father's unopening door with the book in his hands, to the day a week ago when he had run away and risked the wrath of his parents just to buy me a birthday present. My legs found their strength again, and I followed close behind him as we wove our way through the twisting halls.

At long last we reached the door to the King and Queen's bedchamber. Alyssa turned the golden knob and let Edwin in. I couldn't fit through the door frame, but I managed to poke my head through.

The King and Queen stood at the foot of their silken bed. They had both donned their suits of armor, white pieces of finely-tempered metal that caught the faint light of the torches that had replaced the windows. The white diamonds adorning their armor matched those they wore on the crowns on their foreheads. And at each of their hips hung their swords. Edwin leapt into his mother's arms, trembling in her embrace. She ran her hands through his hair, trying to reassure her son, whispering to him that everything was going to be all right when we all knew that it wasn't.

The Queen raised her head, looking even more regal than before with her golden hair pinned back against her skull. "Edwin and I will stay here," she said to us. "I ask that you accompany us and offer us your protection," she addressed the knights.

They knelt before her with their hands crossed before their chests. "It would be an honor, Your Highness."

"Riella," she said as she turned to me, "You and Alkan are to report to the Dragonhold with Alyssa."

“Yes, Your Highness,” I said and tried to lower my head as much as I was able in the confined space. I locked eyes with Edwin. “Be safe.” He gave a sombre nod in return.

“This way,” Alyssa said as she led me away from the bedchamber. We sprinted down the remaining halls towards the stairwell that led back to the ground floor. She flung open the door at the end of the hall but stopped suddenly, and I nearly crashed into her.

The stairwell was gone. Beyond the door was a straight drop to the ground several feet below us. I shook my head, trying to clear it from the disorientation this whole debacle was causing. Alyssa hesitated for a moment and then leapt off of the doorway’s ledge. Her white cape snapped open into two white silken wings, and she glided safely to the ground. I readied myself to mimic her jump, but first turned and looked behind me.

The halls were continuing to narrow, and as I stared at them they twisted into curving shapes. My stomach churned. When I gazed out again beyond the doorway it looked as if the entire world and not just Alba Aula was twisting and spinning as well. “You need to jump!” Alyssa called up to me. But I couldn’t. My breath was trapped in my throat again. My ears rang and stung with the shouting of the knights and screeching of the gryphons and wyverns. And the door frame around me was beginning to shrink. I cried out in shock as I felt the wood press against my scales. In a wild panic I threw myself away from the door, just barely managing to open my wings before I crashed into the ground. I stood in the grass, heaving and retching up all the food I had eaten that morning. When I looked back up at the spot where I had jumped, I saw that the door had disappeared altogether.

Chaos was all around us. An impossibly dark cloud had covered all of Lux Splendens, seeping down from the north and blotting out any light from above and turning the early morning into the middle of the night. The knights of the Royal Army and of House Volarus, along with

the castle guards, rushed to their stations along the ramparts above us, readying their arrows to be fired through the loopholes in the walls. Men and women in white and silver armor manned the catapults that had sprung up along the walls, and ranks of soldiers stationed themselves within the courtyards. Their weapons were drawn as they looked about wildly, awaiting the enemy to arrive. The King joined their ranks at the center of the ramparts, his armor gleaming in the little light that remained. The Gryphon Riders and Wyvern Squadron had taken to their air, circling the castle on their winged mounts. And above them, resplendent and shimmering, soared the Dragons and Dragonbound.

My attention turned to the shouting at the front of the walls of Alba Aula, where a gigantic portcullis had formed. The drawbridge was drawn upward above the moat and the gate was closed, not allowing any of the people to enter. A crowd of the citizens of Lux Splendens had gathered at the entrance, crying out to be let in to safety. But the drawbridge stayed drawn upward, and the wall around Alba Aula had risen to at least three times its normal height.

A resounding boom emanated from behind me. “The Dragonhold has lowered,” Alyssa whispered with a hint of panic in her voice. I turned and looked for myself. The massive cavern, usually held aloft by the same Light Magic that gave life to the castle, had now touched down to the ground, landing in the courtyard behind the keep.

It didn’t take much to figure out what was going on. Normally the citizens of Lux Splendens would be let into the keep for safety along with the servants when the city was under attack. But this time Alba Aula itself was the target. And our enemies were airborne.

Alyssa donned her helmet. The silver metal covered all the curly dark hair that she had tied back against her head, and I barely recognized her. Furion swooped down beside us, and as he zoomed by she swung herself into the saddle with one fluid motion. “Get to the Dragonhold!”

she called to me as she was borne away into the sky with the other Dragons and Dragonbound. The air rang with the clanging of the alarm, the same bell that tolled the day Edwin had run away. One clang. Two. Three. Four. It was no longer a drill. This was an emergency. Five. Six? Seven. Eight. Nine. I lost count as the clanging sounded through Alba Aula, and with each toll the hole in my stomach tore wider and wider with pure fear.

And then everything was silent. The alarm stopped abruptly, and the knights shuffled in their stances. Minutes stretched on as we watched the sky with no sign of an enemy except for the black cloud above us. With each passing second my blood pulsed in my ears, my muscles taunt with dread.

I felt Alkan appear beside me. I could hear his heart pounding inside his chest like a bird trying to escape from its cage. “We need to get to the Dragonhold,” he whispered in the silence. But I didn’t move, and neither did he. We stood rooted to our spot in the courtyard, our gaze frozen on the black cloud above us. The minutes dragged on, and still no sign of an invader appeared. The knights began to mutter to themselves, and many of them began to visibly relax, leaning against the walls and lowering their weapons. But the Dragons and their Dragonbound knew better, still watching the skies intently.

After nearly an hour of paralyzing fear, still nothing had happened. Alkan and I were rooted to the ground, but gradually my fear began to ebb. Maybe it was a false alarm. Maybe Alba Aula had made a mistake. The muscles in my legs relaxed, and I turned to Alkan. “We should go,” I said, and he nodded in agreement. He turned and started to head for the Dragonhold. I took one last look at the cloud-covered sky.

My heart froze. The shadow in the back of my mind stirred, and from where it lay I felt a sharp stinging pain erupt out. From it came a single word: *KILL*.

The cloud exploded, and the Abyss itself rained down upon us.

They came from the North.

The cloud tore to shreds, and from it erupted legions of shadow-beasts, horrifying creatures of all shapes and sizes with jet-black fur and scales, crimson claws and fangs, and bloodlust in their eyes. The beasts of Umbra, the land in the northeast tip of Initium, descended upon Alba Aula, colliding with the spears and swords of the knights and the claws of the Dragons. They tore at the towers of the once-gleaming castle, ignoring the city and its inhabitants completely. Those manning the gate to Alba Aula had been right to not let the people in. Whatever the monsters wanted, it wasn't in the city. It was in the castle itself. Screeches filled the darkened sky as the creatures cried out their murderous intent. They filled the air, borne aloft on their membranous bat-like wings, raining acidic spit upon those defending the castle.

And then the Knights of Initium fought back. A volley of arrows shot upward, plunging their barbed tips into the wings and chests of the beasts. Bolts of Earth's Breath magic erupted from the fingertips of the mages stationed on the ramparts. And above all the chaos, the roaring of the dragons rang through the blood-soaked air. The six dragons swooped about, sinking their teeth and claws into the monsters while the Dragonbound leapt off their backs, twirling through the air with their swords drawn. Alyssa dove out of Furion's saddle, free-falling as her Dragonblade shimmered in the light of the Earth's Breath bolts and flaming arrows. She twisted herself in the air, spinning as she brought the blade down upon the shadow-beast directly below her, lopping off its head in one powerful sweep. Her cape snapped open into the two white wings and she landed with a *thump* on the ground that was quickly becoming soaked with blood from the monsters and soldiers alike. The girl continued to fight, plunging her sword into the shadow-

beasts surrounding her alongside the other knights she had landed amongst. She shouted a word in the Old Tongue and a blast of ruby light erupted from the Earth's Breath stone in the pommel of her Dragonblade, searing through dozens of the beasts surrounding them. With a shake of the ground Furion landed beside her, a blast of flame spewing from his maws.

The catapults let loose their ammunition, sending rocks, flaming bundles of wood, anything the soldiers could find at the enemy. Several of the volleys hit their mark, but there were so many of the monsters, too many. They filled the air like a swarm of locusts unleashed upon a field of grain. The screams of dying men and women echoed across the courtyard, mingled with the shrieks of the beasts. The air reeked of sweat and blood.

And in the midst of it all were Alkan and me.

We stood rooted to the ground, unable to move as we surveyed the chaos around us. Above me I watched as one of the gryphons was caught in the talons of a shadow-beast. The monster's powerful tendons rippled as it tore the poor animal in two, spilling blood and severed intestines down upon us. A scream erupted from my throat at the horrible sight, and I made a break for the Dragonhold. Alkan followed close behind as I ran across the blood-stained grass, weaving my way between the mutilated bodies of knights, gryphons, wyverns and shadow-beasts that had fallen to the ground. We didn't dare take to the air. The Dragonhold grew closer, and I forced my legs to move faster, go faster, please, let me get out of here-

A tremor ran through the ground as a hideous shadow-beast landed in front of us. It was slightly smaller than I was, but it bore two sets of wings and four heads upon its shoulders, each gleaming with rows of spiked horns and teeth. Four sets of jaws opened, and a terrible screech emanated from its maws. Alkan crouched low, his tail flicking, and he lunged at the beast before it had a chance to strike. The monster caught him with its claws mid-leap, sending him sprawling

through the air. He landed with a thud on the ground. The beast spread its four wings wide as it loomed over him, froth dripping from its fangs.

And I just stood and watched.

My vision was slipping. Everything became blurry as the shadow in the back of my mind pulsed and grew. The inky black fingers stretched across my consciousness, spreading their message. *Kill. Kill.* I shook my head, trying to blot out the droning, but it wouldn't relent. I started back at Alkan, who was struggling to get up from the ground. The shadow-beast smacked his face with its claws, sending him back down, and two of the four heads reared up and then sank their teeth into his scales. He screamed as the teeth tore into his flesh, and crimson splattered across emerald green.

His scream brought me back. The shadow disappeared, retreating back to the far corner of my mind, and my awareness of the rest of the battlefield disappeared along with it. There was only one thing before me: the monster that was tearing into Alkan.

From deep inside of my chest a roar burst forth, the cry of an enraged dragon. I charged the beast, striking it squarely with the top of my skull, tearing into its flesh with my horns. Without thinking I flapped my wings and thrust myself and the beast upward, anything to get it away from Alkan. The monster screeched in pain and sank its teeth into me. I let out a cry as the teeth easily tore through my scales that hadn't yet been hardened by the strength of the Binding Ritual's magic. Beneath me Alkan had gotten back to his feet, and he too took to the air. He collided with the beast's back, gouging at it with his teeth and claws, and the monster released me from its grip.

Now was my chance to do what only dragons could. I gathered the heat within me, focusing it into a torrent. The scales on my chest glowed white-hot as the heat gathered, and the

beast looked at me with terror in its eight eyes. But it was too late. I released the flames, sending them spewing from my jaws right into its four ghastly heads. The monster hollered and clawed at the air, but to no avail. Alkan joined me and a second jet of flame engulfed the monster. The smell of smoke and burning flesh filled the air, but we didn't let out flames ebb until its shrieks slowed and finally stopped. I let the stream of fire end, and the incinerated foe crumpled to the ground.

"By Dominus," Alkan whispered. We were in the midst of the worst of it. The monsters flew about in all directions, clashing with the remaining gryphons and wyverns.

"Get to the Dragonhold!" Halda shouted as she swooped by. Her tail whipped around and struck one of the nearby shadow-beasts in the chest, killing it instantly.

Alkan turned to me. "What do we do? I don't think we'll make it out of this." He turned just in time as one of the beasts grabbed at him from behind. His teeth sank into its throat as it charged him.

What do we do? I surveyed the area as quickly as I could amidst the chaos. More than anything I wanted to retreat to the safety of the Dragonhold, but just getting there would be a struggle from where we were. I looked down below me and watched as one of the knights was torn to shreds like he had been made of paper. No. I wasn't going to let this continue. I wasn't. I was a Dragon. And if the beasts got into the castle, they would get to Edwin.

I copied Halda's maneuver, bashing the shadow-beasts around me with my tail as they approached. Blood covered my white scales. I dove down to where the knights were, raking my claws into several of the beasts below me, lifting the smaller ones into the air and then dropping them over the soldier's ready lances. My wings carried me between the volleys of arrows as I rampaged through the air. A cluster of monsters charged me and I became a flurry of claws and

teeth, biting and slashing, gouging at them with everything I had. I released the fire from my throat once again. The scorching flames jetted through the sky, incinerating dozens of our enemies. Three of them charged me at once, biting into my legs and sides with their fangs as I yelped in pain. A blast of fire engulfed me and the shadow-beasts. The flames passed harmlessly around my fire-proof scales, but the beasts weren't so lucky. I sputtered, coughing up blood, and beheld Furion hovering just above me. He gave me a solemn nod and then turned his attention back to the battle around us.

The waves of enemies were finally beginning to end. From where I hovered in the air, I could see that there were less and less shadow-beasts in the air. They instead piled up upon the ground, crumpled corpses that had already begun to stink of rot. The knights began to cheer as their numbers dissipated, and I caught a few smiles on the mouths of the dragons. But something was wrong. I could still feel the shadow in the back of my mind pulsing and growing again. My vision grew dim.

It wasn't just my vision, I quickly realized. A hush came over the knights, the cheers stopping abruptly as the cloud above us grew even darker than before, casting Alba Aula into even blacker night. The remaining shadow-beasts turned their heads to the clouds, a rhythmic chittering coming from their maws. And from within the black cloud came the roar of a Deathwing.

The Deathwing descended from the cloud, its leathery wings unfurled to display their full length. The black dragon's tail flicked with bloodlust, and its eyes glared down at all those below. Several more accompanied it, soaring down from the cloud along with another hoard of shadow-beasts. They were all here. All eight. Icy fear seared through my veins at the sight of

them. The Deathwings turned to each other, screeches coming from their hideous mouths. As I listened to them, the screeches began to sound different in my ears, almost like...words.

“...queen.”

“...take the... tower...”

“Death to the Light!”

The sounds of the Deathwings sorted themselves out into full sentences little by little, and my horror grew. I looked frantically at the other dragons around me, hoping for some indication that they too suddenly understood the speech of the black dragons, but I got none. Instead the Dragons and Dragonbound charged forth, straight into the line of Deathwings as they hollered their war cries, swords and claws raised. This was our battle.

And I wasn't ready.

One of the Deathwings broke past the line of Dragons and Dragonbound above, diving straight towards me. But instead of colliding with me in combat, its wings spanned open, holding it aloft in the air just above my head. “White Dragon,” it snarled. The black gemstone on its forehead matched my own in all but its color. Its lips were set back in a cruel smile, and its green eyes glared down at me. Green eyes...

Without warning it pulled its wings back into a steep dive and came down upon me, dragging me to the ground as its claws tore into my scales. I screamed in panic, but there was no one to help me. The other dragons were occupied with the remaining Deathwings, and the rest of Alba Aula's forces were busy fighting off the second wave of shadow-beasts. The scent of my own blood burned into my nostrils as the Deathwing's claws raked across my ribs, tearing open the scales and flesh. I fell to the ground with a thud as the Deathwing stood over me, blood and gore dripping from its claws and lips.

“Traitor!” the monster snarled. It struck me across the face with its claws.

I gasped from the pain, struggling to regain my breath. The icy fear blasted through my whole body, more so than the day Edwin had gone missing, more than when the castle’s halls had shrank all around me, more even than when the first wave of shadow-beasts descended upon us. I balked in terror, limping across the crimson grass in a futile attempt to get away, get away, get away-

The black dragon grabbed my head in its hands and forced me to look into its terrible emerald eyes. “Can you still understand me, Light-speaker? Traitor?” I struck me again, and I coughed up blood in response, my chest heaving from the fear and the pain. This was it. I was going to die, here and now, at the hands of the Deathwing. The beast rose up to its full height above me, wings spread wide and jaws agape, ready to deal the final blow.

A memory from my past self rushed into my mind, flooding out the fear and the pain wracking my body. I had stood on a field like this one, my sword raised against the black dragon. I was afraid, but there was something else. Something overriding the fear.

Dominus.

A burst of light bolted through my mind, obliterating the fear and the pain and the shadow. I gathered my remaining strength and threw myself at the Deathwing. Although it was covered with far more horns and was more muscular than I, we were nearly the same size, and the weight of my body sent it sprawling backwards. It flapped its wings, dragging its bulk into the air and me along with it. I released my grip on my foe and dropped just below it, my wings catching me before I hit the ground. Now was my chance to escape. I wove between the shadow-beasts and Deathwings who were locked in combat with the Dragons and their Dragonbound,

pulling off tight loops and twisting myself in the air as I dodged blasts of Dark Magic from the mouths of the black dragons and the talons of the beasts.

A shout in the Old Tongue rang through the air from the direction of the keep. It should have been lost amidst the sounds of the raging battle, but it was a voice I recognized: The Queen.

I doubled back towards the keep. The claws of the shadow-beasts tore at the feathers on my wings, but a blast of Light Magic from the gem on Halda's forehead eliminated them, clearing my path. I hovered within sight of the keep, my heart utterly frozen in my chest.

One of the walls of the keep had been blasted open, revealing the King and Queen's bedchamber. The Queen stood in the wake of the destruction, grim and resplendent. Her once white armor was covered with the crimson of her enemies, and her long thin blade was dyed a dark red. Her hair was loose from the pins, hanging in erratic golden waves as she spun about, slashing and stabbing at the shadow-beasts climbing the walls and circling the air around her. The striking lightning-bolt mark on her face was aglow. The dim white light emanating from it cast an ethereal light on her skin amidst the dirt and gore of the battle. The knights once guarding her lay at her feet, limp and lifeless. And Edwin was nowhere to be seen.

Bile and metal filled my mouth as I tucked my wings into a steep dive for the keep, cutting through the hordes before me. I slashed and sliced through them, spattering myself with their blood and intestines. But I couldn't stop. Don't stop. A burst of Light Magic emitted from the Queen's entire body, incinerating the beasts around her, but more quickly took their place. And then, a Deathwing descended upon her. I flapped my wings furiously in a desperate attempt to make it in time, a steady drumbeat filling my head. No, no, no, no-

The green-eyed Deathwing crashed into my wounded side, drawing a pained howl from my throat as its full weight smashed my already-damaged ribs. I was thrown away from the keep

as I clawed helplessly at the air, reaching for the Queen, but to no avail. All I could do was watch as I was dragged away from her and Edwin.

The world slowed. The Deathwing alighted on the crumbling remains of the wall, its wings open wide. The Queen raised her sword and a bolt of Light Magic erupted from it, striking the monster in the face. It reared back in pain, but then it swung its clawed hand down upon her, knocking her to the ground. The sword flew out of her hands and to the blood-covered grass far below. Queen Ania heaved, desperately trying to force herself to her feet, but she was already badly injured and drained of her life-energy by the onslaught of shadow-beasts. And then the hand of the Deathwing wrapped around her, squeezing away her consciousness as it lifted her into the air. The Queen let out a cry that sounded across the battlefield. She screamed her son's name. And then she fell limp in the hands on the black dragon as her consciousness fled her. The Deathwing flapped its tremendous wings, lifting them into the air. And then they were gone, lost in the cloud of night above us.

A scream exploded from my throat, a cry of raw anguish and rage and pain as the claws of the Deathwing dug into my shoulders. The monster let out a hideous laugh of triumph as it carried me helplessly through the air. We passed over the impossibly high wall of Alba Aula. I thrashed and writhed in a desperate attempt to escape its hold on me, but to no avail. The claws sank too deep into my scales. I watched helplessly as the Deathwing raised its head back. Its jaws parted, revealing the full set of fangs that dripped with the poison of Dark Magic, ready to give the killing blow.

In a last attempt I lunged my head upward, biting down hard into the monster's neck. My teeth throbbed and my mouth filled with the taste of metal, but my fangs broke through the row

of tough scales. The Deathwing screamed and sputtered as its own blood filled its mouth. Its wings flapped wildly, and its claws released their hold on me.

I fell. My wings no longer had the strength to hold me aloft, and the life-energy the dragons used to allow us to fly had been depleted by the battle, all of the remaining energy now being used to just keep me alive. As I tumbled through the air I watched the world float by. The dark cloud hovered above, black streaks of lightning shooting forth from it. The shadow-beasts fluttered about as the catapults fired the last of the remaining ammunition at them. Their wings crumpled and their bodies fell as they were struck down by the chunks of rocks and arrows launched at them. Above them the Deathwings and Dragons were locked in combat, their roars filling the air above the din of the rest of the battle. The Amber Dragon, its scales glittering gold in the light of the bolts of magic, rose up above the Deathwing it battled. The gold-colored gemstone on its forehead glowed with a bright light and a beam of Light Magic blasted from its jaws, engulfing the black dragon as it howled.

Someone screamed my name. I turned and saw Alyssa reaching her hand towards me as I fell beyond the outer wall. Her fingers were outstretched as if she could catch me. Blood and gore were splattered across the dark skin of her face, and her hair escaped from the helmet in tangled mats. The flames from the Deathwings' maws surrounded her. She called my name as I passed from her line of sight, rocketing towards the ground.

I landed in the moat surrounding the wall of Alba Aula. The water had widened and deepened when the castle underwent its transformation, and I crashed into the cold liquid. My drenched feathers dragged me downwards, and I let the waters take me. I was too tired. Too tired to struggle anymore. The water around me was dyed red with my blood, the crimson seeping out in waves as I sank downwards. The sounds of the battle were drowned out as my ears passed

below the rippling waves I had created upon impact. Above me the dark cloud still blotted out all the light, save for one single white point now shining through directly above me. The star of Aster.

As I sank into the depths of the moat, my consciousness fled and the watery darkness took me.