

PROLOGUE

A long time ago, in the spring before the five days of the unspeakable, Finnikin of the Rock dreamed that he was to sacrifice a pound of flesh to save the royal house of Lumatere.

The dream came to him from the gods on the eve of the Harvest Moon Festival, when the whole of the kingdom slept under the stars in the Field of Celebration. It was Finnikin's favorite night of the year, watching his fellow Lumaterans dance and give thanks for a life of peace and plenty. When the dawn broke and the priest-king sang the Song of Lumatere, the joy in people's souls lit up their world. And what a world it was – made up of those hailing from the Flatlands, the Forest, the Rock, the Mountains, and the River. All protected by a beloved king and queen and their five children, said to be descended from the gods themselves.

Finnikin told his friends Prince Balthazar and Lucian of

the Monts about the dream the next morning as they spat olive pits into the river. The three boys loved their mornings on the waterfront, watching Finnikin's father, the captain of the King's Guard, as he and his men checked the merchandise on the barges. No one was more formidable than Captain Trevanion when he was protecting the kingdom, and many spoke of his love for the gentle Lady Beatriss of the Flatlands, who would give birth to their child that year, and how she adored Finnikin as if he were her own.

Upon hearing Finnikin's dream that day, Balthazar convinced them that no harm would ever come to Lumatere as long as his father was king. Lucian claimed that if the gods were serious, they would have asked him to protect his royal cousins, for no other reason than that he had turned nine that spring and was a head taller than the others. And so, for a time, the dream was forgotten.

Each afternoon, Finnikin, Balthazar, and Lucian played in the Forest of Lumatere, practicing how they would one day catch the silver wolf. Legend had it that only a true warrior could conquer such a beast, and they were certain that Balthazar, the heir to the throne of Lumatere, would be the one. The three friends spent all summer digging the trap, and when it was finished, they dragged Balthazar's youngest sister, Princess Isaboe, along to be the bait. But the wolf never appeared.

As summer moved into autumn and the days grew shorter, Finnikin began to worry. He would tremble in fear when he remembered his dream. At night he prayed to Lagrami, the goddess of light, to protect his unborn sibling, to keep Balthazar

and his four sisters safe, and to watch over the Forest Dwellers, even though they worshipped another goddess and lived outside the kingdom walls. Until one day, finally, he convinced his companions to make a pledge.

And so they climbed the rock of three wonders at the crest of Finnikin's village, and they cut flesh from their bodies and tugged a strand of hair from the weeping Isaboe's head to make a sacrifice to their goddess. Balthazar pledged to die defending his royal house of Lumatere. Finnikin swore to be their protector and guide for as long as he lived. Lucian vowed he would be the light whom they traveled toward in times of need.

That evening, Finnikin and Balthazar sat perched high on the flat roof of a cottage in the village. As always, they spoke of the silver wolf and the might of a warrior king, and they imagined the years to come when one would rule and one would guard. Finnikin looked down at Princess Isaboe, who slept between them, and although his thigh ached from the pledge wound, he felt peace in his heart that he had done the right thing. They were indeed blessed as no other kingdom in the land.

Until the five days of the unspeakable.

When the king and queen and their three oldest daughters were slaughtered in the palace and Princess Isaboe was slain in the Forest of Lumatere.

When Balthazar's bloody handprints were found splattered on the kingdom walls and the people of Lumatere, seeking someone to blame, turned on one another.

When the despised cousin of the dead king entered the

kingdom with six hundred of his men and began to burn the Forest Dwellers in their homes.

When Captain Trevanion was arrested for treason and sent to a foreign prison and his beloved Lady Beatriss died delivering a stillborn baby in the palace dungeon.

When Seranonna, the matriarch of the Forest Dwellers, cried a blood curse as she burned at the stake, a curse that caused the land to shudder and split the earth, that swallowed those who failed to run from the fury of its jaws, that crumbled village homes and shook the palace to its foundations.

Those who could escaped to the Valley of Tranquillity, outside the kingdom walls, trampling their neighbors who were left behind. And then the dark forces of the curse entombed the kingdom, dividing the people in two.

This is the story, as told to those not born to see such days, recorded in the Book of Lumatere so they will never forget.

The story of those trapped inside the kingdom, never to be heard from again, and those who escaped but were forced to walk the land in a diaspora of misery.

Until ten years later, when Finnikin of Lumatere climbed another rock...

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PART ONE

THE NOVICE

CHAPTER I

When it finally appeared in the distance, Finnikin wondered if it was some phantom half-imagined in this soulless kingdom at the end of the world.

There had always been talk that this land had been forsaken by the gods. Yet perched at the top of a rocky outcrop, cloaked in blue-gray mist, was proof to the contrary: the cloister of the goddess Lagrami.

From where they stood, the flat expanse that led to its fortified entrance resembled the softness of sand over a desert. Finnikin could see a trail of pilgrims with their heads bent low, sacks across their shoulders and staffs in their hands. They made a line across the low-lying country like tiny insignificant ants at the mercy of the nothingness surrounding them.

“We must hurry,” the king’s First Man urged, speaking the Sarnak language. Sir Topher had decided that once they reached this wasteland of Sendecane, they would use the language of the neighboring kingdom to the north. At the inn two nights before, he had made it known that they were pilgrims themselves: holy men who had come to the end of the earth to pay homage at the greatest temple of the blessed goddess Lagrami. To be anything else in this part of the land would raise suspicion and fear, and Finnikin had come to realize that those full of fear were the most dangerous of people.

As they drew closer to the rock, the terrain beneath their feet began to change. What Finnikin had thought was sand turned out to be a thick claylike substance that tested his balance. They were walking on a seabed, and by nightfall the waters would return and there would be no hope of leaving this place until the next low tide.

At the entrance of the rock of Lagrami, they followed the wide stone steps that circled up to the summit, passing the pilgrims kneeling at the shrine of welcome. The leather of Finnikin’s boots gave little protection from the cold hard surface, and he found himself looking back to where the pilgrims knelt, knowing that some would make their way up on their knees as a display of devotion to their goddess. He had witnessed the ignorance that came from blind faith time and time again over the years, and he wondered how many of these pilgrims were Lumateran exiles searching for some kind of salvation.

Higher, the steps became stones to climb. Finnikin suspected that sooner or later they would be forced to crawl their way to the top, where the messenger of the High Priestess was surely waiting. Yet not even halfway up, the stones gave way to a smooth cliff face, leaving them nothing to grip except tiny metal bars embedded in the rock. Finnikin stared, confused. He looked down at his oversize feet and wondered how it would be possible to balance them on so narrow a ledge.

"Not for our feet, my boy," Sir Topher said with a sigh. He wiggled his fingers in front of Finnikin's face.

Mercy.

"Do not look down," he warned.

Sir Topher began to climb, and Finnikin felt a shower of grains from the rocks above as they crumbled under his mentor's weight. One caught him in the eye, and he resisted the urge to wipe it free, preferring to be blinded rather than lose his grip.

"I said, do not look down," Sir Topher grunted, as if reading his thoughts.

"If I look up, I'll lose my dinner," Finnikin gasped.

"And what a pity that would be. All those lovely goose gizzards. All that rabbit pie you insisted on wolfing down despite my warning. All gone to waste."

Finnikin paused, his head spinning and his mouth beginning to taste of a sickly substance. The dull stench of pigeon filled his nostrils and turned the contents of his belly. His hands ached from gripping the metal bars,

and he longed to be able to place his feet flat against the rock. Yet this journey up the cliff face had to be worth it. Somehow the High Priestess had located him and Sir Topher in the kingdom of Belegonia. Not an easy feat when most of the time they chose not to be found.

For the past ten years, Sir Topher and Finnikin had worked to improve the conditions of Lumaterans living in overcrowded camps rife with fever, fear, and despair. Former dukes of Lumatere, now employed in foreign courts, had often requested their presence, eager to fund their efforts to bring a reprieve to their people. Less welcome were the approaches from foreign kings and queens, who always seemed to have a price for their goodwill. Often it was information about what was taking place in a neighboring kingdom in exchange for palace protection for the exiles camped along their riverbanks and valleys. While protocol ensured that the king's First Man and his apprentice were granted access to any court in the land, Sir Topher had learned to be cautious when it came to accepting invitations.

But this one had been different. It began with a name whispered to Finnikin deep in the night as he lay sleeping among the exiles in Belegonia.

Balthazar.

Finnikin had dragged Sir Topher from his sleep in an instant. He could hardly describe the messenger to his mentor. He could only remember the voice in his ear and the disappearing robes of one who spoke of the isolated

cloister of Sendecane. The moment Finnikin had finished speaking, Sir Topher rose from his bedroll and packed it without a word.

Finnikin reached the summit of the cliff first and stayed draped over the stone, trying to regain his breath before leaning across to help Sir Topher, who was wheezing and hungering for air. Hearing a sound behind them, they turned to where a wizened old novice stood before an opening in the wall. When she shuffled around and disappeared into the confines of the cloister, they understood that they were to follow.

Finnikin's lanky frame meant he was forced to crouch through the damp tunnel, which led to a set of narrow spiral stairs. When they reached the top, they followed the old woman along a hallway, past rooms where other novices knelt in prayer. They crossed the cloister and entered a large chamber with high windows that let in the light. This room interested Finnikin greatly. There were rows and rows of tables where novices sat, absorbed in their work. Some were poring over bound manuscripts, copying their contents, while others read. Finnikin had seen a room like this before, at the palace of Osteria. The manuscripts there held records of each kingdom of the land: their gods and goddesses, their wars, their origins, their landscape, their language, their art, their food, their lives.

As a child in exile, Finnikin had worried that his kingdom would have no further record of existence, so he began his own work on the *Book of Lumatere*. He wondered

if these scholars felt the same way he did about the scent of parchment and the feel of a quill in their hands. But their faces revealed little, and the old novice's pace began to quicken, leading them into a dimly lit room full of columns. And there, in the middle of the room, stood the High Priestess.

"Blessed Kiria." Sir Topher bowed and kissed her hand.

"You have come a long way, Sir Topher."

Finnikin heard the note of surprise in her voice, almost wonder. Like all priestesses of Lagrami, her hair was worn long, almost to her knees, marking her years of devotion to her goddess. Upon her death, the braid would be cut and offered as a sacrifice, while somewhere else in the land a novice would enter the cloister, her hair shorn and her journey begun.

"The Lumateran pilgrims who have made their way to us over the years have taken courage in the existence of the king's First Man and his young apprentice," she said, looking at them both.

"It is good of you to acknowledge our cursed people, blessed Kiria," Sir Topher said.

She smiled warmly. "We are neighbors, despite the distance. I feel anguish for your beloved priest-king, to have lost his people in such a way, and I am here as a servant to your people as much as to mine. It is the wish of our goddess."

"Do you have the good fortune to know of our priest-king's whereabouts?" Sir Topher asked.

The High Priestess shook her head sadly. Then her expression changed and she walked farther into the room, beckoning them to follow. "You have come for the girl?" she asked.

Girl. Finnikin's heart dropped. He had hoped; *stupidly* he had hoped. The fury he felt for harboring such a dream made him sway on his feet.

"We have little time before the tide rises, so I will speak quickly," she said in a low voice. "Two springs past, a girl came to us. Her name, Evanjalín. Unlike many of our Lumateran novices, she was not orphaned during the five days of the unspeakable but belonged to the exiles in Sarnak."

Finnikin flinched and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he saw that Sir Topher had paled. The High Priestess nodded. "I see that you are well aware of the ill-fated exiles in Sarnak."

"We have petitioned the king of Sarnak to have those responsible for the massacre brought to justice," Sir Topher said.

Finnikin wondered why they had wasted their time. The slaughter of a group of Lumateran exiles, two years past, was of little concern to an apathetic king.

The High Priestess leaned forward to whisper. "The novice Evanjalín has a gift, and I promise you this: in my time I have come across many who claim to have extraordinary gifts, but I know this girl speaks the truth. She professes to have walked through the sleep, not only

of your beloved heir, but of your people trapped inside Lumatere."

It was one of the most fanciful stories they had heard to date, and Finnikin bit his tongue to hold back a contemptuous retort.

"It is not that we are surprised by the notion of Prince Balthazar being alive," Sir Topher said carefully, clearing his voice as a warning to Finnikin. "It has always been our hope that there was truth in the tales that the heir survived. But these past ten years, there have been many claims to the Lumateran throne across the land. Each one has proved to be false. You are aware that as a consequence, the ruler of each kingdom of Skuldenore has decreed it treason to make such claims."

"Yet I hear that no Lumateran acknowledges the reign of the king trapped behind those walls," the High Priestess said. "Is he not referred to as the impostor king?"

"Despite our belief that the one ruling inside Lumatere played a role in the deaths of our beloved people, as far as the leaders of Skuldenore are concerned, he was legitimately crowned the king."

A hasty decision made by those controlled by fear, who dared to meddle in the affairs of another kingdom, Finnikin thought bitterly.

"If you are to believe anything, believe this," she said firmly. "The rightful heir to the throne of Lumatere and survivor of that wretched night has spoken to the novice Evanjalín."

"Does the novice have a message from him?" Sir Topher asked.

"Just a name," the High Priestess said, "of a childhood companion of your prince. A trusted friend."

Suddenly every pulse in Finnikin's body pounded. He felt the eyes of both the High Priestess and Sir Topher on him. Then the High Priestess came closer, taking his face between her callused hands.

"Is that what you were to him, Finnikin of the Rock?" she said softly. "For I do believe your king is calling. It has been ten years too long and Balthazar has chosen you, through this girl, to take your people home."

"Who is she to be worthy of the association with our heir?" Finnikin asked stiffly, moving away. "Does she claim to have made his acquaintance?"

"She is a simpleton. She has taken the vow of silence, broken only to tell me of the sleep and that you, Finnikin, would one day come to collect her. I believe she is somehow promised to your heir."

"What makes you believe such a thing, blessed Kiria?" Sir Topher asked.

"At night she whispers his name in her sleep with intimacy and reverence. As if their bond is ordained by the gods."

This time Finnikin failed to hold back the sound of his disbelief.

The High Priestess smiled sadly. "You have lost faith in the gods."

He held her gaze and knew she could read the confirmation in his eyes.

"Do you believe in magic?" she persisted.

"My kingdom has been impenetrable for the past ten years with no logical explanation, so I have no choice but to say I do believe," he admitted ruefully.

"It was indeed a very dark magic used by the matriarch of the Forest Dwellers. Made up mostly of hatred and grief for what Lumaterans had allowed to happen to her people in the days following the deaths of the king and his family. But somehow some kind of good survived, and the novice Evanjalín is the key. You would know by now the meaning of the archaic words spoken by Seranonna that day."

Finnikin had not heard the name Seranonna since his childhood. He did not want her to be known as anything other than the witch who had cursed Lumatere.

"We were in the square that day," Sir Topher said, "and have spent these past ten summers deciphering the curse, but there are words we are still unsure of. Seranonna used more than one of the ancient languages."

"And those words you do understand?" the High Priestess asked. She stared at Finnikin, waiting for him to speak.

"'Dark will lead the light, and our *resurdus* will rise.' It's the ancient word for king, is it not? *Resurdus*?"

The High Priestess nodded. "The curse was to condemn Lumaterans for allowing the slaughter of her

people, but it was also to protect the one she claimed to have seen fleeing from the forest that night. The *resurdus*. The heir. The dark and light will lead you to him."

"But where are we supposed to take this ... child? Evanjalín?" Finnikin asked.

The High Priestess gave a small humorless laugh. "Do you consider yourself a child, Finnikin?"

"Of course not."

"The novice Evanjalín is nearly your age and left her childhood behind far too early."

"Where are we to take her, blessed Kiria?" Sir Topher prompted gently.

The High Priestess hesitated. "She claims that the answers lie in the kingdom of Sorel."

Mercy.

Finnikin would have preferred to have heard Sarnak or Yutlind. Even Charyn with its barbaric ways. He would have preferred to take her to hell. It would certainly be less dangerous than Sorel.

"And you believe Balthazar will contact us there?" Sir Topher said.

"I do not know what to believe. The goddess has not bestowed the gift of foresight on me. All I can pass on is this girl and the name of the one she claimed would come for her." Once again her eyes were on Finnikin. "Perhaps both chosen by a missing king to be his guide."

There was a sound by the door, and the High Priestess held out her hand as a figure appeared from the shadows.

The girl had the coloring of the Lumateran Mont people, a golden skin tone, much darker than Finnikin's own fair skin. Her hair was shaved, but he imagined that if it were allowed to grow, it would match the darkness of her eyes. Dressed in a gray shift made of coarse fabric, she would easily be passed by without a second glance.

"Sir Topher, Finnikin, I present to you the novice Evanjalin."

She cast her eyes down, and Finnikin watched as her hands shook and then clenched.

"What is it you fear?" he asked in Lumateran.

"Most of her time was spent in Sarnak," the High Priestess explained. "It is the language we have used during the break of silence."

Finnikin could no longer hold back his frustration. He pulled Sir Topher aside. "We know nothing of her," he said in Belegonian to ensure the novice and the High Priestess would not understand. "This is all too strange."

"Enough, Finnikin," Sir Topher said firmly. He turned back to the High Priestess. "Has she spoken since?"

She shook her head. "She has taken the vow of silence. She has suffered much, Sir Topher, and her faith is strong. It's the least we can leave her with."

Sir Topher nodded. "If we are to make the tide, we must leave soon."

Finnikin was stunned at how swiftly Sir Topher had made his decision, but the look in the older man's eyes warned him not to protest. Biting his tongue, Finnikin

watched as the High Priestess took the girl's head in her hands and pressed her lips tenderly to her forehead. He saw the girl's eyes close and her mouth tremble, but then her face became impassive again and she walked away from the High Priestess without a backward glance.

The descent was as nauseating as the climb up, made worse for Finnikin by the burden he carried in his heart. Taking this girl halfway across the land had not been part of the plan he and Sir Topher had worked out in the early days of winter. The uncertainty of their new path did not sit well with him.

When they reached the base of the cliff, they passed the group of kneeling pilgrims. A hand snaked out to grab the cloth of the novice's cloak.

"Your feet," Finnikin said, noticing for the first time that she was barefoot. "We can't afford to be slowed down because you don't have shoes."

But the girl did not respond and continued walking. It was only when they were a good distance from the cloister that she looked back and he saw the raw emotion of loss on her face. By then the waters reached their knees and Finnikin feared they would not make it to safety without being washed away. Here, the tide was said to return at amazing speed and pilgrims had drowned without any warning. He grabbed her arm and pulled her forward, and suddenly her look of vulnerability disappeared and in its place was a flash of triumph.

As if somehow the novice Evanjalín had gotten her way.