

TOXIC

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SHADOWS

“You can only come to the morning through the shadows.”

~J.R.R. TOLKIEN

The wind stirred restlessly through the mountains, roaming far from its home. Ignoring the instruction of the Ancients, the young wind, whose name was Foehn, journeyed to the city nestled in the foothills.

Eager to play, Foehn tugged at people’s clothes and tousled the hair of a boy pushing a wheelchair. But the boy just smoothed down his hair, and the people pulled their cloaks closer. Turning their backs, they hustled home and locked him out in the dark. Foehn had never felt sadness or loneliness before. Now those feelings consumed him.

Foehn journeyed until he saw universities dotting the countryside. He entered one quiet bedroom and flipped through pages of a book that belonged to a boy who was studying, but the boy calmly turned the pages back and closed the window. Blocked from the room, the little dry wind heaved a deep sigh and turned to look

elsewhere for a friend.

Continuing on, Foehn traveled farther away from home and found musicians playing lively songs. Hope rose like the golden sun in the morning. He joined the dance while a young girl sang a song of heroes. The wind whirled merrily around until the people moved their party inside a lovely house. Shut out in the dark, he turned away and resumed his journey.

Foehn moved across the country. His heart sank into the bowels of dejection like a boulder chucked heedlessly into the deep ocean. He wondered why people shunned him. In the mountains of home, the trees always danced with him. But home was far away, and he didn't know how to return. He kept looking for someone who would be a friend.

And then he reached the coast.

There Foehn met up with one of his own kind. But this new wind caused Foehn to quake. The coastal wind whipped the ocean with such great force that Foehn watched from behind some trees. Frothy and foamy in their protest, the waves reached up into the blackened sky.

A piece of wood rose and fell with the waves as it washed up onto the beach. A man, looking half dead, was draped over the board. Foehn jumped back in terror when the man

raised his head. The man grabbed a handful of sand. Like magic, the brutal wind ceased.

“Land.” He doubled over in a fit of coughing.

The man stumbled to the trees and gazed up at the sky as the moon tentatively peeked through the scattering clouds. Foehn leaned closer to catch a glimpse of him.

“They said it couldn’t be done.” His laughter sounded harsh as it rang through the air, gaining strength. “I did it, and now the power...so much power at my fingertips.”

He strode through the darkness to an oak tree. He tore a branch off and dug it into his skin. The blood spilled to the dirt as the moon shone down on him. Foehn gasped, now able to see that the man’s whole body was covered with bruises and cuts.

The man spoke again. “By full moon’s light, take this sacrifice and spread good health. Send energies far and near to heal all that I hold dear. So must it be.” He let his blood drain to the earth as he repeated the words three times. His dark eyes glowed red as the dirt hungrily drank up the blood.

Foehn stared as the man trembled suddenly like his whole body were a tender leaf in a vicious wind. The cuts and bruises began to

heal, leaving him whole and unscarred.

The man laughed with triumph. “No one will withstand me. All will bow at my feet.”

He gazed back across the ocean. “For your gift of magnificent power, my Master, I vow to reclaim this land in honor of you.”

Foehn was both terrified and awestruck. He circled above this strange man. When the man began walking, he followed from a distance.

CHAPTER ONE

The Night Race



They say evil lurks in the mountains. They say that if the rivers and cliffs don't kill you, the monsters will. They say there is only one difference between the brave and the stupid.

The brave die a little bit slower...

Kai knew what they said of the mountains. And he knew about the monsters because they were right behind him.

As he raced deeper into the lonely peaks, the tales of the old women sitting in the marketplace haunted him. *You should have listened*, they mocked. *Now you'll die*. He'd laughed at them, but they had been telling the truth: the monsters were real, and they terrified him more than anything he'd known in his sixteen years.

He raced through the darkness up the mountains and paused, clutching his side,

gasping for air. He didn't hear any thudding footsteps. Maybe he'd lost them. He waited. The trees surrounding him hid the night sky. Only the sound of rain and his breathing filled the air.

A branch broke behind him. He held his breath. *It's just a deer.* But deep inside, he knew it wasn't. Leaves crunched as loud as thunder. *Something's right behind me.*

The moon darted behind clouds, and he bolted. The shadows lengthened, engulfing him. When the clouds parted, the light of the moon revealed cliffs that led up to towering snowy peaks. The hairs on the back of his neck rose as a distant cry echoed through the peaks. That wasn't a wolf. All the wolves had been killed in the Great Wars. Something more evil roamed the Razors. He turned in a slow circle, following the ragged line of the mountains along the horizon, and then strode to the edge of the cliff.

Northbridge filled the valley below him with hundreds of lights from the houses and inns twinkling like stars. River Shammah, the great river which flowed through Eltiria, curled like a ribbon through the valley. Gazing north, he saw throngs of people hustling over the Great Bridge to the Temple of All to celebrate the Festival of the New Moon. *Fools. The priests can't help you.* They hadn't helped Shona. But no matter

how many people died at the Temple, people kept coming to Zoria for help. Maybe it was Her beauty, maybe it was Her power. Maybe they didn't have any other hope.

Thunder rolled and rain spattered on the bushes. A twig snapped in the trees to his right. He crouched in the shadows. Running only attracted predators. And normally he'd rather eat dinner than be dinner. Hiding was better than running.

Lightning flashed. The light fell onto two large figures so close to Kai that he felt like they'd swallow him into darkness. He leaped back with a cry of fear. They stood as still as rocks, their faces lost in their hoods. As thunder rolled, the giant axe in the hands of the creature on the right sparked in the fading light.

"Come with us, little one." The voice slid out of the shadows. "The Master desires you."

Kai wasn't sure what that meant, but it sounded like a bunch of horse manure. He should know. He shoveled the stuff all day.

"We won't kill you," the second one hissed. "But we have ways to make you come, Kai."

"How d... do you know m ... my name?" Kai stumbled over his words.

"Kai Teschner, the son of Tadd Teschner, the great jockey crippled in a racing accident."

The first *thing* replied in a dull tone. “You spend your days shoveling out stalls where your Father was once revered.”

Kai drew in a sharp breath. He glanced down at the city. One pure beam of light across the valley caught his eye. Alone, on the hillside, the light burned brighter than the others. *Adoyini’s shrine. But that shrine was deserted. How can it be lit up like that?* Kai glared at the light. He had prayed and believed, and Adoyini hadn’t bothered to help. *Some love.*

The second monster kept talking in a raspy voice. “If you don’t come with us, your little sister won’t die of her disease like she’s about to. No, we’ll kill her ourselves.”

Kai took a step toward them. “I’m not going with you, and I’m not going to let you touch my family!”

The second monster lowered his hood as a burst of lightning illuminated it. The face, towering over Kai, had pale white skin flaking off in chunks. It looked like moldy cheese, the kind that was white with all the holes in it. But this cheese had been forgotten about for years. Out of two holes, amber eyes glared down at him.

Thunder rolled as the sky lit up again. In front of the creature was Shona. She looked

even smaller next to the large creature. Her hazel eyes were wide with fright, her chestnut hair dark in the rain. The axe blade was poised at her throat. Everything went dark.

“Please, Kai,” his sister pleaded. Her voice cut him deeper than any axe. “Please, help me. You said you would take care of me. Only you can rescue me.”

“Shona! But...you... died.” Kai felt the anger drain away as shock took over.

“Kai, do what they say.” Shona’s voice floated out of the darkness. “Please, rescue me.”

“I can’t, Shona.” Kai’s voice broke.

“Rhiana’s sick. Mom needs help getting money. I can’t just leave them.”

The lightning flashed again, lingering in the sky. Shona stood with her hand outstretched to Kai. The axe dug deeper into her neck, leaving a red streak on her pale skin. Blood slid down her neck as the axe dropped away. Before Kai could move, her eyes went blank, and she fell to the ground.

Kai yelled. He fell to his knees and crawled to Shona’s body as the blood mixed with dirt. Twice he had seen her die. Twice he had failed to save her. Her lifeless hand still reached for him in the mud. He grasped it and held her tight as he fought back the sobs. He had lost one

sister twice. He wasn't going to lose another. He'd save Rhiana if he had to fight through these two monsters.

He got to his feet, covered in mud and Shona's blood, and faced the monsters, shaking with rage and grief. He wanted to rip their throats out. But not today. He had to save Rhiana first. Reluctantly, he turned away from Shona and ran deep into the Razors - the very mountains that offered no help, only the promise of horrors.

CHAPTER TWO

And the Winner Is...



Kai rushed up the steep mountains. The rain blinded him as it fell in solid sheets, so violent that it dulled his senses. Pain stabbed his side. He gasped as he forced himself to run faster. Boulders replaced the trees as he climbed higher. He slipped and stumbled on the wet rocks, scraping his hands.

Stones tumbled behind him, and he urged his tired legs to keep moving. He had to escape this nightmare. He staggered as the rain hammered down on him. The lightning flashed, making it impossible to see in the complete darkness that followed. Kai took a step forward, and his foot found nothing but air.

Oh, yeah. That's just great.

He waved his arms wildly in various directions, but he tumbled down the cliff. There was a moment of silence as he hurtled down. He crashed on an overhang of rock and groaned as his body spun and slipped off the edge.

Tree branches smacked his face and rocks

gouged his back. Yelling, he madly grabbed at anything to stop his descent. A branch slipped through his hand. Grasping desperately, he grabbed it and held on while his body came to an abrupt stop.

“Ah, ha!” he cried in triumph, his arms feeling like they were jerked out of their sockets. He tried to pull himself up, but his hands slid downwards.

“No, no.” His hands cramped with the weight of his body, and his arms screamed with pain. He wiggled to find a foothold, but his squirming caused him to slip another inch.

“Please, no.” He wasn’t sure who he was talking to, but he didn’t care. His grip loosened. In a mad panic, he forced his fingers to tighten around the branch, but it was no good. He plummeted downward as he yelled.

He slammed into the ground and rolled to his back. His whole body ached, but he’d never been so happy to be alive. He’d gotten away from them. He was safe. *Was Shona really alive, or was I just seeing things?* He sobered. *Was she alive all this time only to die now?* He shook his head. He had watched when the priests tried to heal her. He had watched as life left her, as her hand had lost its grip on his.

He sat up slowly, wincing as the blood raced

to his head. The clouds parted, and moonlight shone on the cliff. Kai gazed up the rock face. He'd fallen over forty feet. Trees were scattered throughout the sheer rock wall, growing out of stone. *No one will believe me when I tell them about this! What a fall! There's no way those things could get down that!*

He stood, feeling the aches over his body. The moon broke out from behind the clouds. Standing right in front of him was one of the monsters. *Seeker!* The name from the fables leaped into his mind as he saw a scaly arm reaching for him. *The servants of the Evil One.*

The moon went behind a cloud, and the night was as dark as the insides of a panther. He jumped away from the monster only to land beside the second Seeker. Kai's eyes were drawn into amber eyes peering down at him.

"We always acquire that which we seek," it grunted.

Kai's feet pinned to the ground. "Leave me alone." He could see a scaly, three-fingered hand reaching for him moving in slow motion.

Only three inches away.

Run! He tensed, ready to bolt.

The hand moved closer. Two inches.

"Don't even think of it," the first Seeker warned. "No one has ever escaped."

Kai remembered Shona with the angry red streak across her throat. He was trapped. He couldn't fight them. He couldn't outrun them.

I've lost. The words circled in his mind. *I've lost. I've lost.*

But he didn't want to lose.

His mind screamed orders to run, but he was trapped like a rabbit. He stared at the scaly hand coming nearer.

Then it tightly gripped his shoulder.

CHAPTER THREE

Truth and Consequence



The forest hushed as the rays of the sun slipped through the branches with the budding leaves. The dust in the air looked like solid pillars of light. Lizzy slid between them in the darkness of the trees. A shadow beneath a giant oak moved. Something was there.

Lizzy took one careful step forward as the branches stirred. She raised her sling and aimed. A bird started to chirp in celebration of the warm weather as she squinted through the rays to see the dim shape. She let the strap go and heard a swish and then a thud. A deer burst out of the trees, unharmed. She watched it scurry through the trees.

“Zoria’s blood!” She shot another stone at a leaf high up in a tree. The leaf shuddered and fell to the ground. She stared at it with disgust. *Why is it that I can hit anything I want when it’s a leaf or a stick? And yet I miss any real target I aim at?*

A branch moved deep in the shadows. She

squinted into the darkness. A snap of a branch cracked, loud in the silence. *Another deer's in there!* She drew out a flat rock from the pouch on her belt. It slipped and fell. She bent down, reaching for the stone, her heart beating loud in her ears as she strained for it.

The pounding of her heart disappeared as her head began to buzz.

Peace, daughter. I mean no harm.

Fear inched up her spine, leaving an icy chill. Rica had tormented her for years of strange creatures that could overcome thoughts and control a person to do whatever it wanted. She groped for the rock. The buzzing started again.

I will not hurt you. I am a friend.

She ignored the words. *Yeah, right, you're my friend. Up until the time comes to eat me!*

A chuckle filled her head. *I prefer grass or a special treat of apples.*

Her hands stopped. *It can read my thoughts!* She hunched down like a mouse hiding from a hawk. The trees swayed as if something large was walking through them. She gripped her sling as the branches parted. A white horse's head appeared. The small ears were pricked forward. A long white forelock covered the dark eyes that gleamed behind it.

Lizzy screamed and dashed through the trees until she could see the gates of Albia. She stopped running by the River Shammah. She didn't even notice the stench of the water as she gasped. *What was that about? Was that horse a monster, or was it trying to escape, too?* She took a deep breath.

She saw the sun dropping to the horizon. *Dinner! I'm in trouble!* Mother didn't allow the fear of death to affect her strict schedule. Dashing through the large stone gates, she slowed when she reached the market. The crowd who came to be cured of their illnesses had grown so large that she could barely walk through. Soldiers with long swords at their hips pushed people aside as they patrolled for troublemakers. They sauntered around, watching for anyone starting a protest. Last week the crowd had rioted over the price of water. They marched on the king's palace, and one girl was killed when the soldiers responded. Now all protests were illegal.

Someone had painted "Free water for all" on a wall of a booth selling clean water. She didn't quite understand why they were fighting. Everyone needed water. It wasn't a privilege for the rich. She sighed and stepped around a man lying in the gutter with a bucket out for aid.

The sign by his feet read, “Wife dead. Two children sick. No money. Please help.”

Everyone passed by without a second glance. She fingered the money in her pocket. Her coin could help him, but Mother said to buy a dress. She stood there while the press of the crowd swirled around her. *Who cares about a dumb dress?* She threw her remaining coins in his bucket.

Lizzy marched deeper into the market, trying to ignore the other sick people. She loved it here, normally. But there weren’t any fresh strawberries from northern Edgemont, or fish from Maruba in the south, or pastries with the delightful scent of *tsambi* anymore.

The vegetables for sale were brown and sickly, and the last of the meat looked bad. There was water, though. For now. Crowds clustered around the booths advertising clean water from Maruba. *In a few weeks, the whole world will have no water to drink. Will the Chancellor actually save us?* She fought back the panic that rose.

She pushed through the crowds until she was home. Mother’s carriage was in front of their large white house. She passed the decorative columns, went through the dark oak door, and collided into Mother in the hall. The

look on her face reminded Lizzy of a cat staring down a dog in its territory.

“Where have you been?” Mother snapped. Her long black hair was pulled back in a tight bun. Her voice, so rich and tender when she sang, was as tight as strings on a guitar.

“Shopping.” Lizzy’s heart sank. She hadn’t seen Mother this angry since Dad left.

“And just *what* did you buy?” Mother shot back. “I see no dress in your hands.”

Lizzy slowly pulled her new green and white sling out of her pocket. “I don’t see why I have to buy a formal dress when we’re all going to die.”

Mother looked at the sling like it was poison and snatched it away from Lizzy. “We are not going to die, although you may soon wish to. For now, go to your room and clean up.”

Lizzy began to protest. “But...”

Mother interrupted, her tone as sharp as a stagecoach driver’s whip. “For once in your life, be the kind of daughter I always wanted.”

Lizzy felt like she’d been slapped. She knew Mother was consistently disappointed with her, but she had never said it out loud. The words beat like a loud bass drum pounding out the wrong rhythm. She ran up the stairs and into her bedroom without a word.

Dad couldn't wait to get away from here, and Mother hates me. She sat by the window and gazed out over Albia. *If only I could go back five years when everyone was happy, when we told stories that made everyone laugh, and sang, and danced.* But those times were past, and now she heard Mother's awful words echoing in her mind, a bad song that you cannot forget. *Be the kind of daughter I always wanted.*

Mother opened the door slowly. She took two steps toward Lizzy and stopped like she was repulsed to come closer. "I can't take your disrespect anymore."

"It was just one day in the woods," Lizzy defended herself. "I don't see why that's such a horrible thing."

"I'm tired of your disobedience. You will still go with Rica to Northbridge." Mother scowled at her. "But once Chancellor Belial has purified the water, you will return here."

"But you said we could stay with Dad for a while," Lizzy protested but stopped when Mother lifted her hand up as a command to be silent. Lizzy stomped to her bed and flopped down.

Mother continued. "When you come back, you will act like a civilized person. I will tame this gypsy wildness of yours that your Father

gave you. Your musical abilities aren't good enough, and you're not pretty enough for plays, but I'll find something you can do by the time you return."

Lizzy bit back her angry words.

"Clean up for dinner. We don't want to look at you like this." Mother didn't wait to hear anything Lizzy had to say as she left the room.

Lizzy punched her pillow, knowing that Mother would hear her if she screamed. She gulped back the tears and went to the gilded mirror. No wonder she wasn't the daughter Mother wanted. Her long auburn hair was sticking up all over the place. Her eyes were red, and her face was streaked with dirt and tears. *If I were prettier, she'd love me better.* She washed her face, combed the tangles out of her hair, and went to the dining room.

Rica was standing beside the big brick fireplace. He was watching the servants bring the food. One maid risked a glance at him, and he glared at her. The girl dropped the bread on the table. Lizzy saw her hands shaking as the maid hastened to brush off the tablecloth.

What's he so angry about?

Rica frowned at her. "We've been waiting for you."

She saw the terrified maid scurry back to the

safety of the kitchen. “Why’d you do that? You didn’t have to scare her.”

“Just look at you! Fifteen years old, and you’re giving your older brother lessons in manners. Manners for servants, no less!” Rica sighed. “She’s just a servant. It’s not like she has feelings. I’d be surprised if she still remembers her scare.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but Mother waltzed in like she was on stage. She greeted Rica with a big smile and swept him to the table without a glance at Lizzy.

“You must be starving, Rica,” Mother said, passing the meat to him. “I know you were busy getting ready for the trip.”

Lizzy knew he was upset. He didn’t normally frighten servants for nothing. *It must be because he doesn’t want to leave his precious girlfriend. He probably loves her more than me.* His next words confirmed her suspicions.

“Mother, I know you are trying to look after us, but I’m not comfortable leaving Gwyneth. I want to stay and make sure she is okay.” Rica handed her the beef.

“She’s not your wife yet,” Mother replied. “Her father is one of the wealthiest bankers in Albia. I’m sure he can take care of her.”

“Why do we even have to go?” The words

burst out of Lizzy's mouth before she could stop them. "Die here or die there. What's the difference?"

"We've been over this," Mother sighed angrily. "Chancellor Belial told me personally that he will be purifying the water at Northbridge. The water will be clean there first, giving Rica a better chance of survival. The topic is closed."

Lizzy glared at the potatoes on her plate. *She didn't say anything about me surviving. I bet she wants me to die. Then she wouldn't have to worry about me causing any more problems.*

Rica took a drink of his water and set down his goblet. "I had a weird thing happen at the temple today."

Lizzy glanced up from her food. *Religion.* Only Gwyneth could get him to do anything religious. He'd do the stupidest things for that girl. Rica had told her to take care of herself because no god or goddess cared about her, and now he was following Gwyneth right into the temple he used to scoff.

"A priest started asking about our family. He wanted to know if we were related to The Slayers. Do you know?" Rica asked.

"The Slayers?" Mother laughed. "The three warriors who defeated Seiten? They're just

stories to entertain children.”

Rica shifted back in his chair. “It was just so weird because he was so insistent. I was a little afraid of what he might do.”

“You, afraid of something?” Lizzy risked Mother’s attention because Rica was never scared of anything.

“Well, not scared.” Rica winked at her. “Not like you that time we saw...”

“Maybe he saw you singing about the Slayers once.” Mother cast an exasperated look at Lizzy. “Lizabeth, you need to go through your suitcases and sort out only what you need for a few weeks. Then go to bed.”

“But I’m not finished eating,” Lizzy said before she could stop herself.

“You would’ve had more time if you hadn’t disobeyed me today. Do what you are told.”

Lizzy pushed her chair back and dashed to the room. *Why is she always so mean to me? I can’t make her love me no matter what I do.* She threw clothes from her bag to the bed. Angry tears streaked down her cheeks, and she wiped them away impatiently. She plopped down in the middle of the floor. *Maybe if I brought her some purified water, she’d love me for saving her life. That’s what I’ll do. I’ll save her life, and then she’ll always love me.*