

The Kingdom of Erlain

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Prologue	1
Chapter One	4
Chapter Two.....	13
Chapter Three.....	27
Chapter Four	37
Chapter Five.....	46
Chapter Six.....	62

Prologue

Stars flickered in the night sky above as gray clouds began to slowly swarm and obscure their view. Miles away rests an unaware city, the capital, Arten. Claps of thunder echoed through the sky and shook the sea of green trees below. A tall figure in a tattered black hooded robe came forth from the shadows of the dense greenery and it to reveal a man. Lightning slithered across the sky, briefly showing his face: a long scar from battle from the top of his left cheek stopped just before his mouth. Faint lines covered his cheeks and just below his eyes indicating that he had endured harsh stress and restless nights. The hood drooped down across his back and the wind picked up; he stepped forward slowly and grinned. The time had come for his plan to come together. Rain poured from the clouds as he laughed. There was no way to stop him.

The man entered a clearing in the forest where trees gnarled around one another. His robe and ruffled black hair blew in the wind as he entered the small unsecured area. Surrounded by trees was a smoothly cut stone tablet laid out in the center with roses scattered about on top of it. The man approached the stone and knelt in front of it. The rain pelted the ground and thunder echoed louder.

“Finally,” the man exclaimed. Rain dripped down his face and his eyes shone through the darkness as the moonlight struck them. It had been too long with months of secretive research; searching this forest had led him to dead ends and false visions. He put his right hand onto

The Kingdom of Erlain

the tablet and wiped away the roses that covered the inscribed glyphs. The sound of the rain that struck the ground filled the silence as he caressed the image, “. . . you are definitely real.” He took his hand off the cold, gray stone and began to chuckle. His hand hovered over the stone as water dripped from his fingertips and thunder boomed overhead. The man took out a small dagger and sliced his right palm open. He winced at the pain and dropped the blade to the wet ground.

He clenched his wrist and rubbed his bleeding palm across the engraved glyphs on the stone tablet. They began to glow a crimson red and outlined the image of a ferocious beast. “Hear me, mighty Creature that lived long ago in ancient times: I have gathered the requirements of thy rebirth for the Common Era to fulfill my needs. I summon you!” he shouted over the thunder. He closed his other hand to create an energetic ball of blue and white smoke that flickered with black electricity. Blood pumping, he shoved the sphere into the stone, which caused a massive wave that nearly toppled the trees around him. Slowly it settled, and he stood back up laughing. The tablet zapped and jolted with the same blue-white color. Finally, a bright white flash engulfed the surrounding area; closing his eyes, the man could only hear his accomplishment: the roar of a mighty dragon.

Chapter One

A lone two-story home settled at the edge of a looming forest. Its roof damaged from the plethora of branches that fell. Rain dripped off the windows allowing the sun to creep through the innards of the household. The wooden walls that protected the family were drenched and twigs buried themselves in the cracks.

Esmund abruptly woke up; his face sweating, chest pounding, and ears rang with echoes of a roar. His brown hair had become a mess when he fell out of bed and onto the cold wooden floorboards below. Serena, his older sister, came rushing to his room from the room downstairs.

“Esmund! Are you alright?” she nervously shouted.

Groaning, Esmund slowly made his way off the floor. The familiar comfort of his sister’s hand on his back calmed his nerves. He felt his chest with his hand and felt his heart beating normal again, *I am fine . . . but what was that?* Esmund covered his mouth and coughed, blowing away any dust that he inhaled. He turned around to face his sister who showed both worry and relief.

Serena tossed her brown hair behind her, “Darn it Esmund, you scared me half to death!” She took her hand off his back and turned around, walked out of the room and down the stairs. Esmund shook off the feeling of dread and walked towards the window nearest to his bed;

The Kingdom of Erlain

sunshine poured on his face as he peered outside and watched as a robin and blue jay flew past into the forest beyond. He sighed in relief and put on his clothes that lay next to him on the dresser and watched the wind blow on the trees. Once dressed he walked downstairs to the first-floor landing.

Turning the corner of the stairs, Esmund saw Serena had already begun to make breakfast. She stood in front of the fireplace mixing wheat and cinnamon spice in a pot. There was a brief silence as Esmund walked over to the table.

“ . . So, it looks like we had a bad storm last night,” Serena started. Esmund froze in place, unable to move or breathe as visions from his nightmare assaulted him. “Some branches seem to have fallen—and I suppose our crops either got blown away or got the rain they needed. Either way, breakfast is ready so once we are done we should go harvesting outside,” Serena turned her head and stared at Esmund. Puzzled by his silence, she turned her head back around to the pot that she was stirring, filled two bowls with the spiced oats and walked over to the table, placing them down at their respective spots. She sat down and saw Esmund had begun to come to his senses but had been staring down at his oats unable to eat.

“Esmund . . . is something wrong? You know you can tell me.” He made no response to her question, but only slowly stirred the oats in front of him. After several seconds of silence, she slammed her fist on

The Kingdom of Erlain

the table. “Dammit! I am your sister and I have always been there for you when you needed me!” she choked while tears began to form in her eyes.

Esmund looked up from his bowl to see Serena starting to cry. “Sis, I’m fine, really. I had a bad dream last night. I’m just tired.” He watched Serena turn her head away from him, wiping her tears away. She sat in silence with her head down, “Let’s just have breakfast and go foraging like you said,” he said calmly to avoid upsetting her further.

Serena began to fiddle with her hair, “I’m sorry I snapped at you, it is just unusual for you to not respond to me,” she said with her sore throat, “Ever since dad passed away after divorcing mom, you’ve only had me to rely on,” Serena said quietly.

“I know,” Esmund said.

“Dad and our uncle—had quite the rivalry. A playful one. Dad always told us that.” Serena waved her spoon about, “Yet we never saw him. Kind of a shame, don’t you think?”

“I was too young to even remember most of this and you know that,” Esmund laughed.

“Oh yeah, you were. I’m sure Dad would be proud to see us now,” Serena yearned.

Once they had finished their breakfast, Esmund began to clean the dishes. Finishing the last few dishes, he heard Serena walk into the

The Kingdom of Erlain

other room. She came back with her bow slung over her left shoulder; its design was simple yet sturdy with various intricate carvings of shapes outlined. The quiver was at maximum capacity with sharp flint-tipped arrows. Esmund stood up from his seat and grabbed his steel sword, which lay sheathed against the fireplace wall. They both brandished their weapons and headed for the front door.

Esmund and Serena stepped out onto the stone pathway in front of them to survey the damage. The front lawn's patchy grass had leaves and twigs scattered about. To the right of the front door was the garden, which had suffered casualties to some of the growing plants. They toppled over from the drenching rain or ripped out of the ground by the violent winds.

"Well, there goes about half the harvest," Esmund calmly said, "But it couldn't be helped. We should just get to the forest and replenish our supplies." Serena nodded in reply and the two of them walked towards the forest clearing just past the garden. Approaching the opening to the forest Esmund felt cold as though death itself was calling him. Serena seemed unaffected and walked beside him as they finally entered the clearing in the forest.

Serena pushed away some branches that blocked their path; Esmund ducked under them as they recoiled.

"Serena! Be more careful!" he yelled.

The Kingdom of Erlain

“Oh, sorry Esmund! I should have realized they would have done that. Are you alright?” she shouted back.

Dusting off his pants, Esmund scoffed at the fact his sister was forgetful—something that rarely happens with her, “I’m fine, just a bit thrown off by it.”

“Alright we’re here!” Serena said as Esmund caught his breath. “Remember that if you get into any trouble to do the whistle call. You still remember how to do it right?” She asked with her arms folded, hoping he would remember. Esmund tilted his head, trying to remember the tactic. Serena snapped him out of his thoughts and began laughing. She knew her younger brother too well, placed her pinky fingers inside her mouth on opposite sides, and whistled in a pattern like a birdcall. She patted her brother on the head, “Just be careful. I don’t want to come back to see you nearly cut yourself everywhere like last month!”

“Sis, I’ll be fine. Just you wait! I’ll have plenty of resources when I get back!” he said proudly. Serena jogged towards a group of berry bushes in the distance leaving Esmund on his own. Esmund walked to at a hollow log opposite to where his sister disappeared to check for some hidden animal. The bushes ahead him rattled about and he darted his attention to focus on it. He froze with fear as he gazed upon the bush waiting for whatever dangerous creature would appear before him. Esmund quickly grasped his sword’s hilt on his back, preparing for a fight.

The Kingdom of Erlain

Out of the bushes hopped a small gray-furred rabbit. Esmund felt embarrassed that he was fearful over a small and harmless creature. He looked up at the sky, “Dammit. I’ve wasted my time,” he said. He brought his concentration back to the bunny, “I’ll have to catch *something* and that would be *you*, mister bunny!” he said confidently. Esmund prepared a running stance as the rabbit stared back at him with bright, beady eyes. It knew what his intent was. The rabbit quickly hopped away from Esmund towards a group of bushes, rustling through them.

Esmund growled at the fact he got get away, “No! I won’t lose to a stupid rabbit!” He ran towards the undergrowth in front of him. Once he was through, Esmund watched the furry critter spring away even faster. “So, you like to play games? Fine, I’ll play!” He smiled with greed and ran at it with determination. The rabbit turned the corner around a tree attempting to alter its path trying to lose him. Whizzing around the oak tree, Esmund saw the creature directly in his path. Esmund glared at the now escaping rabbit. It turned to look at him as though trying to tell him something and hopped into an opening between arched oak trees. Branches from the surrounding trees had fallen on the ground and foliage littered the area. Noticing that this area was dreadfully familiar, he was hesitant to move from where he stood.

Through the open ceiling, the sun shone directly on the ground, *there’s no way this is real*, Esmund thought to himself. He walked

The Kingdom of Erlain

slowly through the arched trees and over to what appeared to be fragmented pieces of rock scattered around the center of this small area. He could not make out what it was supposed to be but noticed there was a single mark where it had been. Esmund knelt to examine it further. There were small markings and dried blood on a few of the pieces. His hand trembled in the direction of a lone piece of stone by his foot and lightning ejected from it. Immediately he felt his entire hand go numb, stomach felt nauseous, and a sharp icy feeling ran through his bones. Esmund screamed in agonizing pain, throwing himself to the ground as he grasped onto his wrist.

* * *

Esmund's eyelids were heavy; clear white smoke drifted from the center of his right palm. He sat up while holding onto his forehead, *Dammit. What is happening?* He stared at the spread of stone pieces. His memory came back, and he glanced down at his right hand that now felt no pain but reddened. He pushed the thought aside: *Serena! She's going to kill me if I don't return home!* Esmund adjusted his sword strap and pushed himself off the ground, *All right then. Time to go home.* He darted out of the area and through the woods at a rapid pace. Scrubs crackled against his body and vegetation crunched under his feet as he ran to reach the entrance of the forest. Once there, he dodged around the branches and vines that were in his way.

The Kingdom of Erlain

Coming through the entrance of the forest, Esmund was running out of breath. He had several cuts and scratches along his arms and legs. Home was right in front of him, *perhaps she is still out gathering--I would be lucky if that were the case*. He shook his head, *No, not possible—It's mid-day and she would have gone back home by now*. Esmund approached the front door, put his hands on his knees, and huffed. He wiped the sweat from his brow, stretched, and then opened the door, “Hey Serena, I--” an overwhelming presence of fear and death interrupted him.

Time felt like it slowed down as Esmund’s eyes locked onto his sister. Her expression was soulless and empty. Black, shadowy particles shrouded a humanoid figure behind her wielding a small dagger to her throat. “*Serena!*” he cried, darting towards his sister with his hand on the hilt of his sword. In that split second, Esmund noticed a tear in his sister’s left eye. The menace stared at him intensely and he felt put into a trance. Extremely weak and unable to move Esmund stopped mid-stride. His heart beat heavily in his chest, *what’s going on?* Serena’s tears dripped down her face as the figure slit Serena’s throat, drawing out black particles instead of blood from her neck. Esmund collapsed, slowly losing his ability to stay conscious and watched his sister die in front of him, “I’m sorry--” he muttered.