

## *Chapter One*

### *Empty Rooms and Dead Eyes*

Two days later I took the back stairs to my apartment. The stairwell was unpainted and water-stained from disuse and neglect, and the doors to each landing were bolted tight. The attic in which I lived had once been used for storage, and the elevator had been blocked off when the space was converted for habitation. It was no inconvenience considering the privacy it afforded in return.

During my haste to flee my dreams, I'd failed to close the door. It was a small concern. The building was secure, and few people even realized I lived here. A quick glance was all it took to ensure everything was as I had left it.

The apartment was a sprawling affair with a low, uneven ceiling jutting out at strange angles to conform to the roof. Small, multi-paned windows overshadowed by extended ledges let in gloomy light at best. The walls were dark brick except for the boarded mouth of the defunct elevator, and the hardwood floor gleamed dully with deep scratches beneath the polish. It wasn't a quiet place, what with the constant rattling of unpainted pipes and air ducts running the length of the ceiling and the gentle hum of elevator cables. However, it was large and out of the way and had suited my purposes well in the past.

Katherine had loved it.

I shelved my equipment and made a quick meal of cheese and crackers. I wasn't hungry, but eating regularly helped pass the time. There was little else in the pantry. I never was one for shopping. I checked the phone for message and went to the back rooms.

Steven Glen Baird

Katherine's door hung drunkenly from a top hinge. I straightened the bolt, nailed the lower hinges back in place, and did manage to repair it after a fashion. There was nothing I could do for the splintered wood or the holes, but at least it no longer protruded into the hall. I could only sweep the crumbled brick from the scarred floor and replace the unbroken ones where they fit over the concrete blocks of the wall. The rest would have to wait.

The refrigerator offered little but months-old juice and something that might at one time been yogurt. I returned to the sparse pantry and managed to find a soda before putting on some music and settling into the den to relax. The stereo system was impressive by any standards. It had been Katherine's and was one of the few things I hadn't shipped to her family. She had somehow instilled in me her love of music, and an entire wall of the den was dedicated to her shelves of cds, old vinyl, and even a few vintage 8-tracks.

Most everything here still bore her mark. The few photographs still gracing the walls were her favorites, chosen from among the thousands I'd taken over the years. Katherine used to spend hours pillaging through the boxes I stored in odd corners of the apartment, studying each white and gray photo as if reading its story. She never asked why I only shot in black and white, even when using a digital camera. She would ask questions about them and point out things I'd never noticed. She had an intuitive eye for detail.

Of Katherine I had but a single image, framed in black and white upon the coffee table.

I'd taken it just after one of her bad times when she was pale and weak and wanted only to rest. She'd always kept her dark hair short, and so it was in this photo. Her light complexion and delicate features made her appear almost child-like, but her tired eyes spoke of experiences far beyond her years. A thin smile played upon her lips, a smile I can seldom remember her without. I suppose it could not be said she was a beautiful woman, but what does that really mean?

I closed my eyes and let my mind drift and flow with the Celtic melodies. So much time. So many places and faces.

## When Dragons Sleep

Sometimes I found it difficult to distinguish between what was real and what wasn't, between yesterday and yesteryear. So many tales changed in word and song over the years until the original events they recounted were completely shrouded by time. It was quite another thing to actually experience those events, to even take part in some of them. The ever-changing stories mingled with the real memories with every retelling. Soon it was difficult to distinguish between the solid fact of memory and the excesses of poetic license. However, one thing always remained unchanged. Everything would have been so much simpler if I'd not been so damn curious.

Katherine had been curious, too. She'd had a need to know that was more subtle, yet every bit as strong, as my own. She'd been fascinated by the ancient tapestry of the Runes I'd once hung over the boarded elevator shaft. The intricate weaving and illusion of constant shifting had prompted questions I was ill-prepared to answer.

"These are beautiful," she'd said. "What are they?"

"Just some old Runic patterns I've picked up here and there." It would have been so much easier had I been able to lie to her.

"These aren't Scandinavian." She'd sounded certain enough that I didn't try to argue otherwise.

"No."

She'd reached out and traced a few Runes with a finger, careful not to touch the weavings. "It's all interconnected, almost as though there's some theme or story. Do you know what they mean?"

"I'd been unable to meet her gaze. "Some. Very little." Not enough.

She'd frowned as I struggled to be evasive without seeming to be, and then she'd let it drop. Still, I often found her gazing at it as I once had in a far different place. Once, many months later, she'd said quite simply and suddenly, "They're incomplete."

Katherine had seen the obvious after gazing at a crude replica for a few months. It had taken me a lifetime of studying the source to come to the same conclusion. There were times I felt she understood far more than she ever should have.

Steven Glen Baird

I saw the Runes now with their complex inter-twining and maddening inconsistencies. Some of those gaps I could fill in now with knowledge gained at a monstrous price, but the greater mysteries gnawed at me like an unappeasable hunger. I had been so close to answers once. If only I could have had a few more lifetimes.

“A life is far too short to waste on foolish questions,” an old man I once knew had been fond of saying. It had been a very long time ago. His name was Iago, and he lived in a tiny hut of mud and straw near a beach. He spent his mornings and evenings fishing and gathering shells from the sand, and he slept during the afternoon to make up for nights spent in the cave on the rock faces. “Make sure the questions you ask are worth the time answering.”

He didn't know who had carved the Runes into the floor of the cave, and I didn't know how the old man had come to understand them. They were important because they fit perfectly into one of the many gaps of my knowledge. I spent many years nudging the information from the old man. Iago sensed my urgency, but he somehow knew that time wasn't important to me. He fed me his knowledge slowly so as to keep me near. It was the longest I'd ever spent in one place, much less a place so humble, and I learned more from him than I'd ever expected.

He eventually divulged all before his wits left him, but still I lingered until the end. I didn't understand why at the time. In his last delirious days, the old man called me son. I felt strange for a long time after his death. At first I thought it was some side effect of my growing understanding of the Runes. I'd never experienced grief. It was as foreign to me as humility.

At some point during my reverie I dozed off. I did not need sleep, but it had become a potent drug despite the pain it brought. It was the only place I could still be with Katherine. I should have known better.

The shadow hovered just at the verge of my consciousness. It had been for some time. I noticed it just as it found a breach in my mind's barriers where ordinarily there would have been none. It suddenly turned in upon itself, coalesced into a wavering

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outline, and from there began to take on the shape of a familiar form.

“Thytira?” a silken voice purred dangerously. “You dream now as well?”

I started in my chair, and the empty can slipped from my fingers to roll across the floor. The wispy shadow hovered above me, wings outstretched to cup the currents of a far away mountain. Gold, red-slit eyes sought my own, and they filled with malevolent joy as she realized she was seen. But of far more concern, through her eyes I had the fleeting sense of a much more dangerous entity than this.

It was the old Beast himself.

I slammed down that mental barrier with all the force I could muster. A shriek of rage filled my apartment, cracked the glass in the nearest window, and faded like a dying wind as the apparition shriveled into oblivion.

Once again, I was alone.

I sat for some time staring at the wall and trying to suppress my anger. Had it really happened? I glanced at the broken window and the crushed aluminum can that had rolled beneath the apparition. Without a doubt. But how? I should have been well beyond their reach. In fact, I should have been dead to them. The gulf separating me from my old life was greater than any fathomable distance. It could not be bridged by force alone, no matter how great.

But then, I had never considered that it would be N’hera-toth seeking me, nor that it would be my bond with Nyrad that could make it possible. How I hated her! Even now the very thought of her name boiled my blood. The old Beast had used Nyrad to seek me, and in the weakness of my dreams he had succeeded.

That much I could remedy. I arose and took my camera from a shelf. I would simply no longer sleep. I paused and wondered a moment if I had the will. In Katherine’s presence, the nights had brought soothing peace. Was I willing to give that up, even if it meant a descent into a life I had long abandoned?

With that thought returned the old fear that one day I may sleep, never to awaken.

Steven Glen Baird

This time I made certain to secure the door on my way out. The brisk damp air cleared my head quickly. Few people were out this time of night. I strolled with the sidewalks practically to myself. Those few I did pass walked with their heads down or else averted their eyes in the unwritten law of strangers.

I didn't watch where I went. I just walked.

In all my years with Katherine, I had never once considered returning to my old life. Now once again alone, I found myself mulling over the possibility. It would be simple enough. I no longer had anything to hold me here. And there were always the Runes. They were never far from my mind, crying out in their incompleteness. Their puzzle meant something to live for and a far better way of spending my days than this.

I also had many old scores to settle. Vengeance does not die readily among the People. Forgiveness is a weakness. Mercy is unheard of. But my past held many dangers. I held no illusions that I was as hard as I'd once been. I may well be trading grief for death.

I walked for hours, weighing my future and playing devil's advocate for each choice. The irony of that almost lightened my mood. Who better could play that role? My footsteps led me to deeper parts of the city and into darker streets. These streets had once been my own. I had claimed them, marked them with blood, and found grim sport hunting the other night predators.

The gunshots were near, three sharp *cracks* in quick succession. I paused during the subsequent silence then walked quickly toward the shrill scream that followed. Others heard as well, and I was only the first of a gathering crowd.

I read the scene as I would have in a newspaper, as thousands would probably read of it in the morning, with the cold detachment of one with nothing at stake. The boy lay sprawled in a dark pool, limbs akimbo and face turned up toward the orange glow of a buzzing crossing light. He may have been ten, or he may have been fifteen. It's always difficult to say. Death has a way of removing the relevancy of age. One black sneaker lay some feet away.

A woman sat on her heels at his side. She looked old and haggard despite her obvious youth. One hand rested on the boy's

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shoulder, the other lost in the thick tangle of her dark hair. I didn't even realize my hands had found the camera until the shutter snapped for the first time. The woman looked up at me. Through the tears that flowed, her eyes were wide and lifeless and as dead as the boy's. She didn't even have the spark left to curse me. None of the other onlookers bothered to rebuke me, either. They simply didn't care. I fired from the chest, saturating the scene until I had but a few frames remaining. Those I took slowly and deliberately.

Afterward I stood in the rear of the crowd and watched the police and ambulance arrive to take over the scene. It was the Law of Sehi'dra: the law of the strong. The weak always fall. It is the way of life.

People lingered long after the body was taken away, milling about in nightclothes and discussing what they had seen and lying about what they had not.