

RAEMIL

DARKNESS RISING: BOOK ONE

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Prologue...

Smoke drifted lazily around her. She could smell burning hair and flesh as she lay in what had been a forest but was now only a collection of blackened twigs reaching into the pale sky. Unable to move, and the sky and burned trees her only view; she waited for the other to stand above her, to gloat before dealing the final blow. They did not come.

Her beautiful red hair was scorched; she could see its shrivelled ends in her peripheral. A silly thing to be worried about now, she supposed. She couldn't move to see her hands, but they felt like they were on fire still. *They very well could be*, she mused. More likely, they would be blackened claws, not dissimilar to the tops of the trees she could now see. Breathing was hard, she couldn't hear anything above her own wheezing gasps; if her opponent was near, she couldn't tell. She wished they would hurry up; she was getting tired.

The sky grew darker and, as she waited, her mind began to wander back to better days, a time when she was at her happiest, surrounded by good friend and wonderous discoveries. It just so happened that these were also her darkest moments, before she lay blackened in a forest, waiting to die.

Her younger years were spent in Otowan, a cursed land, now known as "The land of the betrayers". Once, her kind had been accepted in those lands. She was a mage, her pale skin, height and strange coloured eyes ensured that it was known. Humans, mortals as they still habitually called them, all looked

the same to her. To be fair to herself, they did all have tanned skin, brown hair and brown or grey eyes. The fact there were varying shades of those colours throughout the human population escaped her.

She and her mage friends went about their daily lives and the mortals went about theirs, and for the most part, their lives did not intersect. She was unaware that outside the bubble of the academy of magic, mortals and mages were beginning to resent one another. Her attitude was no better. It was easy to dismiss mortals as unimportant while living in a school, secluded from the general population and outside world. They spent their days with noses buried in books, time spent on school grounds practising magic with friends.

Those had been glorious days. There had been five students that were classed as “live-ins”. They either had no family, like her friend Stah or, like herself, Preah, Myla and Bascillium, couldn’t journey for every semester break across to Iadron where their families lived. Very few families lived in Iadron at this stage; the reason why only these few students remained.

These girls had become fast friends, and living in a school meant that all five became very good at the art of magic. During the holidays, they had each other, their power and what seemed like infinite resources. There were rules and they were watched to a certain extent, but the girls were young and wild. They found ways to practise magic when they weren’t allowed, break into the potions stock and steal into the restricted library to find all kinds of juicy tales and spells.

Laying there, scorched and still smoking, she wished she could go back in time, at least before everything went wrong; before one of their teachers became a fanatic and lost his mind. If it weren’t for him, Otowan may have stayed the mainland, mages and mortals may have still been living together. Tensions had always been high between the two races; she just hadn’t noticed until it was much, much too late.

A lot of the animosity came from a disagreement on the gods. It was widely believed there were nine gods. The new religion only had room for one. Humans had begun to follow the new god, the “only” God, as they would have others believe. This one God just so happened to decree that mages and magic were evil.

Otowan quickly became a very dangerous place for mages. She should have listened to Stah. She was a blonde-haired beauty with eyes of amber and a laugh that could lighten even the gloomiest of moods. Stah had been the first to mention that something was afoot outside the academy. If they had listened

then, perhaps all the other teachers wouldn't have died in the fire.

She could now appreciate how painful, if not how terrifying, that must have been, trapped in the academy while it burned. How terrible it must have been to watch the doom of your own race, to know it was caused by one of your own.

The five girls didn't stay to heroically fight the flames and try to save the school and hundreds of years' worth of learning and history, like the staff had. Narrowly escaping, they watched from afar as the place they had called home burned to the ground.

Pulling her out of her reflections of the past, she saw a large bird through the break in the burned trees overhead. It dipped and wheeled above the scene, no doubt a bird of prey, looking for small and injured creatures crawling out of the ruined forest. It was directly above her, circling as though deciding whether or not she was too big to eat. Ridiculously, her only fear was that it could shit on her from this position. She didn't want her body to be found after an epic battle, only to have the one thing remembered about it was that she lay dead with a giant bird shit on her face. That would be a cruel and frankly, unacceptable, ending.

The five former students were on the run for a while, only survival on their mind in the beginning. How to get back to their families without being captured and murdered by mortals, came in second. By now, there had been a mass exodus of mages from Otowan into Iadron. Once the humans had realised the mages were fleeing across the sea, they took control of the docks, making it near impossible to get back to Iadron.

Bascillium had been the best at gem spells among them. It was she who convinced them of the power of, not only gems, but the natural stones around them. The most powerful family houses held power stones, a different colour represented a different house. The stones helped mages access their power and boost it if needed, as well as being tools for communication. There were not many great houses and by the time the war would end, only four of those families would remain.

Each of the girls had worn a pendant around their necks, made from their families' power stones; small pieces to carry with them on their journeys away from home. They were to help the young mages learn to control their power, a

focal point, and something weaker mages would rely heavily on. All five gave up their house pendants to Bascillium and she made with them a tool they would use against Eldantez, the power-hungry mage that had instigated it all.

Eldantez couldn't see anything but devotion in those mortals. This led him to his doom. His human followers betrayed him, earning Otowan its second name. The combined power of his former students banished him from the mortal plain, but the fighting was not over.

Their world was utterly and irreparably changed after the evacuation of mages from Otowan. So many had died and they had been few in number in comparison to the humans to begin with. Battles raged between mortals and mages, but even powerful mages had their limits; even they became exhausted and overwhelmed.

The bird was gone, leaving her alone in the quiet again. Her opponent was nowhere to be seen; perhaps she was dead or dying too. She and her four friends from the academy had parted ways a long time ago, deciding it was safer that way, until now, that was. Bascillium had reached out to her after such a long time. It seemed that Bascillium had had a change of heart. She wanted to resurrect the academy, to make Otowan a place for mages again and rule the mortals there.

Leaving her family behind and, without explanation, she had stupidly been lured to the land of the betrayers. She went to determine if Bascillium worked alone, if she was just deranged from a long and traumatic life, or if she was in fact dangerous. It turned out to be the latter. She and Bascillium battled through a land full of people that would burn them alive, given the opportunity. Their final battle ground was this forest, where, to both their surprise, they seemed very evenly matched.

The final blast of raw power threw her back so far, she couldn't even see Bascillium and what damage she may or may not have done to her former friend. Since she was still not dead, and it was starting to get dark and cold, she could only assume Bascillium was dead. Internally, she assessed the damage, her mind probing her own body for fatal wounds, she could not see, but could feel. She discovered half cooked organs, burned lungs and trachea, extremities burned to charcoal and tremendous pain.

Sick of waiting for death to come to her, she decided to meet death on her own

terms. They had flirted before, she and death. She wondered why it was taking so long for him to take her now. Drawing on what little power and energy she had left to her, she sent her spirit from her body, drifting to the Inbetween. It was a place void of light and sound; it was the small or incredibly large place between places. The veil separating the Inbetween and the Underworld was very thin.

Standing now in the void, she lifted her hands to inspect them. She was glad to see that here, they were not looking like crispy, over-cooked chicken feet as she was sure they looked back on the mortal plain. While she waited for death, she realised, after reflecting back on her long life, a greedy part of her wanted more than this. She had been through so much, and for what? To die pointlessly and alone? There was more to come, she could feel it in her bones. This was not her end, so when death drifted quietly into the void to take her, she lifted her chin and she told him *no*.

He laughed. They all said no: the young; the old; the pretty; the ugly; the poor and the wealthy. What had they to give him? What could they bargain with other than their lives, which were already his to take? But this one was so sure she could be the one to cheat him. She stood there so confident, so strong, her elegant neck craned, her long, red hair pushed back behind her squared shoulders, a defiant look on her fine face. Mage-kind were all the same, all arrogant, all thinking they could just take what they wanted with no consequence.

‘I could give you more lives,’ she said.

As though he hadn’t heard that one before.

‘I gain nothing from murders,’ he said dismissively.

He accepted lives and housed souls before their crossing, but he could not keep them. He could neither prevent their transformation nor hurry it along. Murder victims were the least interactive and of the least benefit to his existence; a way to discourage such bargains that led to mass killings. Wars were a little different. The definition of murder during war times became a little more ambiguous, and a war was coming; it would be a busy and enjoyable time ahead for him.

‘What can you gain from anything here? As Death?’ she asked.

Death looked at her in a new light. She was pretty, beautiful even, and very powerful; even in the underworld where he ruled, power was still coveted.

‘Now that is a question that is rarely asked.’ Death smiled.

The imprudent mage smiled back, arrogance forever the downfall of her kind.