



# ETERNAL EMBER

MJ KAYE

Book One Of  
The Chronicles of the Aethlum



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### **First Edition**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and events are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or real events is purely coincidental.

Recommended for readers aged 13+ due to thematic intensity and fantasy violence. While appropriate for teen readers, parental guidance is advised for sensitive readers.

**FOR DONNA, MY INSPIRATION...**

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*“The light breaks what the darkness cannot touch. Shadows consume, yes—but it is the light that reveals every wound. And those who survive its searing become something else: not whole, not pure—only real. Only true.”*

— MJ Kaye

*“There are wounds a sword cannot give and time cannot close—the ones shaped like hands that should have held you, voices that should have called you home. Love, when given, is a light that roots itself into the bones. But when withheld—by cruelty, by silence, by careless forgetting—it does not vanish. It shatters. And every shard becomes a question that never stops bleeding. A child should never learn the weight of being unwanted. Yet some carry it like breath. This is not the absence of love. This is its unmaking.”*

*— MJ Kaye*



## High Priest Balldour's Last Record...

### Temple of Radiant Light — Emberfall, Year 93 AG (After Gods)

In the heart of Emberfall, within the sacred hush of the Temple of Radiant Light, stood the statue of Aevyra.

Tall. Serene. Her hands outstretched in quiet benediction.

The morning light spilled through stained glass, casting fractured halos across the marble figure. Her face—worn smooth by time—seemed almost to breathe.

At her feet, etched deep into the stone plinth, the words:

*Only in silence is light remembered.*

*Only in fire is light reborn.*

— *Temple Codex, Fragment 12a (Author Unknown)*

High Priest Balldour stood in reverent silence; his gaze fixed on the inscription.

“Did you record it?” he asked, voice echoing faintly beneath the vaulted dome.

The scribe beside him nodded, fingers ink-stained and trembling. “Yes, Most Holy. Shall I mark the year?”

“Aye,” Balldour murmured, his eyes still on the flame-lit altar. “Mark it... year ninety-three.”

The scribe hesitated. “Ninety-three... what? I’ve not seen that count before.”

Balldour turned then, the weight of centuries in his gaze.

“AG,” he said. “After Gods.”

The scribe bowed his head. Understanding bloomed like a bruise.

Behind them, the great brazier flared—once.

Then settled into a steady, enduring glow.

### Recovered Margin Notes — Scribe Unknown

*(Preserved on a scorched vellum leaf, origin disputed)*

*I see only darkness.*

*The firmament is broken.*

*There are no gods. We are alone. There is no hope. But we pray.*

*High Priest Balldour is dying.*

*All the priests are dying.*

*And some... are changing.*

**(Second entry. Ink faded. Written in haste.)**

*The priests are gone. They are no more.*

*There is none left to guide us.*

*All that remains is shadow... and them.*

*They call themselves **Fae Lari**.*

*They speak in tongues older than sin.*

*They have claimed the darkness as theirs.*

*We... are... lost.*

## Archivist's Final Note — Recovered from the Deepvault, Year 2289 AG

This record was found beneath the ruins of the Temple of Radiant Light, buried in ashstone and root. Emberfall had long since fallen quiet—its braziers cold, its prayers forgotten. Still, the ember lingered. Waiting.

I fear the temple at Kingsreach has grown corrupt. The rites feel... hollow. The Light no longer answers.

I will carry this fragment to the Temple in Silverwood, where Brother Aric may preserve it.

If the Fae'Lari do not find me first.

May Aevyra shield my steps.

May the ember remember my name.







## Chapter 1

### The Last Hope of Evershade...

*"Build not where the wind forgets to howl,  
nor where the ground remembers blood."*

— Old Illyndoran Warning

In the dark heart of Evershade Forest, twilight bled into night with an uncanny hush. Mallwell straightened his aching back and surveyed the clearing where he'd worked these last few months, setting the final planks for a modest wooden cottage. It was small but sturdy, the sort of place he hoped would keep Reyla safe and warm once the winter winds came. The outside world might scoff at their choice to settle here, yet Mallwell liked the solitude—no guards' barracks, no clanging steel, just the quiet rustle of leaves, the snap of branches under foot, and the hope of a fresh start.

Now, as the sun surrendered its final rays, Evershade seemed to shift. Tree trunks faded to tall silhouettes, forming a black lattice against a sky fast filling with stars. A breeze wove through the underbrush, stirring dead leaves with a whispery sound like hushed gossip. Mallwell paused, letting the plank rest on his shoulder, and listened. The wind carried odd calls—somewhere far off, an unearthly cry echoed through the pines, then faded. He glanced around, half expecting to see a pair of glowing eyes between the trunks. Nothing.

“Hogswallop,” he muttered under his breath, remembering the old wives’ tales of Moonstalkers—massive silver-furred cats said to wander these woods by moonlight. In five months, he hadn’t so much as seen a stray cat, let alone a monstrous beast. Nonetheless, a prickle ran across his skin, like a warning carried on the wind. Possibly just the chill of impending night.

He hefted the plank again. Every so often, the trees themselves creaked and groaned, bark rubbing bark as if the ancient trunks whispered secrets among themselves. The deeper the gloom grew, the more the forest seemed to come alive—soft chirps, low hoots, and a rhythmic thrumming that reminded him of distant drums. Could be bullfrogs by the marsh, or might be something else entirely. In Evershade, one could never be certain.

Cicadas started their clatter, rising and falling in an alien cadence. Reyla had once told him she’d glimpsed strange shapes skulking at dusk—Veilshades, the locals called them—but Mallwell told her it was only trickery of the fading light. He’d fought in wars, stood watch on city walls. He knew how imagination could play with shadows when you were tired and half-scared. Still, an uneasy part of him wondered if she truly had seen something. A branch snapped behind him, and he spun, eyes roving across the tree line. Silence.

The breeze picked up again, rustling the branches so that the forest seemed to breathe, a slow inhale that tugged at the corners of Mallwell’s courage. But he shook it off. There were no monsters here—just an old forest, with old bones and older stories. The smell of pine pitch and loamy soil grounded him. He’d keep Reyla safe. That was all that mattered. Tomorrow, he’d finish these walls, hang a proper door, and they’d share a warm meal by the hearth.

For a moment, he stared into the deepening dark between the pines, almost willing something to appear, to validate his tension or prove his

fears misguided. But all he heard was the creak of branches, the hush of leaves, and the soft sigh of wind as the night claimed Evershade Forest once more. It was enough to make a sane man doubt his senses. Mallwell took a long breath, adjusted the plank on his shoulder, and trudged back toward the half-finished cottage—unaware that, deeper still in the shadows, the forest watched with quiet, unblinking eyes.

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Darkness clung to her like living tar, winding over pallid skin etched with vein-like patterns. Her hair—if one could call those dripping strands hair—hung in soaked ropes around her face. Her eyes glowed with a predatory luminescence, twin embers peering through the tangled mass. When she licked her blackened lips, it wasn't just hunger. It was ownership of the silent realm all around.

Deep beneath the towering pines and twisted oaks of Evershade, she crouched low. The wind stirred, carrying the scents of timber, human sweat, and something else—something she hungered for more than flesh. Her chest rose and fell in slow, deliberate breaths as she drew the odor into her nose, dissecting each note like a connoisseur. A woman's scent clung to the man. Life lingered there, fresh and new—a spark she had not tasted in ages.

A wet rasp echoed in the hush as she ran a serpentine tongue across her lips. They dare to come here? Her realm. Her domain. The mortal building a home on her soil was laughable. This forest was a cradle of old magic, blackened roots twisting beneath the loam, feeding on lost souls and ancient secrets. She was the mistress of that deep hush, the warden of shadows that devoured the pale moonlight.

Twigs and leaves cracked softly under her bare feet as she shifted her stance, watching from behind the twisted trunk of a gnarled oak. The man trudged back toward his half-finished cottage; a wooden plank balanced on his shoulder. From this distance, she could see the tension

in his muscles—a soldier's discipline, no doubt, but not nearly enough to match her cunning. She thought of the taste of him, of his flesh—but oh, what truly kindled her appetite was that other perfume. That flicker of new life he carried from the woman within his walls.

Her gaunt silhouette wavered between the trees, almost melting into the gloom, rivulets of black twisting around her limbs like living threads. A hush fell across the clearing. The creatures of Evershade—wolves, owls, insects—seemed to hold their breath when she moved. She relished their fear, relished the hush that came with her presence.

As he disappeared beyond the makeshift doorway, she tilted her head back and let out a silent laugh. Whether he believed in superstition or not mattered little. Her domain was old and wild, inhabited by the unnamed and the forgotten. And what was a mere cottage's walls against centuries of shadow?

She ran a claw-tipped finger along the trunk of the oak, flaking off bark as easily as dry skin. There was no rush. She had all the time in the world to watch, to learn. She would taste them when the moment was right—consume not just their flesh, but that sweet, vibrant energy of creation stirring within the woman. Her eyes flared gold in the gathering darkness at the thought.

When the breeze shifted, it carried an echo of his voice—distant, muffled. She coiled her body against the tree, letting the forest drape her in deeper shadow, letting the forest's shadow drape over her. Her laughter died to a hiss. In this dark heart of Evershade, no folly went unpunished.

She flicked her gaze toward a patch of moonlight that had managed to seep through the canopy. The silver glow danced on the ground, shimmering almost invitingly. It tempted no one but her—she remained swathed in darkness. Soon enough, the man and the woman would learn who truly reigned in these woods.

Slowly, deliberately, she slipped deeper into the labyrinth of trunks and twisted roots, vanishing as though she had never been there at all—leaving only the faintest trail of an acrid, unsettling musk and the weight of an ancient hunger that had only just begun to stir.

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Mallwall hammered the last nail home with a final, hollow thunk. Outside, the forest had descended into full night—only the faintest outline of pines swayed against the starless sky. A quiver of unease rippled over his skin, prickling at the back of his neck. For a fleeting instant, his hand almost lifted toward his belt, where his sword should have been, but the blade was inside near the hearth. It had seen him through war and worse—iron that had never failed him. But now it sat idle by the hearth, too far from his reach.

He swallowed hard, picturing Reyla alone in there with her belly so big, so close to birthing. He couldn't give in to fear or show it. The thought of frightening her—or agitating her condition—made him grit his teeth and force the worry away.

He took up the torch he'd wedged against the half-finished wall, and the flame's glow flickered across the fresh wood, bathing the little clearing in a wary golden circle. The insects that had been creeping out with the dusk scattered from the harsh light, legs skittering and wings whirring as they fled into the underbrush. Every nighttime sound seemed magnified: the crunch of dead leaves under foot, the muted chorus of cicadas, the soft crack of shifting branches in the dark heart of Evershade. Mallwall's stomach tightened at every noise, but he pressed on, stepping into the cottage he'd worked so hard to build.

Inside, the space was cramped but sturdy—warm enough to ward off the chill wind coming off the forest. His eyes landed instantly on Reyla, splayed across the simple wooden bed in the corner. Her usually brilliant

golden hair lay in damp, tangled clumps across the makeshift pillow, and sweat glistened on her brow in the glow of the torch. She looked to him with wide, pained eyes, her breaths coming in frantic, shallow gasps.

The sight punched the air from his lungs. His torch hand trembled. Instinct took over as he hurled the torch into the half-stone hearth, where the dry tinder caught quickly, sending up bright flames that danced across the new walls. The flicker painted Reylya in sharp relief—her face twisted with another wave of agony. He dropped to his knees beside her, heart thudding.

She reached out with a clammy hand, her grip tight and urgent around his arm. He felt her nails dig in as her belly cramped again. Her eyes screwed shut, and this time she couldn't bite back the scream that tore from her throat. It filled the tiny cottage, echoing off the fresh timber until it seemed to join the hum of the forest.

"Reylya," he breathed, trying to keep calm but hearing his own panic spike in his voice. "It's going to be all right... hush now, we're safe... we're safe here."

But even as he spoke, a gust of wind rattled the loose shutter on the far window. The flames in the hearth guttered a moment, sending shadows skittering over the walls like living things. Mallwall's stomach lurched. He forced himself to steady his breathing, to keep Reylya's focus on him and not on the roiling darkness outside.

He took her hand in both of his, feeling the tension in her slender fingers. A bead of sweat trickled down the side of her face, catching the firelight. Outside, a wolf howled—low, long, a melancholic note that made Mallwall grit his teeth. He squeezed Reylya's hand tighter, as if willing the walls of their new home to hold fast against every lurking shadow in Evershade.

She gasped for air, gulping in quick breaths. "Mall... Mallwall... it hurts," she managed, voice thin.

He pressed his forehead gently to hers, whispering, “I know. We’ll get through this. We will.” Though he tried to sound certain, he’d never felt more helpless. A soldier could fight a man, even a beast, but this—childbirth, the raw force of nature—he couldn’t conquer with a sword.

Flames crackled in the hearth, and the rising heat offered a temporary comfort. Mallwall scanned the sparse room. He’d prepared linens, boiled water earlier in the evening, just in case. But was it enough? Would the forest’s chill seep in through the cracks in the walls? Would a shriek of wind slice through the roof? His heart pounded.

Reyla’s grip tightened further as another contraction seized her. She pulled at his arm, burying her face against his shoulder, biting back a second scream. Her breath came in ragged bursts.

Outside, the night deepened, and the swirling hush of the trees seemed to close in. The flicker of the firelight threw dancing shadows across the walls, revealing glimpses of the old forest beyond the window. Mallwall forced himself not to look. All that mattered was here, now—the life they had chosen in these woods, and the life about to be born. He set his jaw and straightened, ready to do what little he could.

“Reyla,” he said softly, trying to sound reassuring over the thunder of his pulse, “we’re safe. I’m here. Just... hold on.”

Her only response was a low moan as another wave of pain slammed into her. Mallwall braced himself, kneading his free hand into her back, desperate to bring some measure of comfort. Outside, the wind lashed the treetops, and somewhere in the darkness, something laughed or howled—he couldn’t tell. But inside these humble wooden walls, the fierce light of the hearth burned, and Mallwall clung to that meager warmth as though it were all that stood between them and the unseen terrors of the Evershade.

As Reyla's scream tore through the stillness, the figure in the darkness paused. Her head tilted, and her lips curled into a slow, hungry smile. The cry cut across the night like a blade, reverberating through the ancient trunks of Evershade. The witch's pulse thrummed, anticipation sparking in her veins. Tonight was the night. She could feel it in the very soil beneath her feet.

She moved with a predatory grace, slipping from shadow to shadow, careful to keep any hint of torchlight or moonlight off her pale skin. Each step made the forest seem to quiver—leafy branches rustled with uneasy energy, as if the old wood itself recoiled from her presence. Thick roots twisted under foot, and the hush of the undergrowth was total. Nothing dared stir when she passed; even the wind seemed to hold its breath.

Another scream echoed from the direction of the clearing, faintly muffled by distance but still laced with agony. She licked her blackened lips in anticipation. They have no idea, she thought. No idea what prowls these woods. The humans might have built their little shelter, but this realm belonged to her.

A low groan, like the rasp of stone across stone, sounded somewhere to her left. She spun, hands flaring out, her long, claw-like fingers poised to rend anything foolish enough to threaten her. Between two towering pines, a Veilshade emerged—a creature of living twilight, more mist than flesh, with a faintly humanoid outline that shimmered as it moved. Its eyes glowed silver, a beacon in the deep gloom.

It hissed, echoing an unspoken warning. Leave this place, its stance seemed to say, this forest is not yours.

She smirked at the audacity. Mine, she thought, all of it is mine. A second Veilshade slid into view, larger and more defined, its form like a cloak of living shadow. Both guardians bristled at her presence, shapes flickering in and out of visibility as the scant moonlight filtered down through the canopy.



A coil of sickly green magic curled around the witch's fingers, twisting up her wrists like smoke. She did not wait for them to move. With a flick of her hand, the magic lashed out in a crackling arc, searing the night air and splitting the silence with a sharp crack. The first Veilshade vanished the instant the power struck it, dissolving in a swirl of inky vapour, gone before it could even shriek.

The larger guardian roared—though no real sound emerged, the force of its fury trembled through the air. It lunged, reaching out with shapeless arms that glimmered in the darkness. But the witch only sneered. Another twist of her wrist, another flare of that eerie green light, and she seized the creature's very essence.

She closed her hand into a tight fist. The Veilshade shimmered in agony, its form collapsing inward. Flickers of silver fought against the crushing darkness, trying to maintain shape, but there was no escaping her grip. The silent roar died. With a final convulsion of power, the guardian was ripped apart—its essence scattered on the wind, devoured by the sorcery that clung to her every breath.

The forest went unnaturally still. No rustle of leaves, no chattering insects, no distant owl cry—just the heavy, oppressive silence that fell whenever she displayed her power. Shadows danced along the ground, as if uncertain whether to creep toward her or shy away.

She let out a low, almost purring laugh, her voice softer than a whisper yet brimming with cruel delight. "No match at all," she murmured, brushing the last residue of green magic from her fingertips. Let them warn, let them hiss. Evershade answered to no guardian but her. She had lived in the darkness far too long to be cowed by these wisps of old magic.

A third scream—shrill and desperate—suddenly rang out from the direction of the cottage. She lifted her head, nostrils flaring, catching the scent of fear and sweat on the breeze. "Yes," she muttered, voice thick with dark promise. They have no idea how lucky they are that I'm in such a good mood. A twisted grin brightened her pale face for an instant.

Without another glance at the spot where the Veilshades fell, she turned and slipped deeper between the black trunks, making her way toward the glow of that pathetic little torchlight. Every step was silent, her ragged skirts trailing over roots and fallen branches as she moved with the stealth of a hungry predator.

Soon, she would reach the clearing. Soon, she would savor more than just screams. And under the ancient canopy of Evershade, not a single soul—mortal or otherwise—stood ready to stop her. Only the wind bore witness, whimpering through the boughs as if pleading for dawn to come and banish her from these moonlit shadows. But dawn was hours away. And until it came, the witch would feast.

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Rayla lay sprawled on the bed, skirts hiked to her hips, her damp hair plastered to her forehead. Every fiber of her body seemed aflame. A thick wave of pain rolled from her core, forcing her back to arch off the soaked sheets. She choked on a scream—yet it came anyway, ripping out of her like a wounded animal's cry. Mallwell clasped her hand, his knuckles white from how hard she squeezed. With each contraction, her nails bit into his palm until he was sure he'd bleed, but he refused to loosen his hold. The faint firelight flickered across both of them, illuminating their terror and determination.

Her eyes darted wildly, cheeks flushed, sweat trickling down her temples in sparkling rivulets. She gasped for breath, each inhale frantic and shallow. Mallwell tried to speak soothing words, but they got stuck in his throat. Another scream built in her chest, trembling on the edge of her lips.

Then came a voice from outside—soft and lilting, sweet as spun honey.

"Hello, hello in there. Do you need help?"

Mallwell's head snapped toward the door. For an instant, he couldn't move, pinned by the sudden dread that scuttled up his spine. But Rayla's eyes rolled to him, and she gave a single, desperate nod. She was in no state to question salvation, even if it arrived unannounced at their threshold.

He swallowed hard. "Who are you?" he called hoarsely over his shoulder, glancing one last time at Rayla's twisted expression.

"I was just passing through," the voice replied, muffled by the cottage's walls. "On my way to Silverwood. I heard screams... perhaps I can help?"

Mallwell licked his lips, fighting the sense of wrongness prickling his skin. "What do you know of birth?" he demanded.

A pause—barely a heartbeat—then the response came in that same honeyed tone. "I have had children of my own," she said softly. "I know a few things."

Another contraction seized Rayla, and she nearly tore the sheet with her grip. She gasped, tossing her head back, eyes squeezed shut against the pain. Her free hand found Mallwell's wrist, nails digging in just enough to send a spike of pain up his arm. She gave him another nod, weaker, but insistent. The baby was coming, and they needed any help.

Mallwell exhaled shakily. The wind moaned against the shutters as he stood, carefully prying his hand free. He cast a worried glance at Rayla, still writhing on the bed, then rushed across the small space to the doorway. A draft carried the cool night air inside, along with the faint smell of pine, mud, and something more... something stale and bitter.

When he stepped out, the darkness pressed close. By the glow of the torchlight spilling through the open door, he could see the woman waiting. She looked like a farmwife past her prime—hair wound into a tight bun; a plain, dark shawl drawn up around her shoulders. There was

a sweet smile on her face, but Mallwell's instincts prickled. No farmwife would wander Evershade Forest alone by night. Not willingly.

Yet here she stood, boots caked in mud, clothes otherwise tidy. Her hands clasped modestly in front of her. She inclined her head in a gesture of gentle courtesy, that polite smile never wavering.

"I can help," she repeated, her tone smooth as silk. There was a gentle lilt at the end of her sentence, a hint of an accent he couldn't place. "Won't you let me see to your wife?"

Mallwell's brow furrowed as he studied her more closely. Something about this situation felt off, but Rayla was inside, alone with her agony. He had prepared water and clean linens, yet it meant nothing if the birth went wrong. A midwife—no matter how unexpected—could save Rayla's life. And what about the baby? An icy knot formed in his stomach. The child had to survive. They both had to survive.

"I..." he began, uncertain. His hand lingered on the doorway frame. For a brief moment, he saw Reyla's face as it had been in the golden mornings—laughing, wind-tossed, filled with hope. He had promised to protect that joy.

Then he forced a nod. "All right. We're... in need. Please. Hurry."

She stepped forward, the light catching for an instant on her eyes—too bright for a simple farmwife. But Mallwell, heart hammering, gritted his teeth and stood aside to let her pass. A soft, cloying scent lingered as she brushed by him, almost like wilted flowers left too long in the sun.

In the night beyond the clearing, the forest seemed to close in as though listening, waiting. An uneasy hush blanketed the trees, disturbed only by the occasional groan of branches in the cold wind. Mallwell swallowed, his breath momentarily visible in the torch's glow.

He followed her inside, forcing every muscle to stay calm. But deep in the back of his mind, a voice whispered that this was no kindly traveler. Something in her expression, in her posture, in the very air

around her... He had seen magic before. He had felt the chill that ran deeper than any mortal fear. Yet desperation overshadowed all else. If she could help Rayla—The witch—disguised and smiling—crossed the threshold, and Mallwell felt a shiver he couldn't explain. The night pressed against the walls of the cottage, silent and watchful, as though every shadow in Evershade leaned in to witness what would unfold.

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A hush lay over the Temple of the Goddess of Radiant Light. The temple hummed with quiet anticipation. Candles flickered in tall sconces lining the limestone walls, their dancing flames a testament to the faith burning within. Shimmering tapestries depicting the goddess's triumph over shadow hung between marble columns, each thread catching the light and reflecting it across the polished floors.

At a long oaken table in a side chapel, Brother Aric and Brother Silas stood reviewing the evening's sermon. The scent of beeswax candles filled the air, along with the faint perfume of freshly cut lilies—a regular offering to their Lady of Light. Outside, a growing murmur of voices hinted at the congregation gathering in the main hall. Shoes scuffed against stone, cloaks rustled, and soft conversation rose to the lofty ceilings, echoing in hushed reverence.

Brother Aric turned to Silas, a playful glint in his eyes. Silas, several inches shorter, wore the traditional white robes cinched with a gold cord, and his round cheeks glowed red in the warm firelight of a brazier set in the corner.

"Think Lord Thalorin will bring Auren tonight?" Aric asked, carefully stacking parchment sheets. His voice carried an undercurrent of excitement—Lord Thalorin Rhon'Dareth was a key supporter of their temple, and Aric had long admired the man's dedication.

Silas shrugged, adjusting his cord with a small, wry smile. "I'm not sure. It might be too late for him. Lady Evelina may want him abed by now."

Aric snorted, his grin widening. "Aye, but Thalorin Rhon'Dareth is Lord of Silverwood—if he wants young Auren here, he'll have him, bedtime or no."

Silas's dark eyes danced with amusement. "Would you argue with Lady Evelina?"

"Not a chance," Aric said, pressing a hand theatrically to his chest. "I don't relish being turned into a frog."

Silas smothered a laugh. "She's not that bad."

Aric sighed dramatically, though the twinkle never left his gaze. "Oh, I'm not calling her bad. Quite the opposite. She's so good, she nearly makes my teeth ache. But mark me—she carries a fire inside that calm exterior."

The smaller priest cocked his head, curiosity piqued. "Have you ever seen it? That fire?"

Aric paused, recollecting as he rifled through his sermon notes, parchment rustling under his fingertips. "I've caught glimpses, yes," he said. "Strange things indeed. Evelina's magic hails from the line of the advisors, or so she claims. The elemental kind."

Silas's eyes widened. "Elemental?"

Aric nodded. "Aye. Once, I walked in on her showing Auren these enchanting illusions—rainbows and butterflies, all made from fire and air. The lad was ecstatic, running about shouting, 'Look, Brother Aric, a rainbow!' The flames danced in her palm, twisting into shimmering shapes. She caught me gawking in the doorway, and, well"—he chuckled at the memory—"I'd never seen anything so beautiful or so

frightening all at once. She has a magic about her I wouldn't want to cross."

Silas leaned against the table, clearly enraptured. "I hear she has a sister, too," he said, lowering his voice as if fearful someone else might hear. "Is that true?"

Aric set his notes aside and studied the stout priest with a thoughtful look. "Aye, so the rumors say. A sister with silver hair and emerald eyes."

"Emerald eyes?" Silas breathed, an almost childlike wonder lighting up his round face. "That's a sign of power, you know."

Both priests fell silent, letting the statement hang in the flickering glow. It was a rare thing, emerald eyes. In every tale of the goddess's chosen, green eyes signified a potent bond to ancient magic.

A muffled gong resonated from the temple's bell tower—summoning them. Aric gathered his notes, each page filled with careful lines of scripture and commentary. "Come, we'd best not keep the faithful waiting."

They stepped into the wide corridor leading to the main hall. The stone under foot was cool, polished smooth by generations of pilgrims. Stained-glass windows arched overhead, depicting legends of the Radiant Goddess crowned in solar flares, her hands extending beams of light toward a kneeling host of the faithful. Even in the night, the interior braziers and flickering candles gave the glass a soft glow—shifting colors danced over the tiled floor.

A cluster of worshipers were already removing their hoods and cloaks, gathering on the pews. Murmured prayers and soft chatter mingled in the high-vaulted space. Beyond them, at the front of the hall, an ornate altar carved from pale stone stood ready. Gold filigree traced the shape of wings, reminiscent of a phoenix rising from the ashes—a symbol of the rebirth and hope the temple promised.

Aric and Silas exchanged one last look. Silas, eyes still wide, whispered, “Emerald eyes... who knew Lady Evelina’s family line was so extraordinary?”

Aric managed a small, knowing smile. “A rare power indeed,” he said under his breath. Then, adopting a dignified demeanor, he stepped forward to greet the congregation.

In the hush that followed, neither priest could have guessed that at that exact moment, worlds away, malevolent magic flickered in a shadowy cottage. Nor that destiny—so often whispered about in these sacred halls—was stirring beyond the temple’s doors and deep in the eaves of a different forest.

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Reyla’s scream cut through the cramped cottage like a razor. Mallwell dashed across the room, heart pounding, and dropped to his knees at her side. He grabbed her hand, weaving his fingers through hers, heedless of how tightly she clutched him. “I’m here,” he murmured, over and over again—a prayer, a promise, or perhaps both.

Behind him, the stranger knelt at the foot of the bed. The torchlight cast dancing shadows over her face, so only half of her features showed clearly: a gentle mouth, a deceptively kind curve of the cheeks. Her hair was pulled back in a severe bun beneath a dark shawl. Everything else about her seemed composed, quiet, methodical—too calm for the chaos unfolding around them.

“What’s your name?” Mallwell rasped, forcing the question through the pounding in his chest.

She smiled sweetly—too sweetly. Something about it set his teeth on edge. He felt wrongness simmering in the air around her, like a static charge before a storm. Instinct made him flick his gaze toward the fireplace, where his sword leaned against the hearthstone.



"Vellin," she crooned in a dulcet tone. "I'm Vellin. I'm here to help."

She shifted forward, placing a hand gently on Reylya's belly. The tension in the cottage thickened—Mallwell's mouth went dry, and every muscle in his body screamed to stop her, but Reylya needed relief so desperately.

A soft, sickly green light spilled from Vellin's palm. The glow was strangely beautiful and terrible at once, casting flickers over Reylya's sweat-drenched face. Mallwell's breath caught in his throat, a hiss escaping before he could stop it. In all his years, he had never seen magic so close—and never directed at someone he loved.

Yet an immediate effect took hold. Reylya's features eased; her clenched jaw relaxed and her breathing evened for a moment. A moan caught at her lips, but it didn't break into a full scream. She lifted her head, still panting, still soaked in sweat, and managed to exhale a word of gratitude.

"Thank you," she whispered, voice thin as a reed. "That... that helped."

Vellin grinned, and in the flickering light, Mallwell spotted the faintest shift—a darkness in her eyes that belied her sweet expression. His blood turned to ice. No. Everything about this was wrong: her sudden arrival, her suspicious willingness, the nature of her magic. But how could he push her away now, when Reylya clearly found some measure of relief?

"See," Vellin purred, patting Reylya's belly with false warmth, "I'm helping already."

Mallwell's stomach twisted. The air itself seemed to ripple with tension, as though the forest had pressed closer against the wooden walls, peering in. He risked a glance over his shoulder at the fireplace. The sword was mere feet away—but behind Vellin's crouched form. With Reylya mid-labor, did he dare to provoke this stranger who wielded a magic he didn't understand?

Reyla's head lulled back against the pillow, her face slack with exhaustion. Mallwell felt tears burning in his eyes. He squeezed her hand, torn between relief that her agony had lessened and dread for what price that mercy might demand. Vellin's grin did not waver, and her free hand curled slightly at her side, fingertips trailing those faint ribbons of green light as if ready to conjure more at a moment's notice.

"I—thank you," Mallwell forced himself to say, swallowing hard. A part of him loathed giving any courtesy to this woman who reeked of magic and subterfuge. But necessity clung to him like a chain, and he prayed he wasn't dooming them both by allowing her presence.

"It's my pleasure," she crooned, her tone as thick and sweet as honey gone bad. "Childbirth is such a sacred moment, isn't it? Filled with possibility."

Her words slid under his skin, and he felt another surge of nausea. The possibility of life, or the possibility of something else?

He dared a quick glance to Reyla, whose eyes fluttered open. She looked at him with a mixture of relief and apprehension. She, too, must sense the undercurrent of malice in Vellin's aura, yet the pain had been so great... they both craved any respite.

Mallwell forced a nod, though his gut screamed warnings. Too late, a voice echoed in the back of his mind. Much too late. Vellin was already here, and Reyla was too far into labor to risk driving the stranger away. For better or worse, they were in her hands. And as another contraction began to ripple through Reyla's body, Mallwell could only watch, powerless, as the witch's green magic coiled and glowed anew.

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**This is the end – For now, the story continues in *Eternal Ember*, Aethlum Edition, only available at [aethlum.com](http://aethlum.com). For all other editions visit your local bookstore or amazon**