

MJ KAYE

Eternal Ember

Book One Of
The Chronicles of the Aethlum



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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 younger readers.

FOR DONNA, MY INSPIRATION...



VEIL OF MADNESS

BLACK MOUNTAIN

SHADOWMERE

FROSTGATE

HIGHFIELD

THARN VAAL

WHITEPEAK

RIVERBEND

WARDEN'S GATE

VERRITH RIVER

GREENSHIRE

SKATHRYN STONES

EMBERFALL

RAVENCOURT

AELORIA
SILVANEVE FOREST

SILVERWOOD

STONEHAVEN HOLD

SILVERWOOD FOREST

RYNWOOD

ELMSBROOK VILLAGE

EVERSHADE FOREST

AVENDALE

KINGSREACH

ARTHERIA

THORNWALL

STONEHELM

SUNSPIRE

STORMHAVEN

EL THARION

W

"HEREIN LIE THE LANDS OF ILLYNDOR, FROM THE FIRE-VEINED CLIFFS OF EMBERFALL TO THE FROSTBOUND GATES OF WHITEPEAK, AND THE CURSED HUSH OF THE THARN VAAL BEYOND. KINGS HAVE RISEN AND BURNED, GODS HAVE WHISPERED IN SHADOWED GROVES, AND STILL THE RIVERS RUN. SOME NAMES ARE KNOWN TO ALL. OTHERS ARE SPOKEN ONLY BY FIRELIGHT, OR IN DREAMS. WHAT FOLLOWS IS NOT A WARNING... BUT A PROMISE. THE WORLD ENDURES. THE BLOODLINE REMEMBERS."

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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.

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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 time, and bind themselves to Malakar. 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.



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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



Chapter 1

The Last Hope of Evershade...

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

— Old Illyndoran Warning

Mallwell straightened his aching back, the plank heavy across his shoulders, and eyed the half-raised cottage in the clearing. Small—barely more than one room and a loft—but sturdy enough to hold against winter's teeth. Reyla would like the hearth he'd already laid stones for; she'd curl up there with her mending, safe from the wind that howled through the passes back home. No barracks clamor, no steel ringing in the yard. Just this quiet clearing in Evershade, leaves rustling like old secrets, branches snapping underfoot. A fresh start, if the forest would allow it.

The last sliver of sun bled away behind the pines, and the hush deepened. Mallwell paused, plank still balanced, listening. The breeze stirred dead leaves in a low whisper—gossip he couldn't quite catch. Far off, something cried: high, unearthly, trailing into silence. His skin tightened, a prickle racing from nape to wrists. Moonstalkers, the village women had warned, silver-furred ghosts that hunted by starlight. Hogswallop, he'd told Reyla when she'd asked, voice low, eyes flicking to the tree line. Five months here, and nothing larger than a fox had crossed his path. Still, the chill sank deeper than evening air alone.

He shifted the plank higher and trudged on. The trees creaked overhead, bark grinding bark like old soldiers sharing tales. The gloom thickened; soft chirps answered from the underbrush, then low hoots, a rhythmic thrum that might have been bullfrogs in the marsh—or drums too distant to place. In Evershade, one could never be certain.

Cicadas clattered suddenly, rising and falling in jagged waves. Mallwell's grip tightened on the wood. Reyla had whispered once—late, when the fire was low—that

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she'd seen shapes at dusk. Veilshades, the old names called them. Long-limbed things that moved like smoke. He'd laughed, kissed her forehead, told her the light played tricks on tired eyes. He'd stood night watch on city walls, faced down worse than shadows. But her voice had trembled, just a little, and the memory lodged now like a cold stone in his chest.

A branch snapped behind him—sharp, close.

He spun, plank thudding to the dirt. Heart kicked hard against his ribs. Eyes raked the tree line: black lattice of trunks, stars pricking the sky through the branches. Silence answered, thick and listening. For three breaths he stood frozen, waiting for movement, for glowing eyes or silver fur. Nothing. Only the wind rising again, tugging branches so the forest seemed to draw a slow, deliberate inhale.

Mallwell exhaled, rough. No monsters. Just an old wood with old bones and older stories. The smell of pine pitch and damp earth steadied him. Tomorrow he'd finish these walls, hang a door that latched proper, and they'd sit together by the hearth. He'd keep her safe. That was the promise he'd made, the only one that still mattered.

He bent, hoisted the plank again, and started toward the cottage. Behind him, the shadows between the pines held still—but the quiet felt heavier now, as though something had paused to watch him go.

Darkness wrapped her like flesh—cool, clinging, alive. It slid over pallid skin where veins traced black rivers, pulsing slow. Wet strands clung to her cheeks, dripping onto the loam. Eyes burned low, embers slicing the tangle, tasting the night.

She crouched beneath the pines, low, ribs rising slow and deliberate. Wind came first: pine rot, sweat-salt, then it—the woman's trace woven through the man like a thread of light. Fresh. Stirring. A spark she had not felt bloom in ages. The scent bloomed inside her nostrils, sweet-sharp, kindling a hollow ache inside her. Her tongue—long, forked—slid across blackened lips with a wet scrape. The hunger sharpened, not for meat alone.

Mortals. Here. Hammering planks into soil that drank blood long before their kind walked it. The thought curled like smoke in her skull—amused, irritated. Roots beneath her soles twitched, remembering old feasts, old screams. The forest answered her mood: hush falling heavier, creatures stilling. Wolves froze mid-step, owls tucked wings, insects silenced their clatter. Their fear vibrated up through the earth, a warm tremor into her bare feet. She drank it, let it ease the cold inside.

From behind the gnarled oak she watched. Twigs cracked under her weight—soft, deliberate. The man trudged back to his frail shelter, plank heavy on shoulder, muscles corded with effort. Soldier-stiff. Useless. She could taste the salt of his labor on the air,

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the steady thump of his heart. But it was the other scent that pulled her veins taut: the flicker he carried from the woman hidden inside those walls. Life turning. Creation waking. The spark she would swallow whole.

Her form wavered between trunks—edges softening, black rivulets coiling around arms like obedient threads. The clearing went quiet. She savored the stillness, the way moonlight shrank from her.

He stepped through the doorway. She tilted her head, lips parting in a breath that stirred nothing. No need to rush. Time was thick here, patient as roots. She would watch their small rhythms, their fragile warmth. When the spark ripened, she would take it—flesh, breath, the bright pulse inside the woman.

A breeze shifted, carrying a distant murmur of his voice. She pressed closer to the oak, letting shadow fold over her like a second hide. The breath became a low hiss.

She flicked her gaze to a thin silver thread of moonlight piercing the canopy. It danced useless on the ground; she remained untouched, wrapped in dark.

Slowly she eased back, melting into the trunks, the roots. The forest closed around her—seamless, hungry. Only a faint acrid musk clung to the air, sharp and wrong, and the faint echo of something stirring deep beneath the soil.

Mallwell drove the last nail. The hammer's final strike rang hollow against fresh timber, swallowed fast by the dark outside. Pines stood black against a starless sky. A shiver crawled up his neck, hairs lifting. His hand twitched toward his belt—empty. The sword waited inside by the hearth, iron that had never failed him in blood or storm. Now it sat useless, too far.

Reyla. Belly so heavy, so near. The thought squeezed his throat. He couldn't let fear show. Not now.

A scream tore from inside the cottage—sharp, raw, animal.

The forest went dead quiet.

Mallwell froze, hammer half-raised. No cicadas, no wind, no branch shift. Only the echo of her cry hanging in the air. His pulse hammered ears. Then he moved.

Torch yanked free, flame snapping alive. Boots crunched leaves as he lunged through the doorway.

Warmth met him—cramped and sturdy, hearth stones still holding heat. His eyes found Reyla at once. She lay sprawled on the bed, golden hair matted damp across her brow, sweat shining in torchlight. Wide eyes locked on his—bright with pain, frantic. Breaths came short, shallow.

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Air left him in a rush he hadn't meant to let go. Torch hand shook. He flung the flame into the hearth; dry tinder caught with a sharp whoosh, flames leaping up the new walls. Firelight carved her sharp—face contorting as another cramp seized her.

He dropped to his knees. Heart slammed ribs so hard he tasted copper.

Her hand shot out, clammy, fingers clamping his forearm. Nails bit skin. Her belly tightened visibly; she couldn't swallow the next scream. It ripped through the small room, bounced off bare timber, bled into the silence outside.

“Reyla.” His voice cracked despite the effort. “Hush, love... we're safe... here...”

Wind rattled the loose shutter. Flames dipped; shadows slid quick across walls like fingers probing cracks. Mallwell's gut lurched. He locked eyes on her, kept his gaze from the dark pressing at the window.

He took her hand in both of his. Slender fingers slick, tense. Sweat beaded on her temple, caught firelight and slid slow. Outside a wolf loosed a long, low note—mournful, too close. Mallwell clenched his jaw, gripped tighter, willing the walls to hold.

She gulped air. “Mall... hurts...”

He pressed forehead to hers. “I know. I'm here. We'll see it through.”

The words felt thin as parchment. He'd faced blades, beasts, men who wanted him dead—things he could strike. This—her body straining, the raw pull of birth—he had no shield for. Helplessness rose bitter in his throat.

Reyla's fingers crushed his as another wave hit. She buried face in his shoulder, teeth sinking into his tunic to muffle the cry. Breath came ragged against his neck.

Wind lashed treetops outside. Something howled again—or laughed—he couldn't separate the sound. Mallwell didn't look. He kneaded her lower back with his free hand, desperate for any ease he could give. Hearth flames snapped higher, heat pushing back the chill seeping through gaps in the logs. He clung to that—firelight, her hand locked in his, the stubborn warmth they'd built here.

“Hold on,” he whispered, rough. “Just hold on.”

Her answer was a low, broken moan as the next pain rolled through. Mallwell braced, jaw set, refusing to let the dark outside steal even this.

A scream tore across the night—sharp, raw, human.

She paused. Head tilted. Lips parted in a slow curl. The sound sliced through her, bright and vital, sparking deep in her veins. Tonight. The spark was breaking free.

She moved—shadow to shadow, keeping torchlight and moonlight from touching skin. Roots shifted under bare feet, quivering. Leaves rustled uneasily overhead. The forest knew her step; it drew back, breath held.

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Another scream—closer now, muffled by timber but thick with agony. Her nostrils flared. Fear-salt, sweat, blood on the wind. The scent bloomed inside her, sweet-sharp, pulling the hollow ache tighter. She licked blackened lips, tongue scraping rough.

A low rasp—stone on stone—sounded left. She spun. Fingers flared, claws poised.

Between pines, something shimmered—twilight given form, mist coiling into a half-shape, silver eyes burning. It hissed, silent but trembling the air. A second followed—larger, edges sharper, arms of living shadow reaching.

She felt the forest's warning pulse through the soil—stop her, hold her back. Amusement stirred, cold. Roots remembered her older feasts. Guardians were nothing new.

Green light coiled around her fingers—sickly, twisting up wrists like smoke. She did not wait. A flick. The arc cracked out, searing night. The first guardian dissolved—inky vapor swirling, gone before the hiss finished.

The larger one lunged—shapeless arms glimmering. Fury trembled the air, silent roar shaking leaves. She sneered. Wrist twisted again. Green light flared, seized its essence.

She closed her fist.

The guardian convulsed—silver glimmers fighting inward collapse. Form buckled, shredded. Essence scattered on wind, swallowed by the dark clinging to her breath.

Silence fell heavier. No rustle, no insect, no distant cry. Only the forest's thick hush, shadows uncertain whether to creep closer or flee.

She exhaled—a low, purring breath. Green residue drifted from her fingertips like dying embers.

A third scream—shrill, desperate—from the clearing. She lifted her head. Fear and sweat thickened on the breeze. The hollow ache flared sharp.

She turned, slipped deeper between trunks. Ragged skirts trailed over roots, silent. Torchlight flickered ahead—frail, golden, pathetic.

Each step drew her closer. The forest closed behind her—seamless, obedient. Only the faint acrid musk lingered, sharp and wrong, and the torch's glow growing brighter through the black weave of branches.

Reyla sprawled on the bed, skirts rucked high, hair plastered damp to brow and temples. Sweat gleamed on flushed skin. A wave rolled through her—deep, searing—and her back arched off soaked sheets. The scream tore out, raw, animal, filling the small room, bleeding through cracks into the night.

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Mallwell knelt beside her, hand crushed in hers. Nails bit his palm; blood welled, hot and slick, but he held tighter. Firelight flickered across them both—her face twisted in agony, his locked in helpless terror.

Her eyes darted—wide, wild. Breaths came frantic, shallow. Another contraction built; she choked on it, then let it rip—higher, thinner, desperate.

Outside, a voice drifted through the walls—soft, lilting, sweet as honey left too long in sun.

“Hello in there. Do you need help?”

Mallwell’s head snapped toward the door. A cold scuttle raced up his spine. The forest had gone dead quiet—no cicada, no wind, no branch shift. Only her voice hanging in the hush.

Reyla’s eyes rolled to him, pleading. She gave one sharp nod—pain too thick for words.

He swallowed. Throat dry as ash. “Who are you?” he called, voice hoarse, eyes never leaving her.

A pause—too long, too still.

“Just passing through,” the voice answered, calm, gentle. “On my way to Silverwood. I heard screams... perhaps I can help?”

Another cramp seized Reyla. She nearly tore the sheet. Nails dug deeper into his arm; he tasted copper again. She nodded once more—weak, insistent. The baby was coming. Fast.

Mallwell exhaled, shaky. Wind moaned against shutters. He rose, pried his hand free—fingers numb, blood-smeared. Cast one last look at her writhing form, then crossed to the door.

Cool night air rushed in, carrying pine, mud, and something stale—bitter, cloying, like wilted flowers left to rot.

The woman stood just beyond the threshold, lit by torchlight spilling from inside. Hair wound tight in a bun, dark shawl drawn close. Boots caked in mud. Plain wool dress. A sweet smile curved her lips.

No farmwife walked Evershade alone at night. Not willingly.

Yet here she stood—hands clasped modest, head inclined courteous.

“I can help,” she said again, voice smooth, lilt at the edges he couldn’t place. “Let me see to your wife.”

Mallwell studied her. Something wrong in the eyes—too bright, catching light like wet glass. Skin too pale for a traveler. Smile too steady. Instinct prickled sharp—danger, wrong, wrong—but Reyla gasped behind him, another cry building.

The child had to live. They both had to live.

He forced the words out. “We’re... in need. Please. Hurry.”

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She stepped forward. Torchlight caught her eyes—too bright, too still. A faint scent followed her—cloying, sweet-rot. Mallwell's gut twisted. He stood aside.

She crossed the threshold. The door creaked closed behind her.

The night outside pressed closer—silent, watchful. Shadows along the walls seemed to lean in, listening. The forest held its breath.

Inside, Reyla's next scream rose—higher, thinner. The witch—disguised, smiling—moved toward the bed.

Mallwell followed, every muscle tight, hand itching for the sword still too far away. The hearth flames snapped higher, throwing sharp light across the room, but the chill seeping through cracks felt deeper than any wind.

The temple lay wrapped in hush, candles flickering in tall sconces along limestone walls. Flames danced, throwing soft gold across polished floors and marble columns. Tapestries stirred faintly—woven triumphs of the Radiant Goddess over shadow—each thread catching light and scattering it in quiet shimmer.

In the side chapel, Brother Aric and Brother Silas stood at the long oaken table, parchment sheets spread between them. Beeswax smoke mingled with the clean scent of fresh lilies left as offering. Outside the chapel door, voices rose—soft, reverent—shoes scuffing stone, cloaks rustling as the congregation gathered in the main hall.

Aric glanced at Silas. The smaller priest's round cheeks glowed red in the brazier's warm light, white robes cinched with gold cord. Aric's eyes glinted with mischief.

"Think Lord Thalorin will bring Auren tonight?" he asked, stacking notes with careful fingers.

Silas shrugged, adjusting his cord. "Might be too late for the lad. Lady Evelina will want him abed."

Aric snorted, grin widening. "Thalorin Rhon'Dareth is Lord of Silverwood. If he wants the boy here, bedtime be damned."

Silas's dark eyes danced. "You'd argue with Lady Evelina?"

"Not for all the light in the goddess's crown." Aric pressed a hand to his chest, theatrical. "I've no wish to wake as a frog."

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

"Oh, she's good—too good. Makes my teeth ache." Aric's tone softened, thoughtful. "But there's fire in her, Silas. Hidden under all that calm."

Silas cocked his head. "You've seen it?"

Aric paused, fingers resting on parchment. "Glimpses. Once I walked in on her showing Auren illusions—rainbows, butterflies, all from fire and air. Flames twisted in her palm, bright and living. The boy ran about shouting, 'Look, Brother Aric, a

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rainbow!’ She caught me staring in the doorway.” He chuckled low. “Beautiful. Terrifying. She smiled, but her eyes... they held something older.”

Silas leaned against the table, voice dropping. “They say she has a sister.”

Aric nodded once. “Rumors speak of silver hair... emerald eyes.”

“Emerald?” Silas breathed, wonder lighting his round face. “That’s a mark of power.”

The words hung between them in the candle glow. Emerald eyes—rare in every tale of the goddess’s chosen, a sign of ancient bond.

A muffled gong rolled from the bell tower—summoning. Aric gathered his notes. “Come. The faithful wait.”

They stepped into the corridor. Stone lay cool underfoot, polished smooth by generations. Stained glass arched overhead—legends of the Radiant Goddess crowned in solar flares, hands extending beams toward kneeling faithful. Even at night, braziers and candles gave the glass soft life; shifting colors drifted across the floor like spilled light.

Worshippers already stood in the main hall, hoods falling, cloaks folded. Murmured prayers rose to the vaulted ceiling. At the front, the pale stone altar waited—gold filigree tracing phoenix wings, symbol of rebirth and hope.

Aric and Silas exchanged one last glance. Silas whispered, eyes still wide, “Emerald eyes... who knew Lady Evelina’s line carried such power?”

Aric managed a small smile. “Rare indeed.”

He stepped forward, voice lifting in welcome to the congregation.

Candle flames steadied. Light pooled across stone and faces, warm and certain. Outside the high windows, night pressed against the glass—silent, vast, and unaware of the small glow within.

Reyla’s scream tore out. Mallwell lunged across the room, dropped to his knees at her side. Fingers wove through hers—her grip crushed his, nails biting skin, blood welling hot. “I’m here,” he murmured, again and again, voice rough as prayer.

Behind him the stranger knelt at the bed’s foot. Torchlight threw shadows across her face—half gentle mouth, half cheek curve too kind. Hair pulled tight in a bun under dark shawl. Everything about her too calm, too composed.

“What’s your name?” Mallwell rasped, chest tight.

She smiled—sweet, too sweet. The air rippled—thick, wrong. His gaze flicked to the hearth—sword leaning against stone, too far.

“Vellin,” she crooned, voice honey-thick. “I’m Vellin. Here to help.”

She shifted forward. Hand settled gently on Reyla’s belly.

The room stilled. Mallwell’s mouth dried. Every muscle screamed—stop her, stop her—but Reyla needed ease. He tasted copper, swallowed.

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Green light spilled from Vellin's palm—sickly, beautiful, terrible. Glow flickered over Reyla's sweat-slick face. Mallwell's breath hissed out. Magic this close—never at someone he loved.

Reyla's features eased. Jaw unclenched. Breathing slowed for a heartbeat. She lifted her head, panting, soaked. "Thank you," she whispered, voice reed-thin. "That... helped."

Vellin grinned. Torchlight caught her eyes—darkness flickering behind sweetness. Mallwell's blood chilled. Wrong. Everything wrong—arrival too sudden, willingness too ready, magic too strange. But Reyla's pain had eased. How could he drive her away now?

"See," Vellin purred, patting Reyla's belly with false warmth. "Helping already."

Mallwell's gut twisted. He glanced back at the sword—behind Vellin's crouched form. Reyla mid-labor on the bed. No move he could make without risk.

Reyla's head lolled against the pillow, face slack with exhaustion. Mallwell's eyes burned. He squeezed her hand, torn—relief she had respite, dread at the cost.

Vellin's grin held. Free hand curled at her side, fingertips trailing faint green ribbons—ready.

"I—thank you," Mallwell forced out, throat tight. Loathed the courtesy, but necessity chained him.

"My pleasure," she crooned, honey gone bad. "Childbirth is sacred, isn't it? Filled with possibility."

Words slid under his skin. Possibility of life—or something else.

Reyla's eyes fluttered open. Apprehension flickered there too. She felt it—the undercurrent in Vellin.

Mallwell nodded, gut screaming. Too late. Vellin was inside. Reyla too far gone to risk driving her out.

Another contraction rippled through Reyla. She gasped, fingers crushing his. Vellin leaned closer. Green coiled anew in her palm, glow brightening.

Mallwell watched, helpless, flames snapping higher in the hearth. Shadows along the walls seemed to lean in—listening, waiting.

The night outside pressed closer. Silent. Watchful.

Reyla's scream broke—high, ragged, shattering the cottage's hush.

Mallwell staggered forward. Knees hit floorboards. Fingers locked with hers—her grip crushed bone, nails gouging deep, blood slick between them. "I'm here," he rasped, over and over, voice splintering.

Vellin knelt at the bed's foot. Torchlight carved her face—half soft mouth, half cheek curve too gentle. Bun tight beneath shawl. Too still.

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A hum rose from her throat—low, lilting, almost tender. Notes curled through smoke-thick air, sweet as overripe fruit. Beneath them something twisted—wrong, sour. Timbers creaked once, low.

Reyla's lips parted. A name slipped out—faint, breathless. "Aevyra..."

Mallwell's eyelids dragged. Heavy. The hum seeped in—warm weight over thoughts. Stay awake. Stay— The voice inside him—his?—faded under the melody.

Green light coiled beneath the bedframe—sickly, living. Tendrils brushed boots, tugged ankles, knees. His head nodded forward. Wake up. Wake—

Eyes fluttered. Torchlight caught Vellin.

Gone the farmwife. Shadow edges ragged. Eyes gleaming cold. Clawed hand pressed to Reyla's belly—green pulsing brighter. Outside, trees groaned—deep, splintering. Needles rained. Wind rushed inward, forest exhaling dread.

Mallwell lurched up. "No..." Voice thin, spell dragging. Get her away. From Reyla. From—

The sword at the hearth stirred. Steel glinted, rose on unseen current. Point turned—straight at his throat.

He twisted. Too late.

A wet, heavy thud.

Blade drove through. Hilt jutted beneath chin. Blood sprayed—across sheets, across Reyla's bare legs and belly.

Reyla screamed—higher, frantic. Body recoiled. Torch sputtered, flame shrinking inward. Shadows surged, licking walls, swallowing gold.

Mallwell buckled. Knees gave. Eyes wide, glassy. Blood poured down chest—steady patter on pine boards.

Vellin's hum never faltered. Grip on Reyla tightened. Shadowed face turned to Mallwell's still form—contempt flickering.

Easy.

Reyla's next cry filled the room—raw, broken. Vellin leaned closer, melody rising with relish. Green light shimmered against crimson splatter.

Fire in the hearth dimmed. Night outside pressed closer—silent, watchful.

The *real* prize was still to come

The Faynara moved over the scattered remnants of the Veilshades like a slow breath through the undergrowth.

Inky vapour still drifted upward from the places where the guardians had been torn apart—thin wisps curling, reluctant to fade. She knelt. Bark skin rough with lichen, limbs woven from living vine and thorned creeper. Hair of fine green tendrils stirred

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without wind. Luminous eyes—pale green, glowing softly from hollowed hollows—turned downward.

One thorned hand brushed the last silver glimmers. A low sound rose from her throat—not word, not song: an incantation older than the first root that split stone, older than the naming of Evershade.

Syllables soft, deliberate, spoken in a tongue no human tongue could shape. Each breath carried small green sparks—drifting from her lips, sinking into soil like seeds. The ground answered: faint tremors, roots stirring beneath loam, knitting themselves back together. Not to resurrect the fallen. To remember them. To bear witness.

Another cry tore through the night—Reyla's, raw and high, carrying from the distant clearing.

The Faynara paused. Head lifted. Luminous eyes turned toward the sound. No child's cry followed. Only the mother's pain, sharp and unyielding, echoing off pines.

Tendrils of vine hair drifted upward, tasting the air. The scream faded. The forest listened with her.

For a long breath she remained still.

Then the luminous eyes dimmed. She rose—silent, fluid—bark creaking faintly as limbs unfolded. Shadows folded around her like a cloak. Vine and root withdrew. In three heartbeats she was gone—melted back into the dark weave of the wood as though she had never stood there at all.

Only the green sparks remained, sinking deeper into soil—small, patient.

The forest exhaled once.

Then silence returned, deeper than before.