

## Chapter 1

### The Keepers

*Nanna settled into the cushioned window seat and gazed at the night sky. No stars. A chilling sense of foreboding crept into her mind, for starless nights were dark omens in the Kingdom of Lashai. A girl's small voice drew the Ancient enchantress's attention to her doorway.*

*Cassai, the youngest of the household, stood at the threshold trembling, "I had a bad dream, Nanna."*

*"A dream, my love?" Nanna held out her arms to the child. Cassai ran to her, and Nanna pulled the girl into her lap. "A dream of your little stable friend, Elian?"*

*Cassai shook her head from the depths of Nanna's rich purple dressing robe. "He came at the end, but it was Mama and Papa. They were crying out to someone in fear, asking them to spare us!"*

*"Spare whom?"*

*"All of us. The soldiers had swords, and they didn't listen." Tears pooled in Cassai's crystal grey eyes.*

*"Just a nightmare, my angel. Let Nanna take you back to your bed. You shall dream nothing but pleasant dreams tonight. I'll give you something to drink. Something sweet to make your dreams nice." Nanna kept her voice quiet and soothing, but nothing could mask the fear she felt at the child's words.*

*The power of this young one alarmed her. Cassai had the visions and dreams that should belong to her oldest brother, Patrice, the one to inherit the throne. But Patrice did not dream, nor did he have the other powers inherent in the future king. They rested with Cassai, and further, her strength increased with each passing day. It was unsettling.*

*"I can't go back to my room now, Nanna. Mama and Papa are in danger." Cassai protested rushing into the hall, followed intently by Nanna. "I must-" the child stopped short. Her ancient guardian bumped into her, then froze. Cassai's giant gray eyes had filled with tears.*

*"Cassai? Cassai, are you ill? Speak!" Nanna shook the girl's shoulders, trying to bring her back. A single tear trickled down Cassai's pale cheek.*

*"They're dead," she whispered, disbelieving.*

*“Who? Who’s dead? Darling, please, tell me what you see!”*

*“Everyone. Mama and Papa, Patrice and Edward and ... everyone.” her expression altered from grief to panic. “Nanna! They’re coming!” Grasping the arm of her governess she pulled her into the corridor.*

*“Cassai, you must calm yourself. You’re merely dreaming, child. Stop!”*

*“No, no! It isn’t a dream. I see it playing out in my head, but it’s happening. I know it. They went to my room but found it empty, and they’re coming here now. Nanna, run!” Without another word, the girl fled into the dark corridor, her Nanna, looking stricken, pursued her as if their lives depended upon it.*

Cassai bolted upright in her bed. She gulped down the cold night air, perspiring as if she had actually been sprinting through a corridor moments ago, and not thirteen years past. She tried to slow her breathing, inhaling deeply as Nanna had taught her.

This was the third nightmare this week. Why did they haunt her? Were they actual events from her childhood, or were they merely a vision of something from a book she had read, or a story Nanna had told her? Where was that room and corridor? Who was chasing her and wanting her dead? As much as she longed to go back to sleep and see if it would continue, she was too awake now.

As quickly and quietly as she could, Cassai slipped out from beneath the hand quilted bedspread and fumbled around her tiny room for her dressing gown and slippers. She found the threadbare robe draped over her strait-backed desk chair. Elian had made the chair so she could study in the quiet of her room. Her desk was piled high, at the moment with so many books, Nanna had threatened to throw them all in the fireplace if Cassai didn’t tidy them up soon. She smiled now at the memory of the empty threat; she wrapped herself in the old robe and left her room. She wanted fresh air and a little exercise to chase away the shakiness from her dream.

She tiptoed down the hall of the little cottage she and Nanna lived in together. The polished wood floor was chilly on her bare feet. Cassai stopped and breathed in the scent of baked apples and fresh bread. Nanna must have baked the bread just after Cassai went to bed. She went to the pantry and, finding the warm loaf, sliced two thick pieces and wrapped them in a napkin.

Food and night air: there was no better soother of nerves, except to add maybe one thing more, one person.

Cassai stepped out of the kitchen door and hugged herself against the cool night air. Her eyes, long accustomed to seeing in dim light, focused on a little pasture north of the cottage. In the glow of the almost full moon Cassai found the silhouette of the man she sought. Elian. Her heart rate calmed at the sight of him.

She hurried down the rock path and swept herself over the short stone wall he had built to pen in his small but precious flock of sheep. On the other side of the wall stood the dilapidated stone shack where Elian slept when he wasn't tending his flock. Cassai knew their shepherd boy, Krispen, would be sleeping there tonight.

She tiptoed up behind the large, muscular shepherd. He sat cross-legged in the grass, ever watchful, listening and observing in such utter silence, that Cassai wondered if he was breathing.

"Weren't you in bed, Taiya?" Elian said keeping his eyes on his flock. She smiled in the dark. She liked it when he called her Taiya. It meant "life breath" in his native language. The word was one of the few fragments of his Fontre past he hadn't discarded.

"I had a nightmare. It woke me." She padded up beside him and settled down in the soft green grass. The napkin she offered made Elian smile.

"Mm, still warm. My thanks to the Weaver for sending you a nightmare." He nodded his head in silent salute.

"How thoughtful." Cassai rolled her eyes. "So I can be miserable then, as long as it brings you warm bread?"

He ripped a piece of bread off with his teeth and dropped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her up against his side. "It makes me sound selfish when you say it like that."

Cassai laughed and they sat like that for a long time, enjoying their bread and their closeness. Elian's warmth eased the chill from the night. He was quiet and serious when he spoke again.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Cassai nuzzled herself against him and looked out at the darkened pasture and sleeping flock. She loved watching them sleep so peacefully, all pressed up against each other like a giant fluffy blanket. "I was with Nanna, but I was really little. I couldn't have been more than four or five." An achy dread filled her heart again. "We were running away from someone." Details were slipping away from her like grains of sand through her small fingers.

"Who were you running from?"

"I don't remember. But we were terrified."

He squeezed her shoulders and tucked a flyaway hair behind her ear. Cassai sighed. Her impossibly wavy brown hair simply could not be tamed no matter how tightly she braided it. “You’re safe here, Cassai. Don’t let the dreams trouble you too much.”

Cassai shook her head. “My past is a blur. What if these dreams are memories coming back to my mind? Have you considered that?”

“I have.”

Cassai looked up at him. Even in the dim light she could tell he was frowning. “Maybe it’s real. But how could it be? We were in a corridor of a huge stone house like ... like a castle or something. So, when was it that we lived in a castle?” she asked him, smiling again. He smiled too, but didn’t answer. “Do you ever dream of your past?”

She felt Elian’s chest rise and fall in a silent sigh. “Sometimes.”

“Do you remember when we first met?” she asked, steering away from the pain that had filled his eyes. “I can’t think of a time I didn’t know you. I must have been a baby.”

“I remember it like it was yesterday. It’s one of the few memories of my childhood I enjoy.” Elian was far away and Cassai wished he would take her with him, wherever his mind had wandered. Years of living in this valley with him had taught her that he wouldn’t. “Do you want to go back to bed, or would you like to stay here and help me keep watch?”

“I’ll stay if you like.” His grip tightened in reply. She smiled to herself and rested her head on his shoulder.

“When we’re married, you must learn the secret of this bread.”

She laughed softly. “Judging from my few disastrous attempts at bread-making, maybe we should just keep Nanna around.”

“Perhaps we should keep her around anyway,” Elian assented. “However, she will have to lighten up on the rules a bit. People will wonder about us if we are married but never kiss.”

Cassai laughed again and handed him her crust. He took it gratefully, and looked at her mouth for a few seconds before looking away again. She took a deep breath to settle herself. No matter how hard the rules were to keep, she knew Elian would never break them. Rule breaking seemed to be physically impossible for him. Secretly she felt this was kind of a shame. “Yes,” she said finally, “the kissing rule should go.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” he said with a sigh, and took a large bite of crust to give his mouth something else to do.

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A dark, tingling sensation was creeping into Cassai's heart as dusk was creeping into the darkening sky. She stared at the needlework in her hands and tried to ignore the feeling. Concentrate on knitting. Elian will be fine. He will be home from the meeting soon. The thick woolen cardigan on her needles wasn't getting any closer to being done than it had been earlier in the evening when she lit the lamps and sat across from her Nanna to continue this "fine womanly art". Cassai had built a fire in the hearth, but the logs she used were infested with beetles that kept popping unexpectedly and sending sparks up the floo, and occasionally out into the room. This wasn't helpful for her anxious mood.

"I wish Elian had taken me to the Keepers' meeting tonight. I hate sitting here wondering and waiting."

"Give your mind to the work at hand, my love. You mustn't abandon the tasks of the present to constantly seek thrills for the future." The smile wrinkles surrounding Nanna's eyes deepened.

"The future matters too, Nanna," Cassai fussed as much as she dared. "And the Keepers of the Kingdom are not seeking thrills. They are plotting our path to freedom from the Fontre."

"Hush now, my dear one. Birds, walls, trees and many ears listen to words like that and carry them where it's dangerous for them to be heard." Nanna's voice had lowered to a raspy whisper. Another shiver claimed Cassai. Nanna's rocking chair creaked against the wooden floor.

"There is no one to hear, Nanna," she assured her guardian in a whisper. Another loud pop from the fire made her jump. She wrapped an old quilt around her shoulders to combat a chill that had nothing to do with the dropping temperature outside. "Elian and the other Keepers will be safe tonight."

Nanna stared at her for a long time as though trying to read something in the girl's soul. It wasn't the first time that Cassai had wondered if Nanna could read her thoughts. Finally, the ancient woman breathed a long sigh of relief, as though she had found the answer.

"Yes, I suppose they will. That doesn't mean we should waver from the most important thing." Her voice had risen back to its usual cheerfulness. "The task in front of us at this moment." She flourished her own beautifully knitted shawl.

Cassai looked at her knitting and felt a dull thud in her stomach. She had two new knots in her wool and, instead of wrapping the yarn around her needles, she realized she had been tightly wrapping it around her purple thumb.

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“I say we must move now,” a leather-faced man growled, glaring through the candlelight, daring anyone to disagree with him. “They will never expect an attack with winter coming. If we gather our forces now we can move on them before the Nuelletide.”

Complete silence followed. The names of their forbidden holidays had not been heard by some of them in almost fourteen years. Since the Midnight Revolution. Since the Fontre.

“Quiet down, Altaskith. You know the punishment for speaking of our old holidays,” the baker named Julius whispered sharply.

A cloud of flour rose in the bakery’s basement as the enraged man jumped from his seat. “Who here will turn me in for it?”

“The Fontre have offered hefty rewards for turning in rebels. They know the name of our group. I heard Cobbs speak it not two days ago,” Elian warned.

Altaskith settled back into his seat and looked grumpily at his empty tankard of ale. Rationing made it unlikely that Julius, their host of the evening, would wish to refill it.

A giant man glared through the guttering candle flame at the shepherd. Frederick, the town smithy, was clearly feeling as restless as Altaskith. “What do you propose, Elian? Do nothing? Let these ruffians starve us and beat us and rob from us at will? We wait for a better time? Wait till there’s nothing left for them to take?”

“My point is that we shouldn’t underestimate their anticipation of a revolt. Why do you suppose they have cut our food rations in half since they arrested Phineas?” No one needed to be reminded of this. “Hungry people are not as strong, not as willing to try something that will make their bellies and their children’s bellies emptier still.” Elian’s logic was painfully hard to ignore. While no one dared mention it, of all the men at the table, he was the most likely to understand the strategy of the Fontre.

“But we’re here,” Julius reminded everyone softly. “We assembled somewhere other than their Hermordes, so we’re all risking our lives anyway.” Julius, spat the word Hermordes out like it tasted bitter in his mouth. The Keepers around the table murmured assent. Gatherings, outside the mandatory attendance of the weekly Hermordes, were strictly forbidden by the ruling Fontre.

Hermordes was a slap in the faces of a people who had always worshiped the Weaver as they pleased. The Fontre had burned down the cherished cathedrals of the Borderlings and erected their own buildings of worship. Every week the people were herded into their austere temples

and forced to recite incantations and listen to Fontre interpretations from the Lashain's beloved Book of Ancients. Each verse was twisted this way and that. No large portions were ever read at once.

It wasn't until the "Midnight Revolution" that the Borderlings discovered that the writings could be made to say anything if they were read in bits and pieces. While the Fontre priests insisted they served the same Weaver as the villagers, the Weaver they spoke of was exacting, vindictive and greedy. Nothing like the loving and just deity they had taught their children about for generations.

The Keepers had managed to turn these meetings against their captors. They used the gatherings to signal to each other the place and time of their next meeting.

"Yes, we risk our lives to meet here and discuss war; to strategize about taking our lives back. When will we call for action?" Frederick asked impatiently. "I say we gather whatever forces we can assemble and strike the Southern Borderlands in winter."

"There are not enough men yet," a withered old apothecary named Marcus reminded them in a gravelly voice. Elian nodded and Frederick's face turned crimson.

"So send to the South again. Send to the Kiatrri in the Mountains. There must be more men who hate the Fontre as much as we. And what of the Light Ones of the North? The Fontre are closing in on their borders as well," boomed Frederick, pounding his enormous fist on the wooden slab. It shook unsteadily, sending ale sloshing from tankards. The candles guttered, casting a weird dancing light over the men.

"Agreed!" shouted Altaskith.

"Shh," warned Julius, listening intently. Elian rose because he heard it too. The creak of a footfall upstairs. In a moment, glasses disappeared into an old cabinet, the candle was extinguished and the slab of wood was hauled off the barrels and leaned innocently upright against the wall.

"Everyone through the back door and take the alleys home," Marcus whispered urgently. Most of the men vanished through the door.

Julius heaved a bag of flour onto his shoulder and started up the stairs.

Elian was left in the dark with Julius' nephew Collin, who, at just sixteen, was the youngest of their group. The boy indicated that Elian should get through the back door, but Elian just shook his head and listened.

“My shop is closed for the day, sir. Is there something I can do for you?” Julius’ voice echoed down the stairs.

“I heard raised voices. Thought there was someone downstairs maybe.” the guard growled. Elian recognized his voice. He was not Fontre but a hired local. Most of the townsfolk would rather die than accept the occupation of the local guards, but a few were willing to risk the scorn because guards got double rations, and the privilege of lording over their fellow Borderlings. The one speaking now was Cobbs, who had hated Elian since their childhood. It had not surprised Elian when the gruff man who bullied everyone in his youth joined the Southern Guard.

“I dropped one of my sacks and it split. I was not aware that swearing in my cellar was now a punishable offense.”

“I heard more voices than yours.” Cobbs’ voice hesitated this time.

Elian smiled in the darkness. The newly-minted guard was too intimidated by the baker to simply push past him and investigate. His nerve failed when challenged by a true man.

“My nephew, Collin, sleeps down there and I startled him awake. You remember him, Cobbs? You used to shove him in the mud quite frequently.” Julius was pushing his advantage. Collin started toward the stairs to prove Julius’ story, but Elian raised a hand in warning.

“Yeah, well, keep it down. You’re disturbing the peace with your shouting. And disturbing the peace is against the law.”

“Please make my apologies to the village. I shall keep my shouting to a minimum.” Elian heard the loud clomping of boots and the glass in the door shattering as Cobbs slammed it harder than necessary. Collin clenched his fists. Glass was expensive.

“Make a bed down here and pretend it’s where you sleep,” Elian whispered. “Cobbs may bring back more guards and investigate. I doubt he has the wherewithal, but better be safe.”

Collin nodded. “You should get home. It’s two hours past curfew.” And Elian, with one final glance toward the stairs, melted into the darkness.

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Cassai stifled a yelp as her bare foot caught on a stone in the path that led to Elian’s shack. Krispen was keeping watch that night and his head whipped around at the noise. He smiled when he saw her and waved.

“Sorry to interrupt your song, Krispen.”

“No reason to be sorry. I can start it over,” he replied cheerfully. Cassai beamed at him. Krispen was one of her favorite people in the world. He was simple and sweet, and she had no doubt that he would die for her if it came down to it.

There was a single candle flickering in the tiny window of Elian’s shack and Cassai moved toward it eagerly. “See you later, Krispen.”

“Elian?” She whispered through the rough hide Elian had secured to the doorway for protection from the elements.

“Come in, Taiya.”

She slipped under the hide and glanced around the tiny, immaculate room. He had built it himself as a much younger man. It felt too small to comfortably fit the large man he had become. He sat on the floor in a corner, whittling something with his silver dagger. Cassai squinted at the chunk of wood, trying to make out its shape.

“What are you doing?”

“I am trying to remember my mother’s face.”

Cassai watched him for a moment, itching to ask him about his mother, knowing he wouldn’t tell her. Instead, she perched on a three-legged stool near the window and waited eagerly for him to tell her about the meeting. “Well?” she prodded when he said nothing.

“I can’t recall it.” He seemed to be purposely evasive, just to annoy her.

She let out a gusty sigh. “I thought the Fontre couldn’t forget.” She knew it was a low blow to bring up his past, but she felt goaded and impatient. His features went very dark and she instantly regretted it.

“Yes, but I’m not a Fontre.”

“Please. Just tell me what happened tonight.”

He put his knife down. “The meeting was interrupted when we were finally getting to a real plan.”

“Interrupted? By the guards? Is everyone alright?”

“No, we were all captured and imprisoned.”

Cassai glared at him. She rubbed her eyes, suddenly feeling very tired. “So everyone made it out?”

He pushed himself up and went to the window to remove the candle. “Yes. And it’s best if we’re not drawing attention.”

“Krispen wouldn’t turn us in.”

“Not purposely. It will be better for him, though, if he doesn’t know anything to repeat,” Elian whispered, placing the candle on the floor. “The Fontre are experts at extracting information from unwilling victims.”

“The plans?”

“The Keepers are finally considering sending out envoys,” he whispered inches from her nose. “We think the Light Ones of the North might join us in a war. The Fontre have taken over so much land in the North, Lady Ella will feel the threat to their kingdom. I think there are Fontre already there in disguise.”

Cassai nodded. This was how they took over the Inner Kingdom fourteen years earlier. Changed their features to look like harmless villagers and filtered in a few at a time until that day Cassai had read about so often in the Books of Time: the Midnight Revolution.

“They’ll send someone to the mountains as well,” Elian went on. “The Kiatri remember what it is like to be free, and they could gather men to come to our aid. They certainly have their own reasons to despise the Fontre.”

“Because of the Great Raid.”

From what she had heard about the raid on the Kiatri, it had been gruesome and debilitating for the mountain dwellers.

The Ancient people, who had once lived in peace and plenty, were now even more poverty stricken than the peoples of the Inner Kingdom. The Fontre had slaughtered everything and everyone at their whim. The Fortress City of the Troikord had been the only thing strong enough to save the Kiatri from annihilation. A mere handful of families outside the ancient walls were left alive. Those who lived were tortured as the Fontre saw fit and then abandoned to survive as best they could.

Cassai overheard Elian tell Nanna about it once. He was a little boy still living with the Fontre when it happened, and forced to participate in the day.

Elian’s gaze dropped to the floor. “Yes, the raid.” His voice had gone flat, almost as if the words had died on their way out. “Anyway, the Fontre have sent people to the Kiatri villages the same as here. They’ve stolen their livestock, rationed their food, taken them prisoner even if they’ve committed no crimes. The Kiatri may be ready for this war.”

“But they’re peacekeepers, not warriors.”

Elian sighed. “Desperation changes people. Perhaps they are wounded enough, and afraid enough, to rebel. I don’t see many other options. Julius suggested the Southern Borderlands, but they are overrun with Fontre and the Southern Guard. When it comes to a fight, I doubt we will find many of them helpful.”

Cassai sat in silence while her mind rushed from one angry thought to the next. The people of Plahn thought of the Southern Borderlings as no better than traitors for acting on behalf of the Fontre.

No-one in their tiny village had ever seen a Fontre except for Elian and most didn’t know his lineage. Her emotions were mixed on the Southern Guard, because on the one hand, joining forces with the Fontre was despicable, on the other hand, Elian would be in danger if actual Fontre were roaming around their village. While he was fair-haired and blue-eyed, unlike his darker kin, he might still be recognized and taken if a true Fontre saw him up close.

“What are you thinking of?” Elian asked, smiling at her affectionately.

“I wish I could go to the Mountains. I would persuade the Kiatrri to fight. I’m probably one of the few Borderlings familiar with the language and ways of the Mountains. Let me come to the next meeting with you.”

If she had confessed a desire to waltz up to the Gate of the Inner Kingdom and kick the guard in the shins, Elian wouldn’t have looked more shocked. “Have you lost your mind?”

“I’m not a child any more. I will be of age in less than three weeks.” Cassai huffed out a breath. Why had this idea never crossed his mind?

“Do you have any idea how dangerous this plan is? We could be beaten or killed just for meeting. You think I would risk your life for this?” His usually light blue eyes were black with rage. She did not answer and for a long moment, the only noise in the room was Elian breathing, trying to calm himself down.

“No, I guess not. I should go.” She had to swallow hard to force the lump from her throat.

“Taiya,” the softness in Elian’s voice stopped her. “Don’t leave, please. I’m sorry. I’ll tell you about the rest of the meeting if you’ll stay.” Cassai turned to him. His hands were trembling, and he looked as if someone had been torturing him.

Her anger evaporated. She crossed the room and took one of his shaking hands in hers. “Elian?”

“I overreacted, I’m sorry,” Elian whispered. He pushed himself up and wrapped his arms around her. “Come with me,” he whispered into her hair. “I want to show you something.”

Taking her hand, he led her from his shack. Moonlight guided them as they walked across the empty northern pasture and behind a stand of trees.

Cassai’s anticipation mounted as he brought her into one of her favorite clearings in their valley. “Here it is,” Elian murmured.

Nestled in a grove of dapplenut trees was the framework of a tiny stone house, slightly bigger than the cottage she and Nanna shared. Two of the walls were built up and the others had piles of white stones in front of them.

“What is this?”

“Our house.” Her head whipped around to stare at him. “I’ve been building it a little at a time through the summer. Krispen and Marcus have been helping me.” He grinned.

Her eyes glowed with delight and awe. “You built us a house?”

“I thought you would like it.” His face was completely alight with her glow. “Do you want to see inside?” He led her carefully around the piles of stone. “That back section will be our room, the kitchen here, and a fireplace there.” He waved toward a completely finished hearth. He stopped talking and let her look at everything, then he pulled her against him in a tight hug. “Next spring.”

Her breath caught in her lungs. “Next spring?” She felt dizzy with excitement. “It will be finished, and I think we should get married.”