



Wind Walker

Starlight &
Shadows
3

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PRELUDE



THE BLUNT SWORD

*The Battle of Immil Vale,
Rashemen, DR 1360*

The ruins of an ancient tree guarded the western border of Immil Vale. Its massive trunk, blackened by long-ago fires, was as thick as a wizard's keep, and storm-twisted branches, winter-bare and sharp as spears, encircled it with the determined air of mountain elk standing antler to antler against an onslaught of wolves.

Warm mists swirled around the base of the tree, and high overhead, faint light spilled from an arched portal half-hidden among jagged spires of shattered wood. Framed in that doorway stood three black-robed figures: witches of Rashemen, guardians of a land besieged.

They looked out over a place of exceptional beauty, a deep narrow valley that ran along the northern side of the mountain range known as Running Rocks. Rashemen winters were long and stubborn, but in this place eternal springtime ruled. Hot springs bubbled and steamed in small

rocky enclaves. The grass grew thick and soft, and the scent of meadow flowers sweetened the warm air. Swift-running streams chattered excitedly, telling boastful little tales of journeys down rugged mountainsides. The witches who kept this tower usually went about their business to the accompaniment of birdsong. Today, no bird flew, no songs were sung. Even the whitewater streams seemed oddly subdued. The valley, like the witches, awaited Death in silence.

In the center of the trio stood Zofia, a plump, aging woman who in some other land might be mistaken for a cheerful village crone. Here in Rashemen the Othlor—elders among the witches—drew magic from the land itself. Springtime held potent promise, but no Rashemi denied either the power or the beauty of winter. Zofia held herself like the queen she was, as did the two Hathran with her: competent witches in the late summer of their lives. The three formed a powerful sisterhood, ready to combine their magic into a single force. Other, similar bands stood ready on mountain ledges, their robes dark slashes against the snow.

Zofia scanned the battle-ready company below with keen, bright blue eyes. All was as it should be. War bands had come from many villages, and each *fang* gathered under its own bright banner. Berserker warriors took the forefront, as was custom, but today all were mounted on shaggy, rugged Rashemaar ponies. The wild, running charge of screaming berserker warriors, so effective in melting an enemy's courage and resolve, was of limited effect against the Tuigan riders. Today the warriors of Rashemen would meet cavalry with cavalry.

The huhrong himself commanded the forces. Zofia's gaze went to him, and she noted with a pang of sadness that the Iron Lord had become a graybeard, his once-massive shoulders stooped with age. She brought to mind his broad,

weathered face, lined with the passing of time and the scars of battles fought and won.

On impulse she slipped one hand into the bag tied to her belt. She fingered the ancient rune-carved bones, tempted to see if the old warrior had one more victory in him.

No. Though Hyarmon Hussilthar might lead the fighters, she was Othlor here. Ultimately the battle was hers to win or lose, and any witch who sought to know her own future was courting ill fortune.

Zofia quickly drew her hand from the bag and spat lightly onto her fingers, then fisted and flicked her fingers sharply, three times. The other witches showed no reaction to the little ritual. To the Rashemi such things were as commonplace as children's laughter or winter coughs.

The warding didn't quite banish Zofia's unnamed fears. Her eyes flashed to the place where the berserkers of the Black Bear lodge gathered, all of them mounted on sturdy, coal-black ponies. At the head was Mahryon, the *fyrro* of village Dernovia, a bear of a man as dark and shaggy and fierce as his half-tamed war pony.

A surge of pride warmed the old witch's heart. Though she was an Othlor among Rashemen's witches, her thoughts turned to Mahryon, her only son, whenever she tallied her contributions to the land. How swiftly the wheel turned, how soon boys became warriors! Her child was a grizzled veteran, and his own son rode beside him. The boy—Fyodor—was not yet twenty, but he had been counted among the berserkers of Rashemen these past four winters.

Zofia's lingering unease deepened. She had heard Fyodor's name spoken of late. The first stories recounting the young berserker's exploits were told with gusto, which was soon flavored with awe. The last few tales that had come to Zofia's ears were tinged with apprehension,

an emotion that Rashemi were slow to acknowledge and slower to admit.

Her gaze clung to her grandson as a distant rumble, like the muted cadence of war drums, began to swell. The berserkers lifted their own song, a musical invitation to the battle rage. As the song increased in power and size, so did the men who sang. Their faces burned blood-red, and dark hair writhed around their fierce faces as if stirred by sudden winds. The illusion granted by the magical battle frenzy extended even to the ponies, lending them the daunting size and solidity of a knight's armored mount.

The huhrong lifted one hand high, holding back the swelling tide of battle. Zofia knew his strategy: Once the charge began, the witch whips would flail the advancing enemy from behind, cutting off escape, unhorsing many of the enemy and forcing them to fight with their feet on Rashemaar soil.

A grim smile curved Zofia's lips. These invaders would soon learn that the Land was Her own best defender.

The enemy came into view, and the witch's smile faltered. A large battalion of infantry roiled forward, well in advance of the mounted Tuigan warriors.

Strange, that so many warriors went afoot. The Tuigan and their horses were nearly as inseparable as the two parts of a centaur. Though the tundra-bred horses lacked the ferocity of a Rashemaar pony, they had proven to be intelligent, loyal beasts that would stay with their riders until death.

The truth came to Zofia suddenly.

"Dierneszkits", she said softly, glancing at the witches on either side. "The Tuigan are bringing the spirit-fled against us."

The two women paled. In this land, zombies were seldom encountered and greatly feared. Quickly they took

up a singsong evocation. Zofia joined them in a plea to the spirits that inhabited the streams and trees and rocks of this enchanted vale. With one voice the witches importuned the spirits to quit their homes for a short while, to inhabit the bodies of slain enemies and bring them under the witches' control. Their magic reached out into the valley, entwined with the seeking mists, ruffled the springtime meadows.

However, the spirits, who for more than two years had been growing increasingly capricious, did not answer at all.

The undead hoard shambled steadily forward. The riders pulled up, staying within the parameters of a large circle of winter-brown grass that scarred the land like a fading bruise.

Zofia's voice faltered first. "How is this possible?" she murmured. The location of magic-dead spots was a secret closely guarded. The Tuigan were said to be skilled at torture, but it seemed remarkable to her that a Rashemi would yield this information under any circumstances.

Fraeni, the youngest of the trio, pantomimed the sprinkling of salt in a semicircle before her, a warding against evil magic. "The Time of Trouble," she intoned, "when the Three were silent, and long-dead heroes walked the land. Our power has not been the same since."

The Othlor dismissed the obvious with a sharp wave of one hand. "But the rest of the valley wasn't touched by the magic-death. The place spirits—the *telthors*—are here. I can feel them. I just can't *reach* them."

"It is like trying to sing in tune with our Sisters on the Rookery Peak," the third witch said, nodding toward the farthest outpost. "We see them, but we cannot hear them or they us."

"Just so," Zofia agreed grimly. "Let's get on with it. Command the whips!"

Scores of weapons—many-headed hydras fashioned from magic and black leather—emerged from the empty air. The broad, metal-fanged tips lifted, arched back, and whistled forward. Sharp cracks, like lightning and thunder combined, echoed though the valley and bounced in fading echoes from peak to peak. Each whip tore deep, bloodless furrows into the advancing enemy.

The zombies kept coming.

The witches joined hands and shouted a single ringing word. Steam erupted from the land in killing geysers. The stench of rotten meat filled the air, but the zombies' advance did not falter.

Dark wings filled the air as ravens answered the witches' summons. They swooped down upon the undead carrion, their talons raking and their beaks diving deep into sightless eyes. Feathers flew as the zombies batted the birds aside. Finally the ravens yielded the fruitless battle, leaping into the air to circle and scold.

Still the undead warriors came.

One of the witches on a nearby ledge loosed a stream of magical fire at the undead warriors. The weapon never came close to its target. A dense cloud of mist, dragon-shaped, exploded from a stream, jaws flung wide. It lunged at the flame, swallowed it whole. Wisps of steam rose from its nostrils as it sang back into the waters.

"Fool," muttered Zofia. "You cannot defend the land by attacking it. Are we wizards, to create what we want by destroying what we need?"

"These monsters are not of the natural world or the spirit world," argued Fraeni. "How are we to fight them?"

The old witch nodded toward the impatient berserkers. "This is their battle now."

At that moment the Iron Lord waved his men into battle. Several *fangs* kicked their mounts into a running charge.

Zombies went down under thrashing hooves and flailing swords.

They did not die as men did. They pulled the horses down with them, and bony fingers clung and burrowed and tore even after the body and limbs were hewn asunder. Many a warrior urged his mount up and forward, unaware of a severed hand making its way, spiderlike, up a pony's withers toward the rider.

As Zofia watched, the huhorong's sweeping sword caught one zombie below the ribcage and severed it neatly in two. The upper body went spinning off, arms windmilling in wild search for a handhold. The half-zombie caught a fistful of long flying mane then managed to drag itself up and fling its arms around the pony's neck. Its teeth began to gnaw, and its head shook savagely as it tore out the animal's throat. Meanwhile, the lower body and legs kept plodding forward, its gray entrails dragging behind, directly into the thickest part of the charge. One of the black ponies plowed into the half-creature and stumbled. Its rider went down and quickly disappeared under a swarm of undead.

Everywhere Zofia looked this scene was being re-enacted in endless, grim variation. She shaded her eyes and squinted toward the far end of the battle. The tuigan riders stayed where they were, in the magic-dead stretch of land where no witch whip could venture, no spell could reach. She had anticipated that this might occur—by accident if not foreknowledge—but had thought it no matter for concern. After all, the spirits could walk where they willed.

Why, then, were they silent?

She felt Mahryon's horse stumble, felt her son go down before her eyes actually found the place that received his spilled blood. His sword lifted again and again, a bright flash among the writhing, seeking limbs of the soul-fled monsters who had dragged him down. The man himself

she could not see, but his flame burned bright in her heart and soul.

And like a wind-snuffed candle it was gone.

A wail of soul-deep anguish burst from the aged witch, a keening lament for Mahryon—her firstborn, her baby, her heart's own! The younger women laced their arms around her waist, supporting her as they matched her cry and turned it into power.

A sudden gale lifted a score or so of the undead creatures and sent them hurtling back. The berserkers they had been assailing picked themselves up and charged forward, unaware of their wounds.

Zofia beat back the wave of her grief and looked for Fyodor. He had not yet been unhorsed, and his scream of rage and fury carried on the wind, as alike her own as if it were a mountain-cast echo. His pony wheeled and kicked and bit as Fyodor beat aside a knot of zombies. Horse and rider broke through and rode for the fallen warrior at a gallop. The boy leaped from his mount before it could break stride and hit the ground at a run. The pony veered away; Fyodor stooped and seized his father's sword.

Lofting it high, he let out one fierce roar and burst into a charge. He ran forward, scything through the undead warriors like a farmer harvesting rye. To Zofia's astonishment, he emerged from the deadly gauntlet and kept running toward the waiting riders.

"There is courage!" exulted Fraeni. "But what can one sword do?"

As if he heard the witch, Fyodor slammed the sword into the sheath on his back and kept running. He seized one of the ineffectual witch whips from the air and hauled it back.

All three witches caught their breath. Their astonishment was mirrored throughout the valley as witch and warrior

beheld the inconceivable. For a moment time stopped. . . .

The many strands of black leather flashed forward in a single gray blur.

Fyodor's first strike took a Tuigan rider, wrapping around his body with bone-cracking force. When he pulled the weapon away, it came dragging long strips of flesh. The horse shied away from the thunderous crack and the sudden fountain of blood, sending its owner's body pitching into the next warrior.

Fraeni exhaled on a curse and made the sharp, slashing hand gesture reserved for those Rashemi who flouted the cardinal laws of the land. When she caught Zofia's incredulous stare, she said defensively, "The boy is mad! It is death to wield a witch whip!"

"Yes, he is mad," Zofia agreed, "and yes, it is death—and may the Three be praised for it!"

By now other berserkers had broken through, dodging their way past Tuigan swords and stampeding horses. Fyodor continued on his suicidal path, lashing at the invaders, tearing them from their mounts and urging the horses into panicked flight.

Once unhorsed, the invaders could do little against Rashemen's battle-mad defenders. The *fangs* of Rashemen drove them away from the magic-dead circle, deeper into the valley. The witch whips awaited them there. They joined in deadly song with Fyodor's whip, lashing the Tuigan toward Imiltur and the army that awaited them there.

When it was over, Zofia dismissed the witches to go among the wounded, to find and help those who might yet be saved. It was grim and dangerous work, separating the wounded from the dead, and the dead from the undead. Nor would they work alone: The skies were already black with ravens, and the hungry cries of wolves rose from the darkening shadows of the Ashenwood.

Zofia quickly slipped into a witch's trance, sliding into the gray overworld that linked the living and the spirit realms. She reached out to the Sisters guarding the Watchtowers of Ashane. They must know what was coming their way.

She quickly touched the minds of the first Guardian, the witch who stood at the portal to the overworld, and conveyed without words what needed to be said. When the tower had been warned, she moved to the next and to the next. At the third tower, no entranced witch guarded the portal. Instead Zofia encountered a chaos of displaced spirits—

And a burst of power that threw her across the room.

The gray world exploded in a white burst of pain, and there was only darkness.

Zofia didn't hear the warriors come in, couldn't have said who had the effrontery to pour a swig of *jhuild* down her throat. She came to herself choking and sputtering, and her first words were a few choice phrases she'd learned in her days in the warriors' lodge.

A thin but still-strong hand captured hers and hauled her to her feet. "Save it for the Tuigan, Zofia."

She focused on the face of the aging huhrong then glanced at the white-faced youth who stood a pace to the side and two behind. Her gaze returned to the huhrong's face.

"We have won another battle, Hyarmon Hussilthar. Perhaps we should all have another drink."

"The time to celebrate has not yet come," the huhrong said coldly. "Young Fyodor broke ranks and should be dealt with accordingly."

Zofia let out a derisive laugh. "Broke *ranks*? Has your eyesight so faltered, Hyarmon, that you mistake our berserkers for Cormyr's Purple Dragons? The men of Rashe-men do not march into battle like ants."

The old man's face mottled. "Wolves attack with more discipline and order!"

“And with less ferocity,” she countered. She nodded toward Fyodor. “That young warrior turned the battle. You know it.”

“That young warrior is dangerous, and *you* know it. He is not his own master. What man in control of his wits would lay hands upon a witch whip?”

The Iron Lord reached over his shoulder and drew a long, dark weapon from the baldric slung there. This he threw onto the floor. It landed on the stone floor with a deep ringing clatter, like the bass-voiced bells that tolled a warrior’s death.

“I will not deny that young Fyodor did his duty,” the huhrong said in more tempered tones. “Now I must do mine, and you, yours.”

It was the law of the land, born of stern necessity, and Zofia had no argument against his demand. She gave a curt nod that was both agreement and dismissal. The Iron Lord inclined his head and strode from the room.

She stooped to pick up the weapon. With both hands she held it at arm’s length, sighting down the blade. It was straight and true, as well made as any weapon of Rashemen. It was also heavy—even in the strength of her girlhood, she could not have held it so for more than a moment. Such swords were nearly impossible to wield in battle except in the throes of berserker frenzy. It had no edge. It was a bludgeon, not a cutting weapon. A berserker raging out of control was a danger to himself as well as others, and it was the greatest dishonor for any Rashemi to die by his own hand, his own sword.

She turned to the young man and saw the bleak acceptance in his eyes. Before she could speak, a dark cloud of magic shimmered in the far side of the tower room, then took silent, solid form. The bodies of three of Rashemen’s witches—the women whose death had nearly been

Zofia's—had returned to the nearest fastness.

Zofia dropped the black sword and hurried to her fallen sisters. Her mind refused to catalogue all their injuries, acknowledging only that they had been horribly slain. Two of them still wore the black masks that witches donned when traveling and sometimes when spell casting. The third witch wore her mask tied to her belt. Her face was untouched by her violent death, and it appeared young, fair, and very familiar. It was the face that Zofia had seen when as a girl she had looked into a clear pool or a silvered glass.

Her heart breaking, Zofia dropped to her knees and untied the mask. The woman's face changed to the aging face of Zhanna, her twinborn sister. Zofia gently smoothed aside a strand of gray hair and whispered a prayer to speed her sister's spirit on its way.

A lifetime of duty pushed aside this new pain. With steady fingers Zofia tied the mask to her own belt. Later she would call Fraeni to her, give her the mask, and send her to hold the Watchtower. Zhanna was one of the most powerful witches in the land, and she had been the guardian of many treasures. In addition to the Mask of Danigar, she had been entrusted with an ebony wish-staff and the task of ferreting out the ancient power hidden in the Wind-walker amulet.

A deep foreboding filled Zofia, and she slid one hand beneath the high collar of his sister's robes, her fingers seeking the chain. It was gone—taken by the wizards who had slain her sister.

Gone, too, was her sister's dream. According to the old tales, in the Windwalker lay the power to bind and to break, to heal and destroy. Zhanna had been certain that it had a role to play in the restoration of Rashemen's magic.

The burden of grief was suddenly too heavy for Zofia's

shoulders. The tower room spun and blurred, and her own spirit strained at its life-tether in a yearning to follow its twinborn self.

“Grandmother?”

The tentative question, voiced in a deep, resonant bass, jarred Zofia back to herself. She rose to her feet in a single smooth movement, schooled her face to a mask of calm majesty, and turned to face Fyodor.

The young warrior was pale and haggard, weaving on his feet. It was a marvel he could stand at all. The sickness that fell over Rashemen’s warriors after a berserker rage could be as devastating in its own way as the killing frenzy.

Pride and grief mingled in the old witch’s heart as she beheld her kinsman for the last time. Fyodor was his father’s son—a strong man, a fine warrior. Young as he was, there had been talk about making him leader of his own *fang*. With a heavy heart, she took up the dull black sword, holding it so it lay flat across her two hands.

“You have brought honor to Rashemen,” the witch said softly. She marveled that she was able to speak the ritual words without wavering. Even so, she had to swallow hard before she could speak the last words. “In honor go to your last battle.”

He took the weapon from her, accepting without hesitation his sentence of death. An honorable death, yes, but death all the same. Zofia lifted one hand to give the blessing bestowed upon the dead and dying, but try as she might, she could not form the ritual gesture.

For a long moment the old witch and the young warrior stood in frozen tableau, then Zofia’s hand dropped heavily to her side.

She had had too much of death.

The bag that held her augury stones shifted, as if the ancient bones within stirred of their own accord. She

reached in, drew out a handful of the engraved stones, and cast them to the floor.

They landed in a precise circle around the young man. Instantly he was surrounded with translucent, rapidly shifting images, too many and too fleeting for Zofia to perceive. The one that seized her attention was a raven with golden eyes, wearing about its neck an ancient amulet, a rune-carved dagger of dull, weathered gold.

“The Windwalker,” she said aloud, and heard the power that filled her words like strong winds passing through winter trees—the power of Sight. “You will find the Windwalker. She will bind and break, heal and destroy. You will bring her to Rashemen, and she will bring you home.”

The images around Fyodor faded, and the witch’s summoned power receded like a departing storm.

“The Windwalker,” Zofia repeated in her own voice, responding to the puzzlement on her grandson’s face. “It is an ancient artifact of our people. You must find it and return it to me.”

The warrior responded with a bleak smile. He lifted the black weapon, gripped the blade and drew his hand along it, then showed her his unmarked palm.

“I have been declared *nydeshka*, a blunt sword. By Rashemaar law, I am a dead man.”

“That excuses you from obeying the Othlor?” she demanded tartly. “If I say you will go, you will go.”

Fyodor’s lips thinned. “I accept our customs and tradition. Any berserker who cannot control his rage has earned death,” he said evenly, “but what dishonorable thing have I done, Grandmother, that you condemn me to exile?”

“Consider it *darjemma*, then,” she said, naming the journey all Rashemaar youth took in early adulthood.

“No youth has gone on *darjemma* since the Tuigan

invaded. Would you have me abandon Rashemen while she is under attack?"

"Have I not said so?"

He acknowledged the command with a nod. For a long moment, however, he waged a silent battle against pride.

"I am willing to die," he said at last, speaking his plea with quiet dignity, "but let me die at home. Do not condemn my spirit to walk lands it cannot know, like the fallen Tuigan."

That startled her, for she thought none but witches perceived these unquiet exiles. "You can see these ghosts?"

He hesitated. "Sometimes, yes. From the corner of my eye. When I look straight upon them, they are not there, and when I speak to them, they do not answer."

These words described with distressing accuracy the situation with the spirits, as well. So Fyodor had the Sight, Zofia noted. That was no great wonder, seeing that men of their clan were counted among the *vremyonni*—the Old Ones, the rare magically gifted males who crafted weapons of magic and fashioned new spells. Zofia considered telling Fyodor of the state of Rashemen's magic but decided that he had burdens enough to bear.

"I will enchant your weapon so that the blade will cut, but only those who are not of Rashemen," she said. "So armed, you have as good a chance as any man of completing your task and returning to Rashemen with honor."

"And if I fall?"

"I will send a Moon Hunter to find you and bring you home," she suggested. "I promise you, by the word of an Othlor witch and by the power of Mother Rashemen, that whatever comes of your quest, your bones will rest beneath the skies of your homeland. Will that content you?"

Despite his situation, Fyodor's winter-blue eyes brightened with the wonder of those whose deepest joy was the

hearing and telling of tales. “Moon Hunters truly exist? I had thought them to be legends! Do you truly know such a creature?”

“Have I not said so?”

He pondered this marvel for a moment, then he let out a long breath and shoved one hand through his dark hair. The smile he gave her was wry and far too old for his years.

“These are strange times, indeed! A blunt sword is sent on a witch’s quest, and a Moon Hunter stalks a dead man. What is this about, Grandmother? *Truly* about?”

“I cannot tell you,” she said with total honesty.

His regarded her for a long moment. “With all respect, Zofia Othlor,” he said softly, “it seems to me that the reason you cannot tell me is that you do not know the answer.”

Oh yes, he saw too much, this son of her blood and her spirit.

“Find the Windwalker,” she repeated. “With it you will find your destiny and perhaps that of all Rashemen.”