

# THE GUARDIANS



Copyright © Elana A. Mugdan 2017

The right of Elana Mudgan to be identified as the sole overview author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means – graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or information storage and retrieval systems – without the prior written permission of the publishers.

## **THE GUARDIANS**

First published in October 2017 by  
Pen Works Media Ltd  
54a The Broadway, Crouch End, London, N8 9TP

This book is a work of fiction.

**[penworksmedia.co.uk](http://penworksmedia.co.uk)**

Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

ISBN: 978-1-908730-97-8

*For Medusa,  
the greatest serpent of all.*

ELANA A. MUGDAN

This is a world enrichment book  
for the world of

## **Allentria**

a magical place created by Elana A. Mugdan  
where countless stories are born.

If you enjoy this book, please leave a review  
on sites such as Goodreads and Amazon.  
Those who do will be entered into seasonal draws  
to win exclusive gifts and merchandise.

You can also visit **allentria.com** to stay updated on all  
future  
stories and character information, including updates on

## **Dragon Speaker**

Elana's debut novel, and the first book in  
*The Shadow War Saga*.

The sequel

## **Dragon Child**

will be released in the UK  
in the summer of 2018.

**penworksmmedia.co.uk**

# CONTENTS

**Map of Allentria** *Page 8*

**Spring** *Page 9*

**Summer** *Page 14*

**Autumn** *Page 33*

**Winter** *Page 46*

**About the Author** *Page 62*

ELANA A. MUGDAN

# THE GUARDIANS

by

ELANA A. MUGDAN



## THE GUARDIANS







# SPRING

ZUMARRA, ALLENTRIAN GOD AND GUARDIAN OF WATER, lay coiled in the deepest trench of the Galantrian Lake. Her glittering blue scales slid over one another seamlessly as she drew a breath through her gills, brooding over the latest in a series of disturbing occurrences. A decade ago she'd learned there were once again shadowbeasts roaming Allentria—news bad enough to make even a god shudder—but now she understood the foul things were actually *in* the Galantasa.

Something had to be done before her land was tainted by the creatures forever. But what could she do? Nothing—that was the worst part of it. Her actions were constrained by the binding laws and she couldn't interfere in mortal affairs.

However, supposedly there was a plan.

Shivnath, her sister to the east, had found a mortal being she believed she could tamper with. If she was indeed able to do so, it would open up a world of possibility. Such a mortal could do what the gods were forbidden from doing: such a mortal could work to destroy the shadowbeasts and their master, Necrovar.

Zumarra couldn't say she was fond of the idea of relying on a mortal for help. It was the same tired tactic they'd resorted to during the first war against Necrovar, and *that* enterprise had failed rather spectacularly. Still, there was little else to be done. The four guardians could use passive defensive measures against the Shadow, but they needed a mortal if they wanted to take a more direct approach in fighting him. Perhaps things would be different this time.

Perhaps Shivrath's mortal would be the key to their victory.

The dragon god was currently watching the creature—whether that was to determine its worth as a tool for the gods or to simply observe its natural habits, Zumarra couldn't guess. Shivrath had been secretive about her scheme, more so than was usual even for her. The identity of the mortal was as yet unknown, which made Zumarra furious. And though Shivrath had promised to explain everything, the real question was when she'd bother to do it.

A low growl of frustration rumbled in Zumarra's throat. It was muted in the midnight depths of the lake, but spiralling ribbons of bubbles escaped her lion-like mouth through gaps between her serrated fangs. Those could cause problems, for there were some inhabitants in her lake who she was—to put it mildly—less than fond of. Zumarra had always harboured a fierce pride for her humans, but their intrusion into her personal space was unacceptable. What was more, they actually believed the guardian of the Galantasa lived in the lake *with* them. Well, they weren't wrong, but Zumarra didn't like the fact that they'd guessed her hiding spot so well. Any disturbance in the water and they'd be swarming down here trying to find her. She couldn't have that.

Her slitted purple eyes narrowed as she embraced her source. Watermagic was her flesh and blood, and she wielded it with more skill than any other creature in Allentria. With the merest bat of an eyelash, the bubbles vanished. She'd infused the air with water, which in turn moved the air-threads apart, causing them to be so thinly spread that they were invisible to human eyes. It was too simple; she should have thought of something more fancy. Any fool could have done it. Then again, perhaps they couldn't. Humans really didn't know the first thing about magic.

Without warning a dull pain wormed its way through

her breast, crushing her elongated heart and lungs against her myriad ribs. Pain was normal for the Allentrian gods. They were connected to every magicthread in their domains, and they absorbed the ills and hurts of their states to protect the balance. Threads existed in everything from the smallest morning dewdrop to the most massive mountain glacier—and if those threads were to somehow unravel, it would release an amazing amount of energy, leading to catastrophic events. The gods were a safeguard against that eventuality, and absorbed decaying threads whenever they came undone.

Usually that didn't occur. Decaying threads indicated a weak land, and Allentria had a strong system of magical checks and balances, but sometimes these things couldn't be helped. The stupidity of humans led to disasters every so often. Last season a large fight had broken out and a water mage had somehow managed to unravel—to *destroy*—an entire lake. The lake's unravelled threads had then found their way back to Zumarra. It had pained her to absorb them, but whenever she gained power she put it forth again to strengthen existing magicthreads. Thus energy was conserved and the balance remained intact.

Zumarra knew pain, and she knew watermagic. This was most assuredly pain, but the threads causing it were not from her state. She winced as the unpleasant sensation spread throughout her serpentine body. It felt like fire in her blood. That could only mean one thing: those threads had come from the Fironem, home of her brother Valaan.

The pain piqued, then subsided. Zumarra let out a controlled sigh to soothe her aching flesh. She wasn't the guardian of the southern state, and the threads of things undone in Valaan's domain should have been his own burden. Not so anymore. Necrovar had widened the Rift

between Selaras and the Etherworld enough to cast his shadow upon Allentria once more, and his presence was destroying the Fironem. Death to Valaan's land meant death to Valaan, so the other Allentrian guardians had agreed to share the stress of the state's rapid deterioration.

The whole thing had been Shivnath's idea. Zumarra's lips parted in a silent snarl. It wasn't that she didn't love her sister — she did, greatly — but Shivnath *always* came up with the best ideas. And best though they were, Zumarra couldn't help but feel that every wonderful idea Shivnath came up with ended up being bad for her. That was because most of Shivnath's plans involved self-sacrifice. Zumarra hated self-sacrifice. What was the point of being all-powerful if you always had to suffer?

She shook her head ruefully. The pains had been worsening of late. Necrovar was growing stronger, and Valaan weaker. Something had to be done, but whenever Zumarra pressed her sister for information, Shivnath claimed the time wasn't right.

"That probably means her mortal isn't ready to face the Shadow," Zumarra mused to herself. The lake distorted her deep voice, which was normally a rumble like the roll of distant tides, into a pathetic gurgle. "Which means this plan is likely doomed to fail before we ever manage to set it in motion."

She appreciated the fact that it took gods a long time to do anything — the binding laws made it difficult to take any action beyond what was necessary to maintain the balance of magics — but they'd had well over a decade to work on the issue, and the only major development in their current fight against Necrovar had been Shivnath's discovery of her mystery mortal.

As was always the case when she reflected upon

Allentria's predicament, Zumarra ended up right back where she'd started. There was nothing she could do for now. She could only strengthen the threads of the Galantasa, monitor the shadowbeasts, and hope against all hope that Shivnath's plan would yield results.

*Shivnath wouldn't throw her support behind just any old mortal. There must be something about the creature she isn't telling us. She must know more than she's letting on,* Zumarra thought, her snout crinkling in a subtle frown. She expelled another bubbly sigh and whispered aloud, "There is no choice in the matter. I must trust in Shivnath."

# SUMMER

The compulsion snuck up on Zumarra and took her unawares, as was always the case.

It was a normal night, unexceptional except for the fact that she'd had an oddly decent week. She hadn't felt any pains in days, nor had there been any incidents with shadowbeasts, so she had taken a bit of personal time to have a rare and well-earned rest. One moment she was relaxing in her underwater trench, the next she was filled with a desire to visit Shivnath. She was halfway to the surface of the lake before she realized what she was doing, and she hissed in aggravation. The longing which urged her to go to Shivnath's cave meant her sister was using her mental powers to call a meeting of the gods.

Now that she'd consciously realized what was going on, the compulsion within her took shape and formed into a series of coherent—but alien—thoughts. There had been a development with Shivnath's mortal. The dragon had transferred a portion of her own magic to the creature. She intended it to go forth at once and face Necrovar.

Well, that was quite an unexpected twist. Zumarra wasn't quite sure what to make of it. While part of her rejoiced in the fact that they were *finally* being proactive about dealing with the Shadow, the fact that Shivnath had taken action with the mortal so abruptly—and without consulting her siblings—was unacceptable.

Zumarra didn't like being compelled to do anything, but the thought of making Shivnath divulge her secrets was

enough to keep her from delaying. Usually she came late to these meetings; today she would make an exception. It was about time the lizard explained things.

She inhaled deeply. This bit of watermagic was one of the most difficult spells one could do. Actually only one *could* do it, and that was Zumarra herself. Her siblings, of course, had mastered the trick in their own elements—but she controlled water, so water she would become.

The magicthreads that lived in every fibre of her body expanded, and she drew in the water-threads around her. She flowed upwards as she merged and fused with the liquid, avoiding the ice bubble where lay the Galantrian Palace. She wasn't concerned about being spotted. To a human's untrained eyes she would appear as merely an erratic current.

Zumarra put on a burst of speed and her head broke the surface. Only it wasn't really Zumarra—it was water. Zumarra *was* the water, and the water was Zumarra. She opened the threads of her being wider, allowing space for air to move into her body. As she rose, she felt herself unravelling and being re-woven in a much looser fashion, turning to water vapour. Being vapourous allowed her to fly, and now she could really speed. She wielded and rejoiced in the feeling of all the water-threads in the sky pushing her along. Her lake, a deep pool of sapphire atop a plateau with mighty waterfalls pouring down on all sides, shortly became a speck in the distance.

She passed over Doryn Fen and angled northwards so she wouldn't yet cross the border into the Smarlands. Being out of her state lessened her hold on her watermagic, if only fractionally. It didn't seem fair that these summits were always held in Shivnath's lair. Why did her siblings never come to the lake?

She was passing over the glades now, which meant she was near the sprite queendom. Zumarra wished she had time to drop in and borrow a sprite or two; sprites amplified the power of water wielders around them and fell into an odd grey area between mortal and something else, so the binding laws didn't necessarily forbid her from interacting with them.

She sighed. Why was she wishing she had more power? Did she not trust her sister and brothers? Of course she did — it was just a question of how far that trust extended. In times gone by, before the Great War with Necrovar, she would have trusted her siblings with anything. Now that Valaan was poisoned with necromagic, Zumarra didn't know if she could trust him at all. But her judgement concerning Shivnath—no, Shivnath and Naero—should have been different. Was that simply because of the changing times, or did she truly fear Shivnath now?

She tried to clear her mind of such thoughts, for Shivnath had the obnoxious habit of looking into her siblings' heads to see what was playing across their brains. Without a consensual connection the dragon could only read active thoughts on the outermost layer of the mind, but if Zumarra wasn't careful she might accidentally let one of her deep, dangerous thoughts become a surface-thought. And if Shivnath happened to be prying when such a thought arose, there would be trouble.

A waver in her soul and a hitch in her breath indicated she'd crossed the territorial line into the Smarlands. Even here, at the rolling foothills of her sister's mountains, she could feel the dragon's presence. A part of Shivnath was in every magicthread in the Smarlands, just as a part of Zumarra lived in every thread of her own domain.

She soared higher and banked right. Shivnath's cave



was located at the peak of a mountain called Argos Moor, which loosely translated from the draconic language to 'The Death Height'. Shivnath had always had a morbid sense of humour.

A thunderclap boomed through the sky, causing the vapourous hairs in Zumarra's blue mane to stand upright. She twisted around to see what had caused the disturbance, though she could easily guess. The southern sky was clear and thunderheads didn't just pop up out of nowhere. Below, a swirl of misty air condensed and merged with the fog that clung to the craggy slopes, accompanied by another peal of thunder. Of course—Naero always insisted upon a grand entrance.

Zumarra also merged with the fog, soaring low so she wouldn't miss the cavern. She soon spotted it: a gaping gash in the mountainside adorned with stalagmites and stalactites to resemble the jaws of some enormous creature. More of Shivnath's black humour, no doubt.

As she glided inside, she concentrated on becoming herself again. The air-threads she'd allowed into her being were forced out as she re-solidified. She momentarily became liquid, and then she was back to being Zumarra. She straightened her spine and lifted her head so she was taller than the other two souls in the cave: her brother of the Erastate, Naero, and her sister.

"Welcome, Zumarra," said Shivnath, her emerald scales glinting in the dim light as she shifted her weight to gaze at Zumarra. "We are graced with your presence so early."

"I have things to discuss with you," Zumarra informed her. She touched noses with Shivnath as ceremony dictated, then drew back hastily. She was *not* afraid. It was just . . . alright, Shivnath's pitch-black eyes frightened her. But they would frighten anyone. They'd changed and darkened

during the Great War, and now they held the weight of countless secrets and unfathomable pain. It made Zumarra feel heavy just to look at them, and she repressed a shudder.

She turned to Naero and repeated the ceremony. Her gryphon brother was a little smaller than Shivnath and a little less intimidating, and usually Zumarra liked him quite well. Now however, his violet eyes were cold and tight around the edges, clouded with darkness.

"Welcome sister." His ringing voice, like thunder itself, was laced with something — tension, frustration, or possibly fear. "It's good to see you again."

Zumarra nodded and slithered over to her usual corner. Without preamble she launched into the speech she'd prepared for her sister on the flight over.

"Well Shivnath, we've waited for years. Always when we try to take action you claim the time isn't right or our idea isn't in accordance with the binding laws. While we struggle to find a suitable way to save our empire from imminent doom, the Shadow gains strength. His influence in Allentria grows daily. Now you've set a plan in motion without even consulting us. I want you to tell me how this mortal of yours is supposed to defeat Necrovar."

At the sound of Necrovar's name, Naero's tufted tail began to lash like a marsh reed caught in a gale. He retreated to his own corner, settling back on his haunches.

"I, too, am concerned with your plan, Shivnath," he growled. "You ask us to trust you, but you've told us next to nothing. This cannot go on."

"Some things, I cannot tell," Shivnath said simply.

"Yet others you surely must," he insisted. "You've been watching this mortal for a long time and you never did anything about it before now. What changed? What makes you think he can stand against Necrovar's power?"

"And," Zumarra added, "what makes you think he'll be able to destroy Necrovar equipped only with *your* magic?" There. That should show the presumptuous trog.

*Careful, Zumarra, she schooled herself. Watch your thoughts.*

"There's no cause for concern. I know my plan will work in the end," Shivnath assured them.

"How?" Naero's voice was drenched with skepticism.

"I've seen it in the scrying spring." The dragon tipped her elegant snout toward the back of her cave, indicating the dark tunnel that led into the bowels of her mountain. Zumarra knew the middle cavern housed a hollowed-out rock filled with liquid timemagic. That spring was one of Shivnath's most prized possessions and it allowed her to see—among other things—possibilities of the future.

Neither Zumarra or Naero would dare refute the spring's ability, but these were dangerous times. Their dragon sister caught the doubt nestled in the lines of Naero's finely feathered countenance—Zumarra herself hadn't betrayed a bit of incredulity—and she scowled.

"I understand you're unsure. But if the mortal does as I've asked, she will right all that has been wrong these many ages in Allentria."

The gryphon's pointed ears swivelled forward and his wings fluttered in agitation. "Pardon? Did you say 'she'?"

"I did," growled Shivnath. Naero had the silly notion that male creatures were stronger wielders than female ones, and neither of his sisters had ever been able to sway his idiotic belief.

"Gender is irrelevant," Zumarra said with an impatient snap. "The point is that your magic won't be enough, Shivnath. Necrovar has grown strong, even in a prison that was meant to sap his powers and prevent him from wielding.

He's gathered mortal followers. He's sent shadowbeasts back to Selaras. They have infiltrated my land. The Galantasa is weakening!" Her voice had grown louder with each word, and suddenly she found herself shouting at her siblings.

"We have to do something before it's too late! That was our mistake last time—we waited too long, and we were forced to trust a creature who didn't deserve to be trusted. Valerion's involvement made us turn to a dangerous magic, one we didn't understand."

"Perhaps *you* didn't understand it," Shivnath retorted, rather more nastily than Zumarra thought was necessary.

"Regardless of whether any of us can truly understand it, we couldn't *control* it. And because we lost control, we also lost the dragons. Because of Valerion's foolishness, we almost destroyed the world. If we hope to defeat the Shadow this time, we must join our powers together and put our weight behind a being of *unanimous* choice—a being worthy of our trust."

Silence settled in the cave as the echoes of Zumarra's anger died away. She glared at her brethren, the nostrils of her wide nose flaring with passion.

"You have a point, sister," Shivnath said at length in a strained voice. "I should have kept you informed of my activities. It's true that I've been watching the mortal for years, but I wasn't able to communicate with her before now. She recently had an . . . accident that allowed me to intervene with her, and I had to act at once. There was no time to consult. But you need to believe me when I say that Keriya Nameless *must* be the one to face Necrovar."

"Keriya *Nameless*?" The feathers of Naero's neck bristled in fury and he snapped his hawklike beak. "Do you mean to tell us your chosen vessel is a *human*?"

"Yes," said Shivnath, daring him to complain.

Naero was contemptuous of humans, and with good cause. During the mass monster killings of the Seventh Age, humans had driven his native race, the gryphons, into extinction. He hadn't trusted them ever since, not even his own people. Despite his prejudice, he had the presence of mind to remain quiet, probably because of the stare Shivnath was giving him. Zumarra herself was distrustful of humans—though she liked them as far as Galantrians went—but if Shivnath had been staring at *her* like that, she wouldn't have said anything either.

"How is it possible?" she asked, choosing a tactful approach to voice the thousand concerns that had bubbled up within her at her sister's pronouncement. "The binding laws forbid us from meddling with mortals."

"I found a loophole," was the stony reply.

"And I suppose you chose an earth wielder?" Zumarra riposted scathingly. Shivnath's lightless eyes locked onto her own, and a shiver rippled across Zumarra's spine. She raised herself a little higher so she could stare down at the dragon god again. She'd been slouching.

"She is from Aeria, but the girl has no traces of earthmagic in her soul."

"What?" both Zumarra and Naero gasped.

"If she has no powers besides the ones you gave her—"

"I didn't say she has no powers," Shivnath interjected, overriding Naero's outburst. "I merely said she has no earthmagic. She has the ability to speak with dragons—she is the only *rheenaar* on Selaras."

"But surely this is also a magic you bestowed upon her," said Zumarra. "One can only become a *rheenaar* through interaction with a dragon."

"More importantly, she can't do anything useful with that archaic talent," snapped Naero. "Don't tell me you've

bought into this nonsense the humans are buzzing about. Zumarra's pet foreseer had one hazy vision of a dragon returning to Allentria—"

"Sebaris Wavewould is the most powerful oracle our empire has produced in centuries," growled Zumarra.

"Forgive my unseemly bluntness," he retorted, "but the dragons are never coming back."

"Necrovar is back, and that was also never supposed to happen!" Zumarra swung her head around to glare at Shivnath, who was being unnaturally quiet. "Tell him, Shivnath. If the darkness returns, so must the light. My oracle's vision shouldn't be discounted."

"While Necrovar has grown strong, the dragons have grown weak," Shivnath said slowly. "It would take nothing short of a miracle for one to escape the Etherworld."

Naero puffed himself up and glared at Zumarra. "There, you see?"

"If you are so certain the dragons won't return," Zumarra hissed at her sister, "then why did you make that mortal a *rheenaar*?"

"Her being a *rheenaar* allows me to bypass the binding laws. I can now communicate telepathically with her and keep track of her. That already puts her leagues ahead of anyone you two might have considered."

"What if she's weak?" asked Naero. "Necrovar will use those telepathic powers against her. He will envelop her mind and infiltrate her thoughts. He will break her as easily as he broke that fool Helkryvt."

Zumarra was about to agree with her brother when she caught sight of the look on Shivnath's face.

"Take that back," was all Shivnath said.

Zumarra was the Allentrian god of water. She was guardian of the Galantasa. She was one of the oldest and

most powerful wielders on Selaras. And right now she was absolutely terrified of her sister.

"Perhaps I spoke rashly, Shivnath, but I'm only thinking of the girl," Naero temporized. "I admit she could use telepathy to great effect against Necrovar, assuming she's been primed in the art. Can she control her powers? Have you trained her? If she doesn't know how to use her gifts, she will fall to the Shadow."

"She *will* face Necrovar. And she will do all that I wish her to do."

Naero clicked his beak shut. He didn't protest, but he looked unhappy with the way things were going. Zumarra couldn't say she was pleased with the situation either. Humans were weak wielders and prone to evil acts. That alone should make Shivnath more wary – yet there she was, sending a human girlchild out to fight Necrovar without any preparation, alone and improperly armed.

"She may be alone, but she will be well-armed for the task I have given her," said Shivnath. It took Zumarra a moment to realise Shivnath had been spying on her surface-thoughts. She stuffed everything into the back of her mind – everything except one very rude word for her sister.

"Lovely," Shivnath said dryly. "But your concerns lead me to my next point. One of the reasons I've asked you here is to request your aid. I want you to support Keriya Nameless with me."

"I will not," Naero stated in a voice that entertained no possibility of discussion.

Before he and Shivnath could begin another argument, a tremble ran through the mountain. Zumarra swayed and glanced at the entryway. Her whiskers quivered and the sensitive fins that ran down her back stiffened. She sensed a dark presence approaching.

"Valaan," breathed Shivnath. Naero rose to all fours. If he'd seemed tense before, it was nothing compared to what he looked like now. His golden-grey feathers, which merged smoothly into lush fur, stood on end. His ivory talons contracted, gouging scars into the rocky ground of Shivnath's home. Through the monstrous jaws of the cavern entrance, a shimmering haze appeared. The disturbance thickened, solidified, and took the form of their southern brother.

Valaan landed heavily before them. He'd once been a glory to behold, a majestic phoenix with fiery feathers that burned as brightly as the sun. Limping toward them now was a decrepit bird whose fires flickered sluggishly, as if every twist and flare of the flames was a struggle. His proud head was bowed with shame and exhaustion. Zumarra recoiled from the sight of him.

"Welcome, brother," said Shivnath, approaching and touching her snout to Valaan's beak. Zumarra couldn't understand how the dragon had forced herself to do that, not with the storm of black ash shedding from Valaan's feathers.

The phoenix god didn't speak. He cast his glittering purple gaze back and forth between Zumarra and Naero. When neither of them moved to complete the ceremony, he sighed.

"I shouldn't have expected anything else," he murmured. Zumarra winced; even his voice sounded blackened. "A charming greeting from my beloved family. You, Zumarra – you were never scared of anything, yet now you shy away from your own brother."

Mastering a strong impulse to vomit, Zumarra stretched out her long neck to touch her nose to Valaan's beak. She pulled back quickly – but not too quickly, so as to give the



impression she was unafraid. There was an oily feeling upon him, a feeling with which she was becoming all too familiar. Necro-threads had already lodged themselves in his soul.

"Welcome brother," she said, echoing Shivnath's words. "He has grown stronger." It wasn't a question, but Valaan nodded.

"And you, Naero? Always so overly-proud and confident? Do you not wish to greet me?"

"I was never 'overly-proud,' brother," spat Naero, sounding as if he were now ashamed to call Valaan so. "I always had love for my state, a love that was well-deserved. Unlike you, I take care of my land."

"Naero," Shivnath said furiously, but the damage had been done. With a burst of golden radiance, Valaan's feathers began burning with something close to their former glory, though black flames were now distinguishable in the blaze, dancing across his body.

"You dare blame this upon me?" cried Valaan, spreading his wings in outrage. "You have the audacity to suggest Necrovar's return is *my* fault? We all took part in creating the Etherworld. Should we not all take the blame for making the Shadow's prison too weak? You sit there and imply that he has retaken the Fironem as a result of my neglect—I ought to roast you where you sit!"

"I don't take kindly to threats," said Naero, rearing up to square off against the phoenix. "Of course it's your fault; why else would Necrovar have reappeared in the Fironem, of all places? You've always been jealous of the other states, so you've never properly cared for yours."

Valaan let loose a piercing note and spit a molten fireball at Naero. Naero dodged just in time, though the tip of his tufted tail was singed.

"Traitor," bellowed Naero. "I know you sent

shadowbeasts into my domain to destroy the Erastate. You are laced all over with necromagic—don't pretend you aren't doing the Shadow's bidding!" He flapped his wings and two twisters raged to life, filling Shivnath's cavern with howling wind.

Zumarra was ready to vaporise herself and leave right then and there, when everything stopped. She realised she'd been huddling in her corner, trying to make herself small—which was no mean feat, seeing as she was more than a hundred hands long—and immediately straightened.

Shivnath stood between her brothers, glowing eerily. Her eyes had gone completely black as she wielded, and her face bore an expression that would have made Necrovar himself cringe.

"Fools," she hissed. "Do you know what you are doing? What you have done? Your human kings are unstable enough as it is. You may well have incited a war just now because of your arrogance and stupidity."

Naero strained against something, and Zumarra embraced her source to get a better understanding of what was happening. Once she was in tune with the magic in her soul, the threads that Shivnath wielded became visible to her. Her sister had shielded both her brothers' sources, preventing them from using their powers. She was now using airmagic to bind each of them in place.

Every god could wield all twelve magics, but usually they elected to stick with their native element. Shivnath had always had a love for crossing boundaries, even unspoken ones; while she was breaking no law in wielding a magic other than her own, there was a certain distastefulness in what she was doing that made Zumarra's gut twist.

"I release you now," Shivnath told them, "and I expect you to be civil to each other. Allentria is fragile and the

balance hangs by a thread; you cannot quarrel any more." Zumarra watched Shivnath release her brothers' sources. The dragon's amethyst slitted pupils returned as she dropped her threads, broadening slowly across the dark expanse of her sable orbs.

"I'm leaving," snarled Valaan. "I didn't come here to be attacked by my only allies."

"Valaan, before you go you must pledge yourself to Keriya Nameless, the mortal I have selected to face Necrovar," Shivnath said sharply. "You must vow to help her reach Mount Arax and pass through the Rift."

Valaan deliberated in silence for a long moment. He and Shivnath stared at each other, glittering magenta eyes meeting dead black ones. He was the first to look away; he fluttered his wings in a shrug and turned toward the exit.

"You have my word. I vow to support anyone who stands against the Shadow," he announced. "I can only hope your vessel will succeed where all others have failed."

Shivnath looked to Naero. "She may be a human, but she is our best chance."

"I'll support her," he agreed grudgingly, though it looked like it cost him everything to say it.

"I too will support the girl," Zumarra said preemptively, since the last thing she wanted was a lecture from Shivnath. "But Shivnath, will your powers alone be enough to defeat Necrovar? That remains my biggest concern."

The dragon tilted her head and blinked. "Well, by pledging your support to her I expected you to lend *your* powers to our cause, as well."

Naero let loose an enraged growl. Zumarra's jaw dropped. But to her shock, Valaan stepped forward without hesitation. His fires flared anew as he wielded, and from the tips of his ruby-gold plumes wafted a shimmering ghostly

essence. A portion of his magic, glowing in every spectral hue of red and orange and yellow, seeped away from him to hover in mid-air.

"I've pledged my support to you, sister, and I won't go back on my word," he proclaimed. "I deliver to your safekeeping this small portion of my soul. It contains threads that are yet untainted by the Shadow. May you and your vessel keep it safer than I have." He hung his head and stepped back.

Naero hissed and spat and made a fuss, but eventually he wielded the same spell. A mass of threads—white and grey and rainbow pearly—rose from him and coalesced in the air like a nebulous opal gem. He glared at Shivnath and refused to so much as look at Valaan as he resumed his place in the corner. Shivnath turned to Zumarra, who knew what she had to do—what Shivnath had tricked her into doing.

It was the most terrible feeling in the world. She reached deep within herself and began to wield. Using her magic to pull her source apart was the hardest thing she'd ever done, partly because it was one of the most complex spells that could be performed, partly because she didn't want to give up even the tiniest portion of her power.

But she did it.

She delved into the core of her existence, the centre of her soul, and called upon the magic that fuelled her. It was the magic of the gods, the First Magic, and no one, not even Zumarra—probably not even Shivnath the know-it-all—understood exactly what it did. It was the magic of creation and destruction; in fact, it was the magic that had created the Etherworld ten ages ago. It was powerful and deadly, and it frightened Zumarra whenever she wielded it. Ever since the gods had lost control of it that fateful night, she'd secretly feared she would lose control of it again.

The threads seemed to wield themselves, and once the process had begun, Zumarra found she was unable to stop. The magic flowing out of her source was channelled back into the tangle of glowing energy. One by one she cut out a group of threads, severing a chunk of her power.

She experienced the unpleasant sensation that all her organs were flooding into the space that the portion of her power had occupied, trying to fill the hole. Next a prickling feeling spread across her snakelike form. Shining blue threads seeped from her flesh, escaping and gliding across the cave to hover before Shivnath. They swirled and writhed in graceful whorls like a miniature sea.

Zumarra stared at the part of her soul that she'd willingly exorcised. She wanted to snatch it back and reclaim it for herself, but she had pledged it to Shivnath. And her word, once given, was binding.

"Thank you for your sacrifices," whispered Shivnath, sadness tinging her tone. "My plan will succeed in the end."

"It had better," Naero growled under his breath.

"Now I leave," Valaan announced, limping to the cave mouth. His feathers burned even more weakly, and when he leapt into the air to return to the Fironem, he plummeted before working up enough strength to flap away.

Zumarra stretched her neck out to watch him as he flew off. Contaminated with necromagic or not, he was still her brother and she was concerned for his wellbeing. After a few moments of obvious effort he faded away, becoming nothing more than a glimmering smudge in the sky. She wasn't sure how he managed that trick with fire-threads; it was much easier with water.

"For all you've asked of us, Shivnath, you've been awfully vague with details. Is the plan to simply lend our powers to this vessel and hope she can use them to kill

Necrovar?" Naero said as Zumarra retracted her head and faced her remaining siblings.

"More or less."

"What if Necrovar kills her? This is a dangerous game to play. All four Allentrian gods will be vulnerable to contamination if she should fail in her task."

"You must have faith, brother."

Zumarra wasn't overly pleased with the plan. But, as Shivnath pointed out when Naero voiced a series of objections, it was the only plan they had. Unfortunately, she was all too right. Restricted as they were by the binding laws, there was hardly much more they *could* do.

"How will you transfer those to the mortal?" asked Naero, nodding his head at the three misty bubbles of magic. Shivnath was twirling one of her claws beneath them and they were orbiting in response, faster and faster.

"Let me worry about that."

"You'd better bloody well be careful with them," snarled Zumarra.

"Fear not," was all Shivnath said.

"As informative as this meeting has been, I must also take my leave," growled the gryphon god, rising to his feet and inclining his avian head. "As you pointed out earlier, Shivnath, my rash actions against Valaan have caused some disturbance in my land. King Windscore is upset. I cannot tell what happened, but I know there is discord."

"Farewell, brother," said Shivnath, bowing her head in ceremony.

"Farewell, brother," echoed Zumarra, with much more snap in her tone. Naero turned and broke into a canter. He spread his wings, the feathery tips skimming the edges of the fang-like stalagmites peppering the exit, and leapt into the sky. Immediately he wielded to turn himself invisible.

"It is time that I, too, departed," said Zumarra, her scales clicking softly as she began slithering away.

"Farewell, sister," Shivnath said quietly.

Zumarra embraced her depleted magicsource and opened the threads of her body wide. Effort shone on her face as she re-wove herself to become liquid and then vapour, but she didn't care. She shouldn't be struggling with this—she'd only donated a fraction of her power. Still, she reasoned, weaving this spell in the open air of the Smarlands was more difficult than doing it in the lake of her own domain.

<Farewell, Shivnath,> she thought as she floated in the cavern.

She drifted out of the cave, stirring the heavy fog to push her onwards. Then she was soaring away, back to her own state.

\* \* \*

Shivnath had broken her promise.

She'd looked in Valaan's mind—that much had been decided on unanimously by all four of them—to see how much influence Necrovar had gained over her brother. But she had also looked in Naero's mind to see what had put him so on edge.

She had promised herself she wouldn't pry any more than was necessary. Looking into Valaan's thoughts was *very* necessary, and looking into Naero's thoughts had become so. Touching his source to cut him off from wielding had opened his mind further, and she'd seen deeper than otherwise would have been possible. It seemed he'd been fearing open conflict with Valaan for some time. Harvim Windscore didn't need a reason to fight the Fironians—though Necrovar's return was as good a reason as he could have hoped for—he only needed an excuse. That confirmed

Shivnath's suspicions. It was no longer a question of if the Erastate and the Fironem would be going to war, it was a question of *when*.

Her brothers had been one thing, but there really hadn't been cause to look into Zumarra's mind. Shivnath just hadn't been able to resist the temptation. She'd promised herself she wouldn't pry, but that was exactly what she'd done.

*Why* had she done it? To assure herself that her sister would be amenable to giving up a portion of her powers? That was a poor excuse. All of her siblings were desperate; they would have been amenable to a plan that involved a pebble fighting Necrovar if they thought the pebble had even the slightest chance of winning.

Perhaps Shivnath had done it to ascertain where they stood on the issue of the dragon. But she didn't need telepathic tricks to know that Zumarra desired the dragon as a prize of glory and honour, a reward for her oracle's foresight; or to know that Naero, for all his scoffing and disparagement, secretly hoped a dragon would return so he could use it as a weapon; or to know that Valaan was clinging to the foolish hope that a dragon might be able to save him from the Shadow Lord's clutches.

The dragon had to remain a secret—not only because of what Shivnath intended to do, but because if anyone discovered him they would try to use him for their own devices. Her siblings were no exception, particularly because Zumarra and Naero disliked the current plan of action. They were doubting.

But they'd already pledged their powers and support to Keriya. And now that the pieces of Shivnath's scheme were beginning to fall into place, that was all she needed.



# AUTUMN

Zumarra, Naero and Valaan were doing the unthinkable: they were meeting without Shivnath. It was the first time one of the Allentrian gods had been intentionally exempt from a summit, but desperate times called for desperate measures – and these were indeed desperate times.

“We know why we’re here,” said Zumarra, a strange mixture of apprehension and smugness swelling within her. She was apprehensive because she feared what might happen if Shivnath discovered she’d been omitted from the guest list; she was smug because it had been her idea to do the omitting.

Also for the first time, they were meeting in the lake. Well, not *in* the lake – atop the narrow, spiny mountain that rose from the lake’s centre. This cave served as Zumarra’s secondary resting place, and it was just as good as Shivnath’s dreary old hole for momentous summits and casual godly get-togethers. Granted, it was a fair sight damper than Argos Moor, but who could fault it? It had waterfalls cascading through its craggy depths and deep pools filled with lovely blue-green algae.

“We are here because Shivnath deceived us,” hissed Naero. He’d situated himself as far from his siblings as possible, crouching like a gargoyle upon a section of stone that had been made smooth by the constant pounding of a waterfall ages ago.

Though his statement wasn’t entirely true, it certainly felt like it was. First Shivnath had tricked the three of them

into pledging their powers to Keriya Nameless. Whether she had lied a second time was to be determined by their discussion tonight.

"She did not deceive," Valaan pointed out from his perch near the entrance, where he was trying to keep his black-stained fires dry. His red-gold nimbus illuminated their surroundings, mixing with the blue light of the rising Oldmoon filtering through the entrance. "She did what she had to do to ensure her vessel would have enough power to stand against the Shadow. Shivnath's actions were misguided, but I do not perceive the crime you two seem to see."

"I imagine that's because you're in rather a different position than we are," Naero retorted. "Exorcising a portion of your magic was the wisest thing for you to do—for us, it might have been the worst."

"This is not what we should be focusing on," Zumarra interjected before either of her brothers could say or do something unforgivably dangerous. "We've pledged our powers and our souls are split. It is over and done. Shivnath has faith that the girl will triumph against Necrovar, and we must do whatever we can to ensure she does. No—we are here to discuss the dragon."

"I must say, I'm not surprised," boasted Naero. Zumarra rolled her slitted eyes, but managed to keep her rude comments to herself. How many times had the gryphon god scorned her oracle's vision? How many times had he insisted no dragon could escape the dark pull of the Etherworld? He'd been the most shocked of all the Allentrian guardians when the drackling had revealed its presence in Doryn Fen.

Zumarra would never forget that day. She'd felt a soul-shattering surge of energy, and a mental brush with her siblings told her each of them had felt it, too. Quickly she'd

expanded her consciousness until it blanketed the entirety of the Galantasa. She'd deduced that there were shadowbeasts lurking in the rainforest—for while she could sense every water-thread, every living organism that contained even the tiniest shred of her magic, Necrovar's minions came up as spots of void in her mental picture—and she'd sensed her mortals going about their business, blissfully unaware of the near-cataclysmic torrent of energy spilling across Allentria. Then she'd sensed a brightness, a mental signature she'd never thought to sense again.

"And of course, this explains everything," Naero was saying in the background. Zumarra shook her head and strove to maintain an expression of polite interest as he prattled on. "This is why Necrovar's influence is so strong: the balance has been preserved. The powers of both darkness and light have returned to our world."

"Yes . . . but the appearance of this young dragon leads us to a dangerous topic," said Valaan.

"Shivnath," the three of them murmured in unison.

"Remember how neatly she avoided answering Zumarra's question about the oracle's vision?" asked Naero. "Never a straight answer from the green brute. All she said was that it would take a miracle for a dragon to return to Selaras. Her phrasing—and her increased caginess of late—begs the question: did she know?"

The phoenix god shook his head. "What possible cause would Shivnath have to keep that information from us? A dragon is exactly what we need to defeat Necrovar."

"My very thoughts," Naero agreed. Valaan frowned in confusion, but the gryphon didn't elaborate.

Zumarra cleared her throat. She settled herself into a more comfortable position and primly arranged the coils of her scaly body, revelling in the glory of being summit

leader. "The way I see it, there are three possibilities. One: Shivnath did not tell us about the dragon because Shivnath herself did not know it had escaped the Etherworld."

Naero snorted. "A likely story. Shivnath knows everything. And when you take into consideration the fact that she made the human a *rheenar* months before we sensed the dragon's presence, you've got all the proof you need."

"Shivnath's reasons for bestowing the gift are sound, even without the dragon factored into the equation," argued Valaan. "It doesn't prove anything."

"Why must you always side with her?" the gryphon griped.

"Because she's always been a staunch ally. You will not find a more dedicated guardian anywhere on Selaras. Despite her recent questionable decisions and her unfortunate predilection for secrets, she has earned our trust."

"By all the Fates, she's *one* of them," snarled Naero. "They're connected through their hive mind. She must have known that dragon was back. She would have sensed it."

"Shivnath is a god; she therefore cannot be part of the collective consciousness of the dragons. It would break at least three binding laws if she were," Valaan said sagely. "If she *did* have a connection to the hive mind, she would have known. Seeing as she doesn't, we must give her the benefit of the doubt. We were all blind to the creature's presence until Keriya Nameless brought him to our attention."

Naero obviously didn't think much of this explanation, but said nothing in rebuttal. Zumarra credited Valaan's reasoning and was pleased to hear the phoenix was still as sharp as he'd ever been, despite the fact that he looked markedly worse. A black haze hung upon him, fairly dripping off of his fiery plumes, and his eyes had lost their spark. The purple was fading from his irises and his

expression was dull and tired.

"Two," she continued, trying not to dwell upon her brother's disturbing appearance, "Shivnath knew of the dragon's return, but she didn't tell us because she wanted to protect him. As soon as my human king shared his oracle's vision, Empress Aldelphia put plans in motion to obtain the drackling and use it to her advantage. Our sister may have wanted to preserve the last of her race. An expendable human vessel, stuffed full of borrowed magic, would be a better option than sending a child of Shivnath's own species to war against Necrovar."

Valaan nodded in acceptance. "Much more likely."

"Your argument that Shivnath didn't know will be null and void if you endorse this theory," Naero reminded him, a trace of a sneer in his deep voice.

"My only argument was that Shivnath wouldn't deceive us purposefully – or, if she did, that her rationale would be logical."

*"This is logical?"*

"For Shivnath, yes. It has been some seven thousand cycles since Necrovar and the dragons were imprisoned. What kind of a sad and lonely existence has that been for our sister? She wants to protect her kin. Naero, would you not do the same for a gryphon if one were to magically reappear?"

"I would not. I should hope I'd have more sense than to endanger my state, my country and my world for my own personal desires."

Though he proudly puffed out his chest as he proclaimed this, Zumarra couldn't help but notice that Naero's eyes shone more brightly than usual and his talons constricted in agitation. She knew he would be singing a different tune if he were in Shivnath's position. If there were a chance for

him to save even one of his own race, Naero would take it without a moment's hesitation.

Valaan was too broken to argue with his brother. Zumarra breathed a silent sigh of relief, but Naero seemed disappointed that no fight was going to ensue. He ruffled his feathers and fluttered his wings before tilting his head to Zumarra.

"You said you had three possibilities. Tell us the last one."

"Yes," Zumarra said slowly, not knowing where to begin. "The last possibility is that Shivnath knew and didn't tell us—not because she wanted to protect the dragon, but because she had devised a scheme she thought we wouldn't support."

This didn't elicit the response Zumarra had expected. She'd thought Naero would be righteously indignant at the suggestion and Valaan would staunchly maintain that Shivnath would never do such a thing. He'd claim it was ludicrous to entertain such a thought. In fact, Zumarra had been hoping he would say something to that effect, because she didn't want to believe such a thing was possible.

Unfortunately, as all three guardians knew, it was the most plausible explanation. Naero's eyes narrowed and he stared down at his scaly forepaws in thoughtful silence. The black mist around Valaan seemed to intensify, blurring his fires. He was the first to speak.

"Before we jump to conclusions, we must ask what Shivnath's motivation would be."

"She barely needs one," said Naero. "She's hidden things from us before."

"I'm not talking about keeping the dragon a secret, I'm talking about what plan she could have possibly devised that she thought we wouldn't support. Shivnath has never

hidden anything without good cause. During the Great War she kept secrets only to keep us out of her personal battles – to protect us.”

“She kept us in the dark to save face when her grand plans went awry. You and I have thrown blame and hurtful words at each other, Valaan, but the truth of the matter is everything that transpired at the end of the Second Age was Shivnath’s fault.”

“Naero! You go too far,” chided Zumarra, remembering her role as summit leader. For his part, Naero managed to look properly contrite – for all of half an instant.

“Perhaps I have,” he said coolly, “but it was Shivnath who lobbied for the creation of the Etherworld, Shivnath who told us to support Valerion Equilumos in any and all of his endeavours, and Shivnath who wove the spell that imprisoned the Shadow and the dragons. Therefore the loss of her kin is almost entirely her fault.”

Zumarra liked that argument because it made her, personally, less guilty. But as nice as it felt to apportion all the blame to Shivnath, she knew she was just as much to blame as her dragon sister. She said as much to Naero, who snapped his beak in a harassed fashion.

“Even if it isn’t true, we all know Shivnath feels this way,” he said. “It matters not what is fact and what is fiction – if Shivnath feels guilt for the imprisonment of the dragons, then Shivnath will go to extreme lengths to avenge them. She probably sees this drackling as the solution.”

“Which would mean our sister also intends to use the dragon,” said Zumarra. “Not as a saviour, but as a *sacrifice*. She means for him to perish in the war. His death will once again throw off the balance between light and dark, allowing Necrovar to be destroyed.”

“And with Necrovar gone, there will be no more need for

the Etherworld," Valaan finished. "The spell will dissolve. All who were imprisoned will be set free."

The gods stared around at one another in silence, appalled at where their conclusions had led them.

"Shivnath *did* have a plan," whispered Zumarra. "It was just a bigger, more dangerous plan than any of us could have imagined."

This revelation was especially troubling because of the fact the drackling was now in grave peril. Yesterday he'd been captured by men who appeared to be Necrovar's supporters—which was the main reason why Zumarra had called this emergency meeting—and he was being taken north, right toward her lake.

"Does his capture play into Shivnath's plan, or against it?" Naero wondered when Zumarra brought it up.

"You're assuming Shivnath's plan is to have the drackling killed," said Valaan. "We don't yet know for certain."

"Is there any doubt in your mind?"

Valaan didn't respond, but the slight slump of his flickering wings told Zumarra he'd already resigned himself to her third explanation.

"If the humans were taking the drackling to Necrovar in order for the Shadow to kill him, I would say it fits neatly into a scheme to offer him up as a sacrifice," said Zumarra. "But they are not. They're carting him north, away from the Rift and their master. I fear they have worse intentions for him."

"Worse?" Naero echoed. "Worse than delivering him to Necrovar like a lamb to the slaughter?"

"There are worse fates than death," Valaan murmured. Zumarra winced, for the crack in his voice resonated within her as if it were the very breaking of his heart. "A human mage with access to Necrovar's magic needs only a drop of



dragon blood to create darksalm."

Naero shook his head, as if his refusal to give such a horrible idea credence would prevent it from being true. "The knowledge of how to mix darksalm died ten ages ago."

"But its creator has returned," whispered Zumarra.

"He cannot, under any circumstances, be allowed to obtain a soul of lightmagic," said Valaan. He took a step forward, looking at Naero. "Brother, we cannot cast this idea aside because it is too unpleasant for us to consider. If there's a risk that the humans intend to make darksalm, the most dangerous, most deadly —"

"I don't need a history lesson," snapped Naero, leaning away from Valaan's approach. Zumarra couldn't tell whether he was afraid of the necromagical taint within the phoenix or whether he was just irked by his brother's plaintive tone. "I remember the horrors of darksalm."

"Then we must rescue the dragon from these men," Zumarra declared.

Naero heaved an exasperated sigh. "How exactly do you plan to do that? He is now in the custody of mortals, so it has become a mortal affair. There's also the unfortunate fact that he appears to be bonding with the *rheenar* — that makes him as good as mortal. As such, the binding laws will prohibit us from meddling with him."

Zumarra growled and hung her head. She stared at the cave floor as she pondered over her options.

"We could ask Shivnath for help," Valaan ventured. "She always finds a loophole when she needs to."

"No," said Zumarra.

"Why not?"

"She can't discover we met without her." This was the thinnest of thin excuses, and all of them knew it. In truth, Zumarra didn't want to ask the dragon god for help. She

was a goddess in her own right, just as powerful and just as clever as her eastern sister. She ought to be able to figure this out.

"Do you fear her wrath so much?" asked Valaan.

"I fear nothing," Zumarra stated coolly. "But there's also nothing to be gained by running to Shivrath like snivelling children. This happened in the Galantasa, and as guardian of this land I vow I shall rectify it, in accordance with the third binding law."

"What if you can't?" Naero challenged. "Would you risk Necrovar stealing the dragon's soul just to nurse your own pride?"

Zumarra drew a deep breath through her nostrils and forced herself to remain calm. Naero was such a hypocrite. He was one to talk about pride. Still, she was summit leader and she was above uncontrolled fits of violence, unlike her idiot brothers.

"If the three of us together can't come up with a viable solution, then we will consult Shivrath," she returned stiffly. "In any event, I'm sure the lizard knows what's happening and already has a plan of her own."

"She always does," muttered Naero.

Valaan's head suddenly shot up. "The girl," he said. Zumarra and Naero turned to stare at him. "The mortal vessel, Keriya Nameless. It's why Shivrath chose her: for situations just like this! We can meddle with her. We can use her as our tool to save the dragon."

"Exactly my thoughts, brother," said Zumarra. She smiled at the phoenix, though deep down she wished she'd been the first to suggest it.

"You need to be careful with that level of intrusion," Naero warned. "*Rheonar* or not, the girl is human and is currently in the custody of other humans. It's a dangerous

grey area. You'd be better off trying to tamper with the dragon at that point."

"I think not. She's our loophole," said Zumarra. "While the bond is making the dragon more human, it is making her less so. She is our sleeping agent, or secret weapon amidst the mortals. The seventh binding law states that which happens through mortal or natural acts cannot be undone—"

"Which means you can't just swoop in and remove the dragon *or* the girl from the possession of these men," Naero barked.

"—but we can lend the girl strength," Zumarra continued. For ages she had been impressed with Shivnath's ability to manipulate and outsmart the binding laws, but when one came right down to it, it wasn't difficult at all. "By virtue of the magic Shivnath bestowed upon Keriya, she is no longer fully mortal. She's something in-between, something we can work with. Even from what little I've observed of her, I can see she's clever. And the dragon—well, that goes without saying. Given a fighting chance, he's more than capable of defeating the buffoons who captured him."

"He wasn't very effective the first time he fought them," muttered Naero.

"That was the fault of his bond with the girl," said Valaan. "He was under the blinding influence of Keriya's emotions."

"An excellent reason *not* to rely on that fool of a human."

"An excellent reason to help the human save herself and the drackling," Zumarra corrected the gryphon in an admirably patient tone. "We can strengthen her mind. We can brace her when she uses her telepathic abilities."

"A bad plan," Naero maintained, stubborn and argumentative trog that he was.

"Our *only* plan," Valaan countered.

"A plan that adheres to the binding laws, a plan that leaves Keriya and her bondmate to their own devices, a plan that was devised without Shivnath's supervision." Zumarra nodded, pleased with herself. "I'd say it's a good plan."

"We'll have to watch them," Naero grumbled. "If anything should go wrong—"

"I will call another summit," Zumarra promised. "And invite Shivnath."

After an argument that had centred on *saving* the dragon, it was hard to make the transition back to thinking of him as a sacrifice. Since they'd resolved their meeting's most pressing issue—the immediate danger Keriya and the dragon had landed themselves in—their thoughts returned to their sister.

There was more to be discussed on Shivnath's recent misbehaviour, and Shivnath's misbehaviour during the Second Age, and Shivnath's misbehaviour in general. Valaan fretted over the drackling's fate. Zumarra confessed she had her own reservations about it. Naero was belligerent and argued every point that was made. But in the end they agreed that, since the dragon's death would be for the greater good and would pave the path toward a balanced world, no intervention would be made.

"I do understand why she would keep this from us," Valaan admitted as he finally made preparations to depart. "When one thinks on it, Shivnath is doing a terrible thing."

"She made a choice. Sacrificing the drackling will allow Necrovar to be destroyed, and the rest of the dragons will return," said Zumarra. She didn't dare draw near Valaan for the parting ceremony, so riddled with necromagic was he. He seemed to understand this, and unlike last time he didn't press the matter. Naero had already left without so

much as a goodbye to either one of them, not bothering with decorum.

"True enough." Valaan flapped his wings—Zumarra winced when she saw how laboured his breath became at the slightest physical exertion—and lifted off the stone floor. "Though part of me wonders why she would bother to keep such an idea private if it were for the sake of destroying Necrovar once and for all."

He departed southwards, shimmering out of visibility, leaving only a smear of darkness in the starlit sky to mark his position. He probably hadn't intended his parting words to be so ponderous, but a sense of foreboding stole over Zumarra as she considered his statement.

She left the cave and glided back down toward the lake, which reflected the Oldmoon and the rising Bloodmoon like a silver mirror. If Shivnath's intentions were pure, why *had* she kept the dragon secret? Why go to the trouble of deceiving her siblings to lend their powers to Keriya Nameless under false pretences?

Why, why, why . . . it seemed there were endless questions and no real answers. Zumarra endeavoured to put her mind at ease—something easier said than done in such desperate times. It was no good dwelling on troublesome thoughts, for she had vowed to stick with the accord she'd made with her brothers. She would not confront Shivnath about this.

"A dragon always has a plan," she reminded herself. "Shivnath is no exception to that rule." Her sister was doubtless sitting alone in Argos Moor, plotting something complex and brilliant.

The real question was, who was Shivnath plotting *against*?

# WINTER

While the battle had been short, the losses had been resounding. Necrovar's influence—and his infiltration of the Allentrian government—was greater than any of the guardians had imagined. Discounting the Fironem, the Galantasa had suffered worst. Three months after the Shadow's servants had mixed darksalm, Zumarra's people were still recovering from the attack on their capitol. That was another day that would be forever burned into her memory. The pain she'd felt, both physical and emotional, was beyond anything she'd experienced in the last ten ages. She'd lived a long life and she'd seen the worst the world had to offer. But watching her mortals burn in the aftermath of the bomb's explosion—and not being able to help them—had driven her to the edge of madness.

It was then that Zumarra had despaired. She'd been certain Allentria would fall to the Shadow. She'd lost all faith in Keriya Nameless and young Thorion Sveltorious. She had given Shivnath a vicious tongue-lashing, which hadn't affected the dragon god in the slightest. Her sister's attitude about the whole situation had been cold and detached, and her counter-argument had merely been to wonder why Zumarra hadn't raised these concerns months ago.

Zumarra had asked herself that same question countless times in the days following the attack. She'd had doubts from the moment Shivnath had revealed her plan—why hadn't she spoken up when she'd had the chance? Loath though she was to admit it, even to herself in the secrecy and

solitude of her lake, it was because Shivnath intimidated her. The dragon had tricked and bullied her siblings into agreeing to an ill-conceived plan, and none of them had objected because they feared not only the might of the Shadow, but the wrath of their sister.

Zumarra hadn't been so angry at Shivnath since the Great War. She'd spent weeks fretting in her lake as she watched Keriya make terrible choice after terrible choice, all the while cursing Shivnath's name. She didn't *hate* Shivnath — she never would, for they were family — but she had grown to hate herself for her own cowardice.

Things had reached a critical point when the girl had encountered the bogspectre. That creature had been a thorn in Zumarra's side for centuries. She had no idea where it had come from or what its true nature was; all she knew was that it was a cancer, a dark stain on the good name of her state. It was stuffed full of twisted threads, but she'd never been able to ascertain whether or not it was a servant of Necrovar. She'd feared for the worst when it had attacked Keriya's group, but it hadn't harmed them. In fact, it had given Keriya a most peculiar sword — a weapon enchanted with a spell just as tangled and confusing as the threads within the bogspectre. Even when Zumarra put effort into examining the ancient blade, she hadn't been able to unravel its secrets.

Then the unthinkable had happened. Shadowbeasts had tracked Keriya down and Necrovar himself had appeared to confront her. Not his physical body, of course — he wasn't strong enough to leave the Etherworld, but he had more than enough strength to meld his consciousness with his demon-slaves. Zumarra had sensed his mental presence as a poison, an oil slick spreading across her pure and lovely water-threads, enveloping and tainting them. She'd been

sure it was the end.

But against all odds, Keriya and Thorion had defeated Necrovar.

Looking back upon it, Zumarra still wasn't sure how it was possible. She'd been monitoring the fight—like all catastrophes, she had been unable to look away as the horrors unfolded—and something had changed within the small mortal from one moment to the next. Before, Keriya had felt empty; she didn't come up as a void spot like the shadowbeasts, but there was no magic within her, and her mental signature was but a pitiful ripple in the vast ocean of threads that fed into Zumarra. Those ripples had suddenly become a tsunami, and Keriya had unleashed a flood of raw power against Necrovar. Zumarra had recognised the feel of the threads the girl wielded, for they reminded her of Shivnath—it seemed she had finally tapped into her borrowed powers. Energy had poured forth from her and with a final blast of magic she had destroyed the Shadow. His presence had vanished like a black star imploding.

Keriya and Thorion had escaped that battle with little more than a few scratches to show for it. Zumarra didn't understand, but she knew better than to ask questions of miracles. There were things in this universe that were incomprehensible even to the oldest and wisest gods. Whatever Keriya had done, it had been enough to defeat the Shadow. And that was enough for Zumarra.

The only question now was when Zumarra would be getting her powers back from the girl. Shivnath hadn't specified a timeframe for the return of her siblings' magics. It had been well over a full cycle of the Oldmoon since Keriya's altercation with Necrovar, and Shivnath hadn't made a single mention of it. In fact she hadn't even commented on the battle itself.



"Just takes it all in stride, doesn't she?" Zumarra grumbled to herself, her long whiskers swirling lazily around her in the depths of her watery abyss. "Knows everything, sees it in her scrying spring, never has to worry the way we do. Fates forbid she should have the courtesy to let her family in on her secrets and put their minds at ease."

Her body spasmed as her muscles cramped in pain. The pains had subsided drastically since Necrovar's death, and what she was feeling was residual radiation from the Fironem. The damage done to Valaan and his state had been severe. It would take years, if not decades, to right the imbalance Necrovar had created. In the meantime, while the phoenix god was still weak, the other Allentrian guardians would continue to ease his suffering by sharing his burden. Zumarra didn't mind it so much anymore, and she closed her eyes in acceptance as she let the sensation undulate through her. She was happy to be part of the empire's healing process.

Suddenly a mental summons wormed its way into her mind, snaking through her consciousness just as the pain had swept through her body. But this wasn't a call from Shivnath—it was coming from the west.

<Naero?> she thought, frowning in consternation. She couldn't remember the last time her gryphon brother had initiated a mental connection with any of his kin.

<Greetings, sister,> came the rumble of his mindvoice.

<What's wrong?> Anxiety flooded her gut and at once she came up with a hundred terrible things that might have happened to him.

<Nothing life-threatening,> he assured her dryly, picking up on her concerns. <I wish to speak with you about recent events. I invite you to visit me so we may have a discussion. You may come at your leisure; neither Valaan nor Shivnath

will be attending.>

Zumarra frowned anew. What could Naero want to talk about? And why would he want to discuss things alone? Omitting Shivnath from their last summit had been a different matter—that had been necessary. Omitting two gods from a meeting struck her as suspicious, but she didn't object. She'd find out what he wanted soon enough.

She lashed her tail and propelled herself toward the surface of the lake, becoming one with the water as she did so. Her spell expanded and she turned to vapour as she broke the surface. A stiff wind was racing across the sky, and she allowed it to catch her and bear her away to the south and west.

Wielding and riding the high air currents, it didn't take her long to reach Naero's mountain plateau. She descended once the stone edifice became visible through the gloom of the misty night, and solidified herself on the flat rocky overlook facing the eastern plains. The plateau was a perfect hiding place for the gryphon god, for it was located on the tallest peak in the Erastate and was surrounded on all sides by sheer drops, thus ensuring no nosy mortals would ever come poking around.

Naero was waiting outside his cave, sitting back on his haunches with his tail curled around his paws. He inclined his head as she slithered toward him.

"Welcome, sister," he greeted her, leaning forward to touch noses in ceremony.

"You worried me," she returned sharply as she entered his home. It was dry and sandy—Zumarra hated sand. The granules lodged in her scales and made her itch. It occurred to her that she should have told him to come to the lake if he wanted to speak with her this badly. "What's so important that you had to summon me? And why haven't you invited

the others?"

Naero didn't respond at once. He followed her, trotting over to assume a perch on a throne-like protrusion of stone at the back of the grotto. Sitting upon it made him taller and forced Zumarra to draw herself up, stretching her neck until the hairs of her blue mane were strafing the cave's smooth ceiling.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"What?"

"How have you felt since the human's battle with Necrovar? How is the health of your state? Are you still having pains?"

"We are all still having pains," she replied. "We knew they'd persist. It will take time for the Fironem to heal."

"Valaan doesn't seem to be improving much, does he? I was expecting to see signs of his regeneration after the climactic destruction of the Shadow," Naero went on, stretching his feathery wings in a half-shrug. "But the last time he and I spoke, it appeared as if his health was still declining. Odd, isn't it?"

Zumarra opened her mouth, then closed it slowly. Why had Naero spoken to Valaan in private as well? And why was he bringing up the phoenix's health to her in this manner? If she'd been talking to Shivnath, she would have endeavoured to find some covert way of digging up the truth—but Naero was a simpler creature than the ever-scheming dragon, and Zumarra appreciated the fact that she was always able to be straightforward with him.

"What are you driving at?" she demanded bluntly.

Naero's ears flattened to his skull. "Something is amiss, sister, and I think you know it. Everything from Necrovar's defeat to Valaan's continued illness is suspicious."

"I monitored Keriya's battle," Zumarra retorted. "There

was nothing amiss. While the drackling engaged the Shadow, Keriya Nameless accessed the powers we lent to her. She did exactly what we intended her to do: she destroyed Necrovar."

"Perhaps," said Naero. "But if he is truly gone, why are we still suffering?"

"He was stronger than any of us imagined. It will take time for his poison to wear away."

"How much time?" he grumbled, narrowing his dark purple eyes.

Zumarra suppressed a sigh. She could tell when her brother was genuinely upset and when he was simply complaining, and this was the latter. He was just angry that everything hadn't been magically resolved upon Necrovar's defeat—and he was a fool if he'd believed that would happen in any event.

"The more we share Valaan's burden, the faster the healing will be," she stated.

Naero clicked his beak impatiently with a toss of his head. It was clear he didn't think much of sharing the burden anymore. "Then let me move to the main point I wanted to discuss with you: the human."

"Which one? There are quite a lot of them," she snapped. "Keriya Nameless?"

"She's the only relevant one."

"What about her?"

"I have unresolved questions," said Naero. "How was she able to defeat Necrovar, given the drackling survived? Wasn't Thorion's death supposed to pave the way for the Shadow's destruction?"

"I expect she managed it through the use of the magic we lent her," Zumarra growled. Was he being deliberately stupid? "We never knew for sure that Shivnath's plan

involved Thorion's death, we could only speculate. Obviously we were wrong."

"Shivnath's plan," he echoed. Zumarra nodded to herself, for she caught the faintest undertone of bitterness in his voice. Now they were getting to the meat of the matter. "Shivnath, who has made no mention of returning our powers. Shivnath, who hasn't said a word about the issue of Thorion Sveltorious."

"Naero, if you summoned me here to complain about Shivnath, you needn't have bothered with any pretences. I'm upset with her, too. We all are. You think I don't want my magic returned to me?"

Naero didn't have the capacity to smile with his beaked mouth, but his eyes crinkled at the edges. However, the expression didn't reassure her; in fact, it made an icy tingle run down the long length of her spine. "I'm sure you do. But you at least have been afforded the luxury of keeping the vessel and the drackling in your domain."

Zumarra stared at the gryphon. She realised her jaw was hanging open and snapped it shut. "What are you suggesting, brother?"

"I'm not suggesting anything. I just wonder if it's fair that you've held onto them for so long."

"Excuse me?"

"We're all sharing the burden of healing," he continued, his tone light and casual. "Does it not make sense that we should all share the spoils of war, as well?"

"Spoils?" Zumarra repeated.

"The dragon." Suddenly there was no trace of a smile left on his face or in his voice. "You've been hoarding him all to yourself up there. I think it's high time you allowed the other states to benefit from his powers. "

"Firstly, I am not *hoarding* him," she growled. "Both he

and the girl stay because they choose to, because they love my state. They're happy. My people have shown them great kindness and given them a home. You know the binding laws as well as I do – mortals' wills are their own. I could no more keep them in the Galantasa than I could command the sun to stop shining."

"But the girl is far from mortal," he shot back. "She's a bonded *rheonar*. She holds the magic of gods within her. I know Shivnath's been in contact with her – that means you should be able to speak with her, too."

"And tell her what? To turn herself over to the Erastate?"

"Fair is fair," was all he said.

"I will not test myself against the binding laws by commanding either the girl or the dragon to go *anywhere*. Besides, it's not like the Erastate needs them. If they were to leave, they should go to the Fironem. And barring that, they should stay right where they are. My state suffered too, Naero. The darksalm crippled us. The water supply of the East Outlet was poisoned, so even the Smarlands has cause for concern. Out of all of us, you're the one who needs Thorion least."

The words had slipped from Zumarra's mouth before she'd had a chance to fully consider their repercussions. Naero drummed his claws on his rocky throne as he cast an appraising look upon her.

"I need him for protection," he rumbled.

"From what? Necrovar is dead!"

"And in the wake of his death, what does Valaan do? Instead of putting energy toward fixing himself or his state, he focuses on quarrels of his own devising. He has been belligerent with me, threatening my border!"

Zumarra doubted that. Naero was the belligerent one in the family; if Valaan was concerned about the Fironem's

western border, she suspected it was only because Naero had given him good cause to be.

No sooner had the horrible thought flashed through her head than she regretted having it. Naero was her brother. He was an Allentrian god. He was restrained by the binding laws and he could only act in the best interest of his state, in accordance with the balance. But the fact they were having this ridiculous conversation told her the gryphon was honestly afraid of Valaan.

"I'm sorry if you feel threatened," she told her brother in a terse voice, "but I will not give Keriya or Thorion any command."

"You don't have to command. You have only to explain the situation. If the girl is really the hero everyone thinks she is, she should be happy to lend aid to the Erastate." Zumarra shook her head, and Naero expelled an exasperated hiss. "What are you afraid of?"

"I am not afraid of anything."

"If that's so, you wouldn't be clinging to them so tightly. Is it because of the Fironian radiation that you wish to keep them? Or is it because of Valaan himself? Do you hold them because you fear an invasion from the south?"

"Naero," she gasped, appalled at the suggestion. "How can you say such things?"

"It has been on my mind as well." He didn't seem to realise how upset he had made her, and he ploughed on relentlessly. "The Shadow's presence in his state has addled Valaan's mind. He has become greedy. He covets what is not his. He wouldn't dare strike against Shivnath, but you and me . . . we'd seem like easy prey."

"Do you hear yourself?" she wondered, her voice embarrassingly thin. "You're talking about civil war. You're talking about your own *brother*. He would never dream of

such things."

"Perhaps not in days gone by, but times have changed," said Naero. "*He* has changed. Don't bother to deny it, because you know it's true."

"Yes, but . . . who can fault him? The Shadow —"

"My point precisely!" Naero rose to all fours in triumph, fur and feathers bristling. "The Shadow's poison lingers in him because he has been corrupted. He's plotting against us, and if we don't strike against the Fironem now we will regret it later."

She shook her head. "That is out of the question."

"If you insist on turning a blind eye to reason, at least give me the dragon so I might ward myself against attack."

"I'll do no such thing," she snapped. "Giving her to you will exacerbate tensions between the Erastate and the Fironem."

"If you don't give her to me, then you are complicit in Valaan's treachery," the gryphon god thundered, advancing upon her. Zumarra snaked her body around, keeping distance, but in doing so she manoeuvred herself away from the exit. Now Naero was blocking her only way out.

"I would never do anything to hurt you," she insisted, "but I also will not take any action that I believe is unwise, or not in accordance with the balance."

"The balance will be destroyed if Valaan attacks my state!"

"This is madness," she said in a desperate attempt to reason with Naero—though she feared he was beyond reason now. "Surely you can see that. Perhaps we should hold another summit." She swallowed her pride and added, "Perhaps we should talk to Shivnath —"

"That worm," he spat, acid thick in his voice. "She's complicit too, just as guilty as the wretched firebird. She



keeps my powers from me to keep me weak, and you keep the vessel of those powers locked away in your domain. If anything were to happen to the girl —”

“Don’t even suggest such a thing!”

“—then all the borrowed powers she holds would be absorbed by you,” he continued doggedly. “And since you refuse to help, I can only assume you’re keeping the two of them in the Galantasa because you’re devising your own plot against me.”

Zumarra felt torn. She was furious. She was heartbroken. She didn’t understand how Naero could believe such things of his fellow guardians. For the first time in millennia, she wished Shivrath were there to control and diffuse the situation. What had happened to make him so fearful, so hateful? How had things fallen apart so quickly?

“I have done nothing to deserve your distrust,” she whispered, for that was all she could think to say in her own defence.

“Your refusal to take action against Valaan is tantamount to betrayal,” he informed her. “And your insistence on keeping the dragon to yourself speaks volumes.”

They stared at each other in tense silence, both breathing hard. Zumarra saw a flash of bloodlust in her brother’s eyes and she feared he intended to attack her. But the moment passed. Instead Naero prowled to the edge of his cave.

“Get out of my sight,” he growled, jerking his head toward the exit.

Zumarra made no move to leave. She wanted to say something—to scream something, really, to shout some sense into his feather-stuffed head—but words failed her. She was so overwhelmed by what he’d revealed to her, and what he had accused her of, that she was unable to think straight.

“Leave, Zumarra. Before I do something I’ll regret.”

“I won’t be spoken to like that,” she told him, finally finding her voice. “I don’t take kindly to threats either, Naero. Least of all from my own family.”

He barked a laugh. “Families protect each other. You’ve shown your true colours tonight, snake. You’ve learned a thing or two about deception and duplicity from Shivnath, it would seem.”

Zumarra was finding it more and more difficult to control her temper, and she knew if she lingered then *she* would be the one who struck first, who did something unforgivable. So she pursed her lips and ducked her head, gliding past Naero out into the dark mists. She turned herself vapourous in the blink of an eye and cloaked her mind so she could be detached from her feelings. She wanted to put half a continent between herself and the gryphon before she tried to process what she’d just been subjected to.

It was dawn by the time she reached her home. The sun was kissing the edge of the horizon, sending shafts of watered-down gold spilling across the Galantrian Lake and its falls. Zumarra plunged into the chilling embrace of the liquid, solidifying herself and sucking a calming breath through her gills. She burrowed through the water until she reached her trench.

Valaan was still sick. Naero suspected him—and now her, as well—of treachery. Her brothers were at odds. The Galantasa had been threatened. And to the east, Shivnath sat in her mountain and did nothing. It seemed Necrovar’s presence had rotted and cracked the foundations of Allentria, so why wasn’t the dragon god fighting to prevent their empire from collapsing?

“A dragon always has a plan,” Zumarra reminded herself. “It can’t come to civil war. Shivnath won’t allow it.”

Then, dredging up the courage and confidence that made her Zumarra, god and guardian of the Galantasa, she added firmly, "Neither will I."

ELANA A. MUGDAN

This was a world enrichment book  
for the world of

## **Allentria**

a magical place created by Elana A. Mugdan  
where countless stories are born.

If you enjoyed it, please leave a review  
on sites such as Goodreads and Amazon  
so you're automatically entered into seasonal draws  
to win exclusive gifts and merchandise.

You can also visit **allentria.com** to stay updated on all  
future  
stories and character information, including updates on

## **Dragon Speaker**

Elana's debut novel, and the first book in  
*The Shadow War Saga*.

The sequel

## **Dragon Child**

will be released in the UK  
in the summer of 2018.

**penworksmedia.co.uk**



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ELANA A. MUGDAN is a writer and filmmaker based in New York City. She is described by her friends and family as “the weirdest person I know,” and wears that weirdness proudly on her sleeve. She likes dragons, as is evidenced by this book, and hopes that the world of Allentria will bring as much joy to her readers as it does to her.

**[allentria.com](http://allentria.com)**