

# THE DOOMFIRE SECRET

CELESTIAL MECHANISM CYCLE II

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# 1

## THE LANGUAGE OF SORROW

Sorrow was speaking to Paisley Fitzwilliam. It called to her from deep inside as she led Odelia and the others through the crisp, cold streets of Lower London. Keeping to the shadows, they moved swiftly.

“Paisley, are you all right?” Corbett asked.

Odelia tutted loudly at him. “Of course she’s not all right. Would you be, if your mother had just died and your brother had been carried off by Krigare to the icy Northern Realms on dragonback?”

“No, I guess not,” Corbett said in a low voice. “But it’s what people ask, isn’t it—‘*Are you all right?*’ not ‘*Would you like to talk about your loss and grief?*’”

Paisley said nothing, then looked away from him, glancing over at Hal. Odelia was by his side, one hand firmly wrapped around the top of his arm as she guided him through the streets. He was still in his Krigare

uniform: dark-colored, dragon-scaled leather trousers and a military tunic. It got cold riding high through the air on the back of a dragon, and the leathers were warm, offering protection from the elements as well as from enemies; there wasn't much that could pierce a dragon's hide.

Hal smiled sadly at Paisley, his single eye glinting in the early morning light, the angry red scar that ran from the top of his head under his eye-patch and all the way to his jaw puckering. "In the Northern Realms, when we lose a loved one, we celebrate their life, we remember the way that they lived, and we tell the stories of their deeds—the same deeds that are recorded in their Krigare marks, if they are lucky." He gestured to the icy-blue tattoos that ran up his neck and up into the shaved sides of his hair; the band of dirty-blond hair that ran down the center of his head was long and braided in a way that reminded Paisley of the older Dragon Walkers she had seen in the vaults of Kensington Above.

Paisley took a step toward him. "You don't get to tell me how to grieve. You don't get to tell me about loss. My brother isn't here because your people took him! I will not allow him to become another blue mark on anyone's body. You, Hal Northman, are going to help me get my brother back—I'm sure I'll be able to trade you for him. But if you do anything to jeopardize me getting Dax back, if you add to my grief in any way, we won't take you north with us; we will leave you here for the King's Men to deal with."

Hal had stopped smiling. He set his jaw and looked solemnly at Paisley.

"That seems like a sound plan. Similar to something I might do myself, if I were in your position."

Paisley turned away from him and the others and closed her eyes tight. Her head filled with images from the night before: the fight in the observatory at Greenwich, Mother's machine, the experiment. The Dark Dragon stabbing Paisley in the heart.

She remembered what it had felt like as she had slipped into the Veil—distant and vast. How she had seen her father, and he had sent her back, back to face the Dark Dragon, back to watch her mother die and Dax be taken, back to the realization that Uncle Hector had betrayed them all.

When she thought about her mother lying in the rubble, her eyes closed to the world forever, it was as if she could see it but couldn't feel it just yet. It felt distant, as if it had all happened to a different Paisley: maybe the one she was before she went in the Veil. She found the distance comforting and was scared of what would happen when she felt her loss.

The freezing-cold streets of Lower London felt as if they were pressing in on her. Mother was dead, Dax was gone, and deep within herself, she felt empty; it was as if the black Veil rifts had reached in and taken away a vital part of her, as they had done to the Dark Dragon's arm, leaving a sticky patch of nothingness in their wake.

"Paisley?" Corbett touched her shoulder.

She turned on him. "Look, I'm not okay, Corbett. I mean, obviously I'm not okay. My mother . . ." She took a deep, rattling breath in, then breathed out slowly, her breath fogging like dragon smoke in the chill morning. "But Dax needs me, and I need him." She could hear her voice tremble, and coughed as she pushed down the lump at the back of her throat. "So, right now that is what I'm focusing on: getting to Dax."

Paisley glared over at Hal. Everybody knew that the people of the Northern Realms were barbaric, uneducated, and not to be trusted. History was full of their treachery against the Empire of Albion and the Chief Designer, and now they had Dax.

Paisley felt her anger rise as she looked up at the floating borough of Kensington Above drifting overhead, its large snow-globe-like dome glinting in the clear, bright blue winter sky. So much had changed since they had left the floating borough. How would her track have bent if she and Dax had never visited the Dragon Vault, never set out to save Mother? Would Mother still be alive? Would Dax have been taken? Paisley sighed. There was no escaping one's track; whatever she would have done, she was sure that eventually the cogs of the Celestial Mechanism would have brought her here.

"Where are we going?" Odelia asked, alert, her body tense, as she held on tight to the Krigare. Paisley looked from Hal to Odelia and realized that the streets of Lower London were just as unsafe for her as they were for him.

"Home's not far," Paisley said.

"Are you sure that is wise?" Odelia asked. "The Dark Dragon might try to find you there."

"True. But I don't know what else to suggest. We shouldn't be out in the open like this, just walking around on the streets. If the King's Men find us . . ."

"I agree with Paisley," Corbett said, looking over at Hal and Odelia. "And we can always check out the house to make sure the coast is clear when we get there."

“And once we know we are safe, we can come up with a plan to be reunited with Dax,” added Odelia.

Paisley gave a small smile to both Corbett and Odelia. She knew that there was a gaping hole inside her that her mother had left, even if, at the moment, she couldn’t feel it. She also knew that when she did, Odelia and Corbett would be there to help her from falling into it.

She gave Hal a wide berth as they continued on, but she kept her eyes on him, checking that he wasn’t putting any of them in danger.

“What are you looking at?” Paisley asked as she glimpsed Corbett staring up at the sky. He was wearing the coat that Roach had left behind after the fighting at the observatory, and it looked large and bulky on Corbett’s smaller frame. The collar was turned up, and so was his face, as his hands dug through the many pockets before pulling out a small pair of binoculars and peering through them.

“What is it?” Paisley asked.

Corbett lifted an arm and pointed into the early morning sky. “You see that star?” Paisley nodded. “Well, it’s not a star!”

“Is it Comet Wolstenholme?” Paisley asked. Something tightened in her chest as she thought of the comet that her mother’s machine had just pulled toward the Earth.

“No, it’s not a comet either. It’s a planet, and it’s not supposed to be there.”

“What? How is that possible? Where is it supposed to be?”

But Corbett never answered. As he had been looking through the binoculars, he didn’t see that Odelia had suddenly paused at the curb ahead of him. As he bundled into her, she swiftly twisted to one side,

but his inertia carried him into the road. Corbett fell, arms out, ready for impact, but he never reached the ground. Hal grabbed the back of his coat and held him suspended above the road, his feet still on the curb. Paisley turned her head in unison with Corbett's to see the fast-approaching omnibus heading straight for him. He let out a scream as she lunged forward to help just as Hal promptly pulled Corbett to safety. The omnibus passed in a blur.

"That was close!" Paisley said as she placed a hand on Corbett's arm. Paisley's heart was racing as she looked at the receding omnibus. "Are you both all right?" she asked. If anything had happened to Corbett or Odelia, Paisley was sure that she would be in even more trouble than she already was. She needed them, and not just to help her get Dax back, she realized.

"You saved me!" Corbett said to Hal as he stood staring at him in disbelief.

"Yes, thank you, Krigare," Odelia said to Hal with a nod of approval, before she snapped her head to look across the street.

Paisley saw what had made Odelia halt: Two Men of the Yard in their black-and-red uniforms were making their way across the road toward them. They were staring at Hal; his ice-blue Krigare marks and dragon-hide uniform made him an easy target to spot on the quiet early morning streets.

Odelia stepped in front of the Krigare, shrugging back her cape and resting her hands on the hilts of her curving swords.

"Stay where you are, in the name of the George!" the Men of the Yard called.

"Run!" Odelia yelled. The four of them turned and ran back the way



they had come, pounding through the streets of Lower London with the Men of the Yard behind them, blowing on their whistles for assistance.

Odelia swiftly outran them all, taking the lead, steering them away from danger. Paisley was not surprised to find Corbett close behind the Dragon Walker, the fear of the situation making him run fast. Paisley ran along behind Hal, making sure he was following the others. She wasn't about to let him use this as an opportunity to escape.

Paisley glanced over her shoulder: The Men of the Yard were in hot pursuit as Odelia led them toward a covered market full of stallholders setting up for the day.

Paisley grabbed her satchel as it swung out wildly, knocking a passer-by, who yelled at her. She noticed how her body felt strong and agile, better than new. She was sure that if she wanted to, she could have easily outrun Odelia, the pain of her wounds from the previous night a distant memory.

She glanced behind her and saw that the man she had hit with her satchel had stumbled into the Men of the Yard, holding them up.

"Stop those kids! They're Krigare!" one of the Yardmen shouted.

The stallholders rallied then, and Paisley realized that she and Hal had been cut off from Odelia and Corbett, who were both running for the exit on the far side of the market building, being chased by a man holding a baguette and another in a butcher's apron.

Hal came to a stop, looking about. Paisley pulled him along with her as she skidded left between the stalls, avoiding the group of people in her way, as she headed for a smaller side exit, Hal following close behind now. She leaped up onto a flower cart and turned to help Hal. He jumped

up after her, and the two of them ran along the adjacent stall before jumping down on the other side.

Paisley could feel a strange electric surge in the air, as if her fear and anxiety were stretching their way out as she and Hal ran for an open side door. When they were just feet away, the door slid into place, trapping them. Paisley looked at Hal, his breathing coming fast, his blond braid whipping about him, his single blue eye narrow and searching as he crouched a little, arms wide and ready for trouble. Then he straightened up and his face became smooth, and his eye widened.

Paisley turned to see that between her and Hal and the people chasing them was a black Veil rift, large and looming and incredibly dark as it sucked in all the light around it.

Paisley stepped away from it, feeling the door at her back and Hal beside her.

“It looks like the things from the observatory. Do you think they followed us?” Hal asked.

Paisley stared in disbelief. “I don’t know. I mean, maybe. I’ve never seen anything like them before last night. I think they might be the Veil—not the whole thing, just pockets of it, like little drops spilling into our world . . . or something.”

Paisley remembered that she had heard her father’s voice inside one of the black clouds as it had moved close to Uncle Hector in the observatory. Her father, who had died four years earlier; her father, whom she had seen when she was in the Veil.

Paisley unconsciously reached her hand toward her chest, feeling the space where the Dark Dragon’s blade had sliced into her body.