

# DEFLIANCE

Dragonics & Runics Part I

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*Listen to me now, little Child,  
Brave Child.  
Listen and remember what you have been told since birth:  
There are those that will guard your hearth –  
No matter the reason, cause, or fear.  
Should you ever need help, the Shadows will be near.  
One, two, three.*

*Light the way.  
Mark your place and they will come.  
Graced by darkness and strength, it will be done.  
Soon, safe you will be – again in your bed.  
So, look to the falling first moon and lift your head.  
Eyes to the sky, Child.  
Brave Child.  
'Ere they Ride.*



EASTERN FYLLIAN OCEAN  
SOLERAN CONTINENTAL COAST

It was too easy.

The sunset glowed the colors of a Fire Dragon's breath. The oranges and reds leapt across the waves spilling gold and copper over the waters. Streaks of deep purple came from the horizon where two moons peeked. The four-mast vessel steered towards the growing darkness; its sails billowed in the breeze, jingling the crystal-adorned rigging. The ship sparkled violently on the salty waves.

As the ship pushed on into the black, the whinny of a fiddle stirred the air and was soon joined by wind and string instruments. The ship roared with celebratory glee as guests paired off in a dance around the loving couple in green and white. Princess Carissa stood tall and devastatingly beautiful, a warm smile of serene happiness on her lips. Ribbon and lace woven into her hair beneath her emerald circlet made her dreamlike, ethereal. Stunning. Her Prince stood beside her, his dark eyes alit with her reflection.

They could not have asked for better landing directions.

The Prince did not answer Carissa when she asked him to dance. His eyes remained in the sails where, for a heartbeat, the approaching horizon shivered with lifelike darkness. He turned, dismissing it as an odd gust of wind, and opened his mouth to reply to his wife. No sound came out.

His hand jerked her back to his side. Had the black leather glove not been clenched over his mouth, he would told her to run – to jump into the embrace of the sea and swim far away. Had it not been for the guests' panic, Carissa would have made it to the railing. She could have been free.

More black-leathered hands grabbed Carissa and dragged her back to her Prince's side. She struggled, kicking and squirming, only stopping when her husband's hand grasped onto her forearm. His eyes were wide and white. Lost. Carissa heard herself sob when the strength left his hands.

The tallest assailant pulled his broadsword out of the Prince. He stared at the red-tinted blade thoughtfully before wiping it along his black trousers. He surveyed the deck, where the guests lay lifeless at his feet. On his approach to Carissa, he gingerly stepped over the blood forging its way to the sea.

He exhaled, a gravel of remorse to his breath. He was grateful they had made quick work of the guests. He had never done well with screaming or begging. With a swirl of his cloak, he reached Carissa's side and watched the wide-eyed Princess search for whatever was causing the sails to billow unnaturally. Billow, as if they had lives of their own. Heartbeats and breaths.

Carissa winced. "Dragons," she whispered.

The Dark Rider's lips twisted into a smile. He gestured around the still deck. "That leaves you, your Radiance."

Carissa's soft teal eyes latched onto the man. He was darkness. She shook her head until pins came loose, freeing strawberry curls to dangle haplessly. She wanted desperately to see his face, but he was all shadow. Black.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"You know."

Carissa shook her head slowly. "You're not Council Dragonics."

His grin grew wider. "Not even close."

"Why?"

He laughed. "I could ask you the same thing Princess, but I lack patience. I am looking for a Runic."

"They're dead. All of them. The Collection—"

He laughed again and walked closer. Carissa's features were aging gently, but she remained a deeply beautiful woman, which made his task a pity. He withdrew a small strip of parchment and pinned it to her mint green bodice. His voice soft and kind. "She'd be odd looking and seem out of place. She'd have been hidden."

Carissa softened at his paternal tone, but trembled at his closeness. Still clutching her dead husband's hand, Carissa fought with her memory to remember something. Anything. She shut her eyes. "There was a girl. When I was younger... I... I don't.... She did not look like one of us... Father hid her from us because Mother was so upset. We used to play in

the rose garden until sunset...”

He stepped back to straighten the parchment. “That’s a good girl,” he said.

Carissa’s eyes fluttered open. She gasped at the depth of the shadows filling his form despite being a breath from her face. He looked like a piece of the night – a starless, soulless creature of darkness. And, his eyes were dwelling on the parchment.

Carissa eyed the script on the parchment and dropped her husband’s hand. She clutched the Dark Rider’s forearm. “Please don’t... Let me go.”

He tapped the parchment twice. “Soon,” he said straightening her into the gloved hands of another Dark Rider.

Before Carissa could offer any other sound of protest, the sound of metal against scabbard filled the air.

“Soon, sweet girl.”

# DARK HORSE

*“In the blackest of nights and the darkest of days  
we will find and save you...”*

COMMANDERS' MEETING ROOM  
THE DEN, NORTHERN SOLERAN MOUNTAINS

Alaister Paine sat in the corner in a worn chair, legs wide, and arms leaning against his thighs. The warmth of the room made it a favorite place to sit and think, especially as winter crept into the cave system. The fireplace carved into the southern wall held captive flames that danced as they warmed and lit the entire cavern.

His boots were as worn as the bindings of the old logbook in his hand. His boots had seen much, and although his age did not delineate that, his eyes did. The boots were worn, stretched taut against his calves. They had once been a warm honey sort of color, but now were just a muddied mess of brown and death. Alaister gripped the frayed leather logbook and read. Save for the flickering of the flames, the only sound was the flipping of aging parchment pages.

Back and forth. Again.

It did not make sense.

It was not possible.

He could not have possibly missed it for that long.

They had been waiting for something like this since their founding. Since their inception, the Rogues had carried The Cause as dutifully as they could, but their purpose never had a driving force. A spark. Until now, Alaister was sure that the world he had grown up to know would be the world of future generations. Despite his faith in The Prophecy and The Cause, Alaister had begun to doubt the chance of change occurring in his lifetime.

His gray-blue eyes looked at the worn logbook again.

Alaister had found more than a spark. It was lit kindling. And, it had been in the encoded pages since before he could walk. Twenty-five cycles it had waited in the Rogues' Founder's – Kai Paine's logbooks. His father's logbooks. Alaister ground his teeth at the insensitivity of his father to not tell him, let alone not tell him, how to decode the logs for insight into how he should and could lead the Rogues. Alaister cracked a soft smile. Kai Paine had never been one for easy lessons and his

judgments were never without foresight.

There had to have been a reason to it all – an explanation – but it did not sit right. Alaister sighed and flipped back and forth once more. It had been there all along. His stomach lolled. This was what he had been waiting for. What they had been waiting for. The Council had finally made a fatal mistake – a mistake they did not even realize.

It was time.

Alaister stood to his full height and ran a hand through his thick mass of black hair. Leaning against the fireplace, he stared at his father's old chair and admired the longevity of their family crest on the backing. Claws of a Dragon – sharp and ready, holding fast to a sword – were still discernable, though the pattern behind it had long since been lost to the washed out red fabric.

He laughed and straightened. He had to tell his men. Today would be a glorious day.

Alaister strode to the heavy curtains of the cavern opening and nearly smacked into Vylain. Though shorter, the lanky brown-haired man had a staggering strength about him. His green eyes flickered with excitement as he ushered Alaister back into the room and quickly checked the curtain.

“What is it?” Alaister asked.

“On patrol...” He paused and nodded towards the chairs. “Please sit, Commander.”

Nothing good came from news that required sitting, and Alaister reluctantly receded to his chair at the western side of the long plank table.

Vylain sighed, straightened his yellow rolled cuffs, and cracked his neck. He faltered at how to start – where to begin. He knew Alaister would not be patient long, and he had learned long ago that the best method was to just get to the point. “Princess Carissa is dead,” Vylain said.

“What?” Alaister blinked.

Vylain exhaled. “And the Prince of Pyran.”

Alaister leaned forward. “When?”

“I don't know. We flew a pattern over their wedding ship and it was dark. No candles. No music. It smelled like... It was a massacre. We

found a note pinned to the Princess. I was able to copy it before we heard the Council Dragonics incoming.”

“Did they see you?”

“No, Sir.”

Alaister took the small scrap of parchment from Vylain’s gloved hand. He read the strange text, looked to Vylain, and then looked at the logbook on his father’s chair.

“Gavasti...”

“Sir?”

“Get the others.”

“Gage is already on it.”

Nodding, Alaister offered a smile to his Wing Second. “Sit then. You’ve done well, Vylain.”

Vylain bowed his head and took a seat two chairs down from Alaister on the northern, long side of the table. Alaister watched Vylain stare into the fire calmly and was grateful for his constant ability to maintain composure. It was the reason Vylain had become his Wing Second, and it was because of his integrity that Alaister trusted his gut instinct and reactions over most others’ instincts.

Vylain’s uneasiness meant that the massacre was worse than words could describe. Alaister could see it in Vylain’s shifting green eyes and clenched hands. Who was capable of committing such an act was another matter – a matter neither had an answer to. Alaister followed Vylain’s gaze to the gold rug and lost himself in the intricate pattern, grateful for their mutual silence. It allowed a man to think. The urgency of the note built up inside of him and fused with his discovery in the logbook.

The Prophecy was real.

Alaister stood to settle his stomach. He wandered to the fireplace and straightened his leather vest over his gray shirt. He could not remember if he had fallen asleep looking at the logbook long enough to consider it a true sleep and wished that he had. They would need all the energy they could muster. His eyes wandered to the pennants above the fireplace and lingered on the hand-altered Original Rogue Dragonics banner.

The banner would fly again – sooner now than ever before. Things

would be brought to balance – people to equality and happiness. There would be no more hiding in caves, no more being outlaws.

The fabric curtain slosed open as Lanthar, Commander of the Third Dredth, entered. Alaister looked at the overly tall blond and hid a smirk. He too had been up all night by the look of his wrinkled blue shirt and pants. Men like Lanthar Reynat never missed rest without reason, and before Lanthar could explain why he was there, Vylain awoke from his daydream and flagged the giant commander down.

“Did Gage tell the others?”

“About what?” Lanthar asked.

Vylain frowned and then nodded to the scrap of parchment on the table. Lanthar looked from him to Alaister and retrieved the note at Alaister’s nod.

“Where was this found?”

“Princess Carissa’s body,” Vylain said.

Lanthar slunk into his seat to Alaister’s left, and frowned. “May she rest in peace. Her husband?”

Vylain shook his head and looked to the floor.

“We managed to discover this before the Council,” Alaister said, “for whatever that counts.”

“Who?” Lanthar asked.

“I can’t place it. The Council had more riding on this marriage than anyone... What was it you needed, Lanthar?”

“Nothing of gravity. Nothing like this.”

Staring at Lanthar’s firm face, Alaister waited for his tell. The celadon gaze did not defer; his tell did not come. The blond giant sat with perfect decorum – a statue of grace that remained silent and anticipated any follow up. Before Alaister could question Lanthar again, there was a loud yawn as heavy footsteps approached and kicked the curtain aside.

Alaister would have known the steps anywhere. They had haunted and punished him every morning since he was a child. They belonged to Alaister’s oldest and closest friend Callon, who – for a moment of their predecessors’ weakness in not realizing Callon’s distaste for mornings – had become the Commander of the Second Dredth. Callon clomped to the seat to Alaister’s right and slouched into it, despite his height and build. His mousey brown hair and scarred face looked partially

paralyzed by sleep and, with eyes half closed, his hands fiddled with his dual rapier hilts.

The curtain pushed back to allow Gage, Alaister's Wing Third, to enter and take his seat beside Vylain. Gage's dark face held hazel eyes that failed to shine with their normal youthful glee. They were dark and cold. Gage nodded at Alaister and slid into his chair.

Before the men could fall into a mutual silence, Callon's bass voice hummed with a grumble. "What pleasure may I credit to this early waking, Lord Alaister?" He bowed mockingly from his seat before drooping deeper into his chair.

"Just once, Callon – leave it be. It is too early to deal with your gavasti right now," Vylain said.

"Agreed," Lanthar said.

"Well, look who's chiming in on the Vylain parade today. Good 'morrow to you, Lord Lanthar. And you, Lady Vylain."

Vylain rose slightly in his chair. "Caldenian..."

Callon remained motionless. "Brydellan..."

Alaister slammed his fist on the table, startling both Callon and Vylain to respectable seated positions. "Gavasti! You two are like children without your morning tavi. Believe me Callon, no one would dare disturb you this early if it weren't important, so silence would be appreciated, if you don't mind." Alaister exhaled. "We have a problem."

"Let me guess, Al. We're outlaws, outcasts, wanted fugitives, and the Dragons have eaten all the nearby food supply, so now we're going to have to look elsewhere to feed them. Oh! And Vylain ran off all the eligible women last night, so now we're forced into a life of irreconcilable and serenely blissful celibacy."

Alaister controlled a smile. "Cal..."

"Just my guess is all. Am I wrong?"

"Yes," Alaister said.

"Surprise, surprise," Vylain muttered.

"Wrong about which part?"

Gage kicked Callon's boots. "Pipe down, Cal."

"Princess Carissa of Creitall is dead," Alaister said.

No one moved or spoke for several heartbeats. The silence choked even the fire.

“Married or... dead?” Callon asked.

“Dead,” Alaister said with a glare. “As is the Prince of Pyran. They were murdered last night, along with their entire wedding party during their ceremonial voyage.”

“Gods save Queen Maille and Pyran,” Gage whispered. He was the only Pyranese Rogue and the effect of the news showed. The royals of Pyran were considered more than rulers – they were considered family, kin.

Alaister let the room lull back to silence. The consequences of whoever had committed the crime ran deep. Not only did they send the Soleran people farther into the manipulative and choking hold of the Council, but Pyran was again without an heir and would be forced to comply with the Council now more than ever – despite their Resistance loyalties. And, it was beyond a doubt that the Council would staple the blame squarely on the Rogues’ shoulders. New, insidious propaganda posters would be plastered across the capital cities of the seven Soleran Kingdoms making any recruiting, let alone socializing, near impossible.

Alaister looked to his right and caught Callon’s face. Cold. Upset. Concerned. Commander Callon McKafrey had finally decided to join them.

Callon propped his elbows on the table and read over the parchment before him. He thumbed the words and then tossed it back down. “So, who?”

“I’m sure they’re already saying it was us,” Vylain said.

“Yes, well that’d be a magnificent feat,” Callon muttered.

Lanthar sighed. “The Council had no reason to kill either of them. They needed Pyran to be subdued by the bonds Creitall has with the Council.”

Alaister nodded. Despite their incurable insanity, one thing the Chancellor and his officers were was smart. They were calculating and ever-adapting. They had nearly forced the marriage on the Creitalli and Pyranese Kingdoms before realizing that love had already left its mark. The deaths gave no victory to the Chancellor. No upper hand.

“Gage, were there any sects of the Pyranese Fleet against the marriage?” Alaister asked his only Pyranese officer. “Perhaps—”

Hurt danced behind Gage’s eyes. “We Pyranese may not always get

If Lythgor did exist, it had to have existed an ocean apart. If anyone's opinion on Lythgorians mattered, it was a Pyranese's opinion – Gage's. Above all others, he would know the validity of the possibility. Tonight, Gage sat assured that Lythgor existed, but that they had no reason to interfere in Soleran matters now.

Alaister frowned. Lythgor had reason to interfere, if they knew what he knew. "They do have reason," he said.

"Are we really going with Lythgorians, Al? I mean—"

"The Council missed one."

"I don't follow..." Vylain said.

"According to the logs I just decoded... They missed one. My father... he saved one. They live. She lives."

Lanthar softened. "She?"

"Oh my Gods!" Gage whispered.

"A Runic. He saved a Runic and didn't bother to tell us?" Callon asked, his hands tightened on his chair.

Alaister sighed. "Looks that way."

"All due respect to your father Al, since Gods know he was like a father to me, but that is beyond gavasti. Why wouldn't he tell us that there is a Bretzing Runic out there? We could have taken down the Council cycles ago!"

"He had his reasoning..."

"Or he had lost it," Callon muttered.

Opening the logbook to the proper page, Alaister tossed the text onto the table to let them see his deciphering. "We have to move from what we have now. The logs indicate that Kai left the Runic with King Lynde of Creitall. Now, the Crown Princess of Creitall is dead with that note pinned to her. It cannot be a coincidence. There are no coincidences."

"Al, King Lynde has only ever had three daughters – all mirror images of their mother. All gorgeous, even if they're Creitalli," Callon said.

"Secrets of Kings and Queens run deep," Lanthar muttered. "There is the probability that she was or still is there."

"And, that is why we will look there first. The Council will label us as the murderers and conduct a manhunt as such. Put the Dredths on high alert."

along, but we would never resort to this. Ever. We are kin. We protect each other. Killing another Pyranese is against our natures.”

Alaister bowed his head in acceptance. “So, then who?”  
 “Lythgorians.”

The word came from Vylain and all turned to stare at the straight face and green eyes. Vylain did not blink at the sudden heat of the stares. He remained confident and resolute.

“Hey, I’m all for blaming my problems on the stories of my childhood, but you Vylain? I am sorely disappointed in your lack of creativity and originality in making up this one. Bad form, Vylain.” Callon tsked Vylain with a smirk. “Bad form.”

Vylain faced Alaister. His intent was matched by Alaister’s undivided attention. “I’m serious,” Vylain said. “We all know that signs of their existence are out there. We all know we have seen and heard things on patrols that we cannot explain. It is as good a reason as any.”

Alaister nodded. He opened his mouth to speak, paused, and sat down.

Callon fumbled his breath. “I bretzing hate that look, Al. Spit it out.”

“My father believed in Lythgorians. He even recorded several occurrences where he thought he might have been in the wake of them.”

Lanthar shook his head. “If Lythgorians, why?”

“I don’t know,” Vylain said. “I just know that the note sounds like the stories.” Vylain slid the note toward the others.

Lanthar held it last and tapped out the oddly spelled words of the text.

*Return Her to us or paye Her Kinde’s pryce.*

“The Lythgorians are a silent, distant people. They’d have no reason to involve themselves here,” Gage said.

The room shifted and turned to stare in unison. Gage’s factual tone startled Alaister less than the others. Kai Paine’s logbook had long asserted that the Lythgorians maintained contact with the Pyranese, as they were the only sailing Soleran Kingdom and therefore, the only Solerans to have navigated great distances across the Fyllian Ocean.

“Let’s ride.”

Panic spread in a sickening glaze over Gage and then Vylain. “Do we really want to search for a girl who might be a Runic and take away from patrols with all that’s happened?” Vylain asked. “It’s just before the Season, Alaister.”

“Whether she still exists or not, it is a search we will hold. This is what we have been waiting for and we are not alone in searching. We cannot believe that the Council will not figure out what we have concluded. And, something else is searching for her, as well with a half-day’s start. This girl is our ward and we need her. We will find her.”

“Aye, Sir,” Vylain nodded.

“The Recruiting Season will go off as planned, but she is our first priority. Recruiting is second.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Vylain and Gage take the First Dredth to the sea and be our eyes. Callon, send the second to Pyran for more information. Lanthar, send the Third to Aleria – be our ears.”

“Send?” Lanthar asked.

Callon pointed to Lanthar. “What he said, Al. Send?”

“I’ll need both of you in Knall.”

Callon whistled sharply. “I hate that place. Anywhere but Creitall – anywhere. Seriously. Send me to Udlast in the dead of winter. Send me to the Silent Desert in the peak of summer. Send me to Deathwalker Cliffs for a stroll. Just not Knall, Al. Not Creitall.”

Alaister swallowed his budding smile.

“Don’t let Doc hear you say that,” Gage snickered.

“He’s not my Doc and besides, he’s the Creitalli exception.”

“I’ll be sure to pass that gem along, Caldenian,” Vylain said.

“Don’t you have a Dredth to move, Brydellan?”

Callon and Vylain postured until Gage ushered Vylain out of the Commanders’ Meeting Room. The three remaining men returned to their seats in mutual silence. They all wanted to observe a final moment of rest. Alaister stared deeper into the dying flames.

A Runic had survived the Collection.

Alive. She was alive.

Alaister stared through the flames until his eyes grew warm and weary.