

To Ashes We Run

an Echofall Rising Novel

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Prologue

THEY said he was the Twisted Izdihar. All Dieon saw was a fellow ra'iz burning alive.

The plague crept over Dieon's skin and through his body. He did not know when his saber had fallen from his hand or when his knees had found the sand. Teema lay dead beside him. The plague had already taken her, as it was now overcoming Dieon.

His vision was failing, but he could still see the flames surrounding the Twisted Izdihar Adisa. They did not inch near him or Teema's corpse, remaining knotted around their only victim. But they flickered and grew high until their liquid color consumed everything else in sight. There was no sky with its thousand fractured lights, no shifting sands of Eljihatt, no witch watching her prey burn—now ignoring Dieon, likely counting him already dead to her black scourge.

Only flames. Radiating heat. The plague.

Dieon was not going to make it back to his clan. All the struggles they had surpassed...and he was leaving them—leaving Saqr—under the doom of their curse. This thought frightened him more than that of his own death.

The fire, so bright before him a moment ago, became dark and muddled. He could no longer feel its distant heat or hear its roar. The form of the Twisted Izdihar ceased to writhe in its midst.

Dieon dragged another breath through failing lungs. He could not see...could not breathe.

He thought he had died. It was strange to feel his very sshenar being pulled away from his body. And yet he was not formless—something gave him shape, as if a multitude of foreign thoughts held him, kept him from drifting away.

But they had brought someone else with them.

There was another there now, in the same space as Dieon. There were no words, no emotions shared, just a sense of otherness. Dieon's thoughts began to slip. He was being pushed away, rejected by his own flesh.

No, rejected by the one who now owned his body.

Adisa the Twisted Izdihar had taken Dieon's form for his own.

Chapter One

Killing Love

The Echofall realm consists of the lower spirits, the karfrer, the lualin, and the izdihar.

The izdihar is above all these, and above the izdihar is Baephon.

But Baephon has been separated from Echofall, and the spirits mourn.

—Taken from “The Echofall realm”

By Tsu Dari, Lion of the Yaeron

Twelve Centuries Earlier—Echofall Realm

HOPE WAS A curse more virulent than a Twisted One’s heart.

Adisa’s palm covered his right eye, his mouth open in a silent scream. He stumbled against the wall, unable to see clearly.

Halona, one of the seven lualin, stood in the center of the darkened room. His face was ashen. His gaze disconnected from his surroundings.

“Why is she fading?” Adisa said.

Halona’s lips parted but he said nothing.

They were in one of the front rooms of Yejide, the lualin's palace. Large windows lined two of the walls, letting air—the wind brothers's fingers—freely enter and depart. Several steps led up to an open doorway behind Halona.

She would be that way, deeper within Yejide, her essence slowly isolating itself from him. From them all.

The Twisted One heart in Adisa's right eye flared with pain. Throbbing. Resisting. He stumbled forward and caught himself on Halona's shoulder, nails digging into cloth. Halona put a hand under his elbow to support him.

Adisa struggled to find balance, the sickness in his gut refusing to recede. He had not meant for this. Not for his Baephon.

“She was ill.” Halona stood immovable, cold...broken. “More so than the rest of us.”

The Twisted One named Heng-Shar raged within Adisa, trying to regain control. Adisa pressed the heel of his palm to his eye, tormented. It had been months since Adisa could last differentiate between the Twisted One and himself. Since he could remember the Twisted One's name. Now they were at war with one another. Separate entities.

It burned.

Return to your place, Heng-Shar raged at Adisa. The rest of the contracted have already begun to be sealed by the levki. You do not have time to mourn Baephon.

Adisa pushed away from Halona and fell against the doorway, clutching at his eye. He could see nothing. All he could feel was the agony in his eye socket.

The agony beating within his chest.

If we are not sealed away exactly as we planned, Heng-Shar screamed, each word stabbing at Adisa, *we won't know when in time we could be released! You made this deal—now finish it.*

“She isn’t supposed to leave me,” Adisa said. “Baephon was to be freed from the spirits, from her duties—and remain with me! *That* was the deal we made!”

The Twisted One laughed without mirth. *Yet you planned to leave her.*

Adisa pulled himself up and stumbled through the palace rooms, his feet remembering where to go though he could see nothing but passing shadows. Halona’s unsteady footsteps followed him at a distance.

Adisa had to reach the center chamber before she left him. He needed to speak with her. If she was going to leave him...

He growled low in his throat. “I was *not* leaving her.” He flinched at the pain Heng-Shar sent racing through his skull and down his neck. “I only wanted to become as strong as her! To help her. To free us.”

He found the doorway that led to the center chamber. He fell through it, catching himself on his knees, his vision blurring darker. “I took you on!” he shouted at Heng-Shar. “I broke trust with the rest of the levki and made a way for your kind to enter my world. I have fulfilled my end—now fulfill yours. Set Baephon and me free from the spirits.”

He blinked, an action that caused his right eye to erupt like fire, but his sight slowly cleared. Trees heavy with golden leaves surrounded a field of white stone that formed the palace’s center chamber. There was no roof, only blue sky burning with the colors of the sun reflecting through the sky’s ever-present shield of water.

Baephon was separated from you the day you signed my contract and took my heart, Heng-Shar said. *Your joining with me brought a sickness upon the spirits, and it has festered quietly until now, when she ends.*

Six lualin stood at the center of the field of stone. They were as tall as Adisa, with an appearance that was almost eldrin. Their robes hid from view the person Adisa knew they surrounded.

He took to his feet, the pain in his eye unbearable, but not as unbearable as being separated from Baephon. He forced his body to move through the trees and over the stone to where they stood. Halona followed him.

“You said she would be freed,” Adisa said.

He was angry with the Twisted One—angry with himself. How had he failed to notice Baephon’s sickness? It was the Twisted One. Heng-Shar. He was the cause of everything.

The six lualin drew back from him, distaste in their frighteningly vacant expressions. They jostled against one another in confusion. But even so, they didn’t leave the side of the girl who lay on the stone.

And so she is, Heng-Shar said. *Free from Echofall.*

Another spasm ran from Adisa’s eye through his skull. He collapsed to his hands and knees beside her. She did not look at him. She did not notice him. Her breathing was failing.

She was young. Her hair was black, her skin a smooth tan over wide cheekbones, and she had an odd mark, almost a freckle, beside her nose. Her eyes were open in slits, staring at the sky.

There is more for you to do for my kind, Heng-Shar said. *Stand and return to your place.*

Adisa looked up. The sun reflected through the sheath of water surrounding the world's atmosphere, breaking its rays and sending flashes of every color across the sky. The air was muggy, even here in the Echofall realm. Sweat formed on his skin. "Be quiet."

Baephon's breaths were shallow, harsh.

"Heal us." The seven lualins's voices overlapped and echoed one another's. This time Halona had spoken with the other six.

They were ill. Adisa saw it clearly now. They had been ill ever since he'd taken on the Twisted One. It was killing them slowly. By accepting Heng-Shar, he had broken not only the levki—the band of defenders meant to keep Heng-Shar's type from their world—but the spirits. His family, his sister. Baephon.

The lualin wouldn't focus on him. It was as if they couldn't see him. But they knew he was the cause of their illness. He was being rejected.

"Go!" Adisa did not want them to witness another proof of his failure—Baephon's death.

The lualin startled, their vacant stares gliding past him. Heng-Shar fought to take advantage of Adisa's imbalance and retake control of his mind. The lualin shuffled back, unable to disobey a command given by their Izdihar.

For he was still their Izdihar, despite having broken them.

They did not leave. They were as bound to Baephon as he. It was their duty to be beside Baephon in times of struggle or pain. It would anguish them to be apart from her when she died.

"I commanded you to leave!" Adisa stood. He wanted to be alone with her. The lualin took another step back, but did not turn. Adisa fell upon them, shoving one, dragging another. He could no longer hear Baephon's breathing. "Go!"

The lualin shuddered, all but two turning. Halona and Caileon. Adisa stood between them and Baephon, sweat etching its way down his neck, back, and arms. He planted his feet on the stone in ragged anger, refusing to let them draw near.

“Our Izdihar.” Caileon did not come closer. “Heal us. Save Baephon. The spirits are sick. The world is sick. We need Baephon.”

Adisa’s eye stabbed in pain, only adding to his misery. “I don’t care about the spirits.” He cared only for Baephon. He had not meant to bring about her end. “Leave!”

He did not want them here. They were broken, useless. He despised them. Adisa groaned, pressing his palm to his right eye.

Caileon slowly followed the others. Halona looked at Adisa for a silent moment, his gaze making an unspoken promise, and did not leave.

Seeing the other’s backs, a spiral of fear coursed through Adisa. He had cast them away, yet he did not know how to live without them. Without her.

You have me, Heng-Shar said. You have us.

Adisa returned to Baephon’s side. Still breathing...but soon that too would be gone. Her eyelids shuddered, her fingernails scratching the stone beneath her as she fought for breath.

Adisa went to his knees. He hadn’t meant for her to be affected like this. He’d only wanted to match her, to stand by her as Izdihar, to save his sister from the trial of her duty. Heng-Shar had promised him a world where that could be. Adisa had been naïve—no, blinded by hope—to believe it would become as he wished.

Hope had betrayed him.

“You cannot die.” They were the words Baephon had said to him long ago. “But you can be separated from the world.”

Her eyes, dark slits beneath her lids, jerked to focus on his face. “When one is removed,” her voice was but a whisper, rasping, fading, “the whole becomes ill.”

Adisa’s hand lifted to push the strands of sweaty hair from her face, but his muscles jerked, halting before his fingertips touched her. He could not bring himself, as he was—a Twisted One—to touch the Baephon.

“I did not know it would—” He could not force himself to finish his excuse. His pride bit down on his tongue.

“Brother, the spirits will go astray. Lead them.” Her gaze flicked past his face, as if she could no longer see. Her chest rose, but a strangled hiss came from her mouth. She could not draw in air. Her throat had closed too tight upon itself.

Adisa bent his head to the stone, screaming his fury at Heng-Shar. He had sworn Baephon would not suffer...that only Adisa would pay.

Was this not the ultimate price?

He should have seen. He should have known. Hope was a cursed thing.

Her breathing stopped. He could sense it through the earth, through the spirits. No movement, not even a pulse from her heart, came from her. Her body remained, and she was yet alive in a way, but her presence had receded from the world. Alive, preserved, but beyond his reach.

Adisa stood, his entire being turning cold. Even his eye ceased to burn. Strangely, his anger was gone. He stared at her face a moment, wondering how, if Baephon had left, he could possibly be calm. No, not calm, he realized...lost.

For what was the Izdihar without the Baephon?

A bridge and arbiter to a broken realm.

Now return to your place, Heng-Shar said. The timing must be right or our work will be scattered through too many ages.

Adisa didn't move. He didn't care about the Twisted Ones's plans any longer. His reason for joining them was gone. Heng-Shar had used him.

It was time he used the Twisted One.

"I will not return to your war."

Heng-Shar mocked him. *Even if you refuse to return, you will be found and sealed as the others are. Years—centuries—will pass, and you will only be able to watch and listen. Until finally, one day the seal will break and you will rejoin the flow of time. And then, in an age you do not know, where everything has changed, you will have only one thing to live for. Us.*

Adisa turned from Baephon's body and walked across the field of stone. Heng-Shar was right: Adisa would be sealed away. He had gone against the levki he was sworn to uphold, and he had brought them low from within. They had discovered the face of their betrayer—though too late. The Second War, the war Adisa had brought upon them, was nearing its end.

Those of the levki still alive after this war would not leave him be until he was locked away. When Adisa did manage to break from the seal, he would have nothing. Everyone and everything he knew would be inaccessible to him, locked in the past as Baephon now was—a memory.

The spirits would still remember him, though even they were turning against him.

Adisa entered the shade of the golden trees. Halona stood there, waiting for him. Only Halona had remained. They looked at one another, Halona's face drawn and void.

"Why?" Adisa said.

Why had he not left, though the others had. Why remain when he knew Adisa had been the one to slaughter them, all for the sake of freeing Baephon? Of taking her from them.

Adisa's eye burned.

"You are my Izdihar," Halona said.

"I betrayed you." He did not care how brutal he sounded. "I meant to abandon you."

"Nevertheless, I cannot abandon you."

"Even if I ask you to rise against the other lualin?" Adisa did not know if it were he or Heng-Shar who asked this.

Halona lifted his gaze from the ground. "I serve you."

With those words, Adisa felt another piece of Echofall shatter. But he did not care. This realm was nothing to him without Baephon.

He headed through the trees.

Halona followed.

Adisa didn't know how far the last battle of The Second War had progressed, but someone would come for him as soon as he left the Echofall realm. He could not stay here forever.

He was not truly a spirit.

Adisa looked back through the trees. Baephon lay on the field of white stone. She was as good as dead. The pain of the loss cascaded over him, and he screamed, his nails digging furrows into the skin around his Twisted One eye.

He sensed the spirits run ahead, propelled by his fury. Lash out at his command. The earth rumbled beneath him. The wind rose up, howling through the windows of Yejide. Cracks formed in the stone around Baephon.

Adisa silenced the spirits, and the world returned to stillness.

He lowered his hand from his face. All he felt now was simmering anger and a cold emptiness. Blood ran down the skin around his eye. He could no longer tell Adisa apart from Twisted One.

Whoever he may be, he was finished with the Twisted One's plans. Finished even with Adisa's plans. And he was finished with the spirits. He wanted nothing to do with anyone for as long as time continued.

Baephon was dead.

Chapter Two

For Want of Water

How different our history would be if Dieon and Adisa had never met.

—Taken from “Adisa’s Second Life”

By Tsu Dari, Lion of the Yaeron

Twelve Centuries Later. Saeris

HE CAUSED THE plains to pool with blood and yet he never lifted his saber. It was wrong, this war. It ought never to have begun. Of this, Dieon was now certain, but how to tell Raegn that he no longer wanted to be a soldier spy?

It would make him a deserter. His clan, his home, would never welcome him back.

From his hiding place, Dieon finished tallying the Saeris camp that spread out over the plain in the distance. Five hundred. It had been six hundred that morning. It did not make sense. Why send a large portion of the camp deeper into their own lands, away from Jaakan’s coming forces?

Dieon lay at the rim of a hollow in the earth. The steep slope conveniently hid him and his fellow spies's temporary encampment. There were several of these sloping basins in the plain. It was a poor place to keep an army. Too easy for enemies to approach.

Dust clouds arose from the direction of the Saeris's army. They were breaking camp, but they were not in a hurry. He thought he saw some soldiers ambling about without their weapons. They were too relaxed.

Dieon was missing something important.

Nallan, one of the other three spies in Raegn's group, crawled up to him. It was good for Nallan to observe and draw conclusions of his own. He was a few years younger than Dieon—hardly an adult, and new to the war and to Raegn's group, as Dieon had been a short time ago.

Dieon handed his waterskin to Nallan, leaving him to watch the Saeris camp, and slid to the basin of the hollow.

“The Saeris are preparing to march?” Raegn said.

Dieon was glad to have been assigned under him. Raegn was an old and weathered ra'iz by any standard, peering into their other four waterskins to check their levels and rationing the day's food. They were smaller portions than usual—Teff and Caan had caught two rabbits to add to their meal. They sat a few cubits away, skinning the already gutted animals.

“Yes,” Nallan called softly. “They are packing camp.”

Dieon squatted next to Raegn. “They are packing, but I doubt they plan to march.”

“Explain.”

Nallan slid down from his watch. He should not have left them blind, though it seemed the Saeris were yet unaware of their presence. Dieon moved to retake his place. “A hundred of

their number left while you were hunting. They went toward deeper Saeris lands, not our camps.”

Raegn frowned. “They would not send away a sixth of their number before making an attack.”

“I agree, it is—” Dieon raised his head over the edge of their hollow to inspect the camp again. He found himself staring at a ra’iz with a drawn bow. “Saeris!”

A yelp came from Nallan, a deep-throated yell from Raegn. Dieon dropped. An arrow flew over his shoulder. More Saeris surrounded the lip of the hollow. Raegn had an arrow in his side.

“You Jaakan cannot be trusted!” a Saeris said. “Not a week has passed, and they send spies against us. Do you think with Beshssinia stolen from us, you are fated to win? You will not—we survived you even after your tribe of thieves abducted our treasure. Is your army behind you?”

Dieon tried to make sense of his words. Beshssinia...that was a sling that had become a legend through the centuries. It was said to protect and grant victory to whatever tribe possessed it—and it had belonged to Saeris for generations. But if Jaakan had found Beshssinia and plundered it, why did it sound as if...

Teff and Caan had drawn their sabers, blades ready to taste blood. Nallan fumbled with his weapon. It got hung in his outer robe. He cut it free, leaving a gaping slash in the cloth, and settled into a balanced stance.

Raegn was abandoned in the center of the hollow, bleeding out on the grass. A stone flew from a Saeris sling. It struck Nallan in the head. He dropped.

Guessing at what the Saeris’s words meant, Dieon made a gamble.

He threw his saber to the ground. “We did not know! Caan, Teff, drop your blades.” The older, war-worn ra’iz looked at him as if he had lost sense. “We have been away from our camp for two weeks. Has the war ended?”

A horn sounded in the distance. Low, thrumming. It raised two notes before starting over again. Their own army, calling for them. The thrumming came closer, louder, before receding in the other direction. Too late. It had come too late. Teff and Caan dropped their sabers at the sound, expressions grim.

The Saeris ra’iz watched them warily. For the dozenth time, Dieon was struck by their appearance. The Saeris were shepherds. Herds-people. How had they held strong against the tribe of Jaakan for so long? The sound of the horn reverberated in Dieon’s veins. No, how had they defeated Jaakan, a tribe of warriors?

Jaakan had lost the war.

The war they had started. The war they had sent thousands of their own to die for. That Dieon had killed for, once he was old enough.

“See?” He felt relieved that they had reached the end. It had not felt right, once he was out here, killing for no reason other than extending Jaakan’s borders. “Runners had not yet been sent. We did not know. The horn came late.”

The Saeris lowered their bows and slings, coming closer. They had taken as much loss in the war as Jaakan had. Dieon doubted they would count this a victory. Animosity between the two tribes would not be quick to dissipate.

Especially if Beshssinia was now in Jaakan hands. Dieon felt a weight on his chest. The Saeris’s assumption would be correct. With Beshssinia in their tribe, Jaakan would be emboldened to break treaty and begin the war anew. More pointless deaths.

Dieon could not be a part of that again.

He glanced at Nallan. He was breathing. He would have nothing worse than a sore skull when he woke.

Raegn was still bleeding on the grass. Dieon went to him. A Saeris raised his bow. Teff and Caan growled, looking ready to grab their sabers.

“My captain is dying,” Dieon said. “Let me try to save him.”

The bow was not lowered. “One less murdering wolf.”

Dieon held up his hands, pleading. “The war is over. Time for killing is past. Let me save him, and we will begin traveling out of your lands this very day.”

Slowly, the Saeris relaxed his draw. “If we see you again there will be no more mercy.”

Dieon knelt. Raegn was unconscious. The Saeris prodded Caan and Teff to Dieon’s side, searching them all. They took the two rabbits, their rations, and three skins of water. The Saeris did not touch what little riches they carried—Caan’s bronze cuff, Teff’s carved bone pendant, Nallan’s embroidered sash, and Dieon’s ring engraved with the symbol for his clan’s name.

“We need water.” Dieon staunched Raegn’s wound. “Our war camps will have already withdrawn, and your people will be quick to reclaim their lands. They will not let us Jaakan use their wells.”

One of the Saeris laughed. “The desert take you, Jaakan.”

They were gone. Dieon knew they would not go far, watching to make sure they left. He worked on Raegn. Teff and Caan did not have experience in binding wounds.

Dieon began calculating to hold back his fear. The rush of victory would lead the Saeris people to converge around their regained wells in multitudes. They would purpose to cut off any straggling Jaakan. The war was over, but they would not be lax. They would be even more

vigilant. For the coming weeks their only goal would be to expunge Jaakan from their lands and eradicate any remainder they found.

Secreting water from a well would not be an option with multitudes guarding them. It was too dangerous. If even one Saeris saw a water thief, an army would awake and descend. Stealing mounts would be equally dangerous—if Saeris kept any with them. They only rode donkeys. No horses or camels.

But Dieon could not let his captain die.

He pressed his lips together. Even if Raegn survived the wound, it was unlikely he would live through the journey back to Jaakan. Saeris was blessed with plant life and small prey in the season of Nabba. The closer they got to the Jaakan border...sand. The season of Eljihatt—of drought—would be upon them soon.

Five ra'iz.

Dieon snapped the shaft of the arrow and prepared to extract its head. Teff roused Nallan, and Caan took off his over robe, ripping it into strips for Dieon to use as a bind on their captain.

Less than a month.

Dieon took a knife from Teff and began to cut Raegn's wound so the back points of the arrowhead would not tear his flesh on its way out. He was relieved Raegn remained unconscious.

Two skins of water.

Nallan helped Caan build a fire. Smoke would not matter now. They had to burn Raegn's wound to keep him from losing even more blood.

Five ra'iz. Less than a month. Two skins of water.

“We are going to make it home,” Dieon said. “To our tribe. Each to our own clan.”

None of the others responded. They knew they could not make it to Jaakan through enemy land on their own, and it was unlikely they would be able to catch up with their camp.

They were going to die in Saeris lands, but not with a saber or arrow in their gut.

They were going to die for want of water.