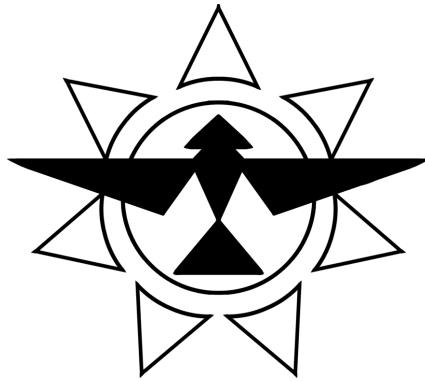


Through Death
-OR-
Through Darkness

Book Three of *The Seven Wars*

E. H. Kindred



A Novel Of The Somaðarsath

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The Seven Wars Series

The Immortal

Bound By Blood

Through Death Or Through Darkness

The Mirror of Dòmсаро

The Court Of The Hydra King

Time's Shadows

Storms Westward

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I see you,
Running up out of the night, bringing your cluster of stars,
 ever-enlarging stars;
Divider of daybreak you, cutting the air,
 touched by the sun, measuring the sky,
Passionately seen and yearned for by one poor little child,
While others remain busy, or smartly talking, forever
 teaching thrift, thrift;
O you up there! O pennant! where you undulate like a
 snake, hissing so curious,
Out of reach—an idea only—yet furiously fought for,
 risking bloody death—loved by me!
So loved! O you banner, leading the day,
 with stars brought from the night!
Valueless, object of eyes, over all and demanding all—
 O banner and pennant!
I too leave the rest—great as it is, it is nothing—houses,
 machines are nothing—I see them not;
I see but you, O warlike pennant!
O banner so broad, with stripes,
 I sing you only,
Flapping up there in the wind.

—Walt Whitman

Excerpted from “Song Of The Banner At Daybreak”

Chapter One

The late spring warmth made Ariana lazy. She left the house that afternoon once she had helped her mother chop the potatoes for dinner, and wandered through the trees toward the road to wait for her father to come home. She climbed up a tall yew tree, looking out over the forest, squinting emerald green eyes to make out the fields beyond, but saw no sign of him. The soft wind tugged at her red hair, making it catch on the twigs as she climbed back down.

Having grown sleepy in the heat, she sat against the base of a tree within sight of the road to wait. Her father had likely been delayed at the castle. As the ambassador between Earth and the Immortal world of Etheria, he was always needed for *something*. While Ari sat there by the road, the wind in the leaves began to lull her and she leaned her head back against the tree, drifting away into the warmth of the afternoon.

She was walking among trees again, but they were different than the ones she knew in Letiana. These were tall and broad, unfathomably large, yet graceful. She knew these trees, knew they were home to her grandparents. She had walked among them only a few times, but she would have known them anywhere.

Ari followed a winding path among the trees, heading in the direction of what should have been her grandparents' house, but she could not find it. She walked faster, her feet scuffing through the short velveteen grass, but the house wasn't where it was supposed to be. Concerned, Ari stopped and turned in a complete circle, realizing the forest was suddenly unfamiliar. The sky began to darken overhead, storm clouds rolling in from all directions, casting a chill over the ground below, a coldness that crept up over her feet, climbing her legs, prickling up her spine.

Ari was running then, weaving through the trees, fleeing the wind at her heels. Knowing that she was dreaming, she tried to change it, for she could often escape from nightmares, but this one would not answer her. She tried thinking of a different place, of her own home, but she could not get there. She thought of her father, riding in to pull her up on his horse, but he did not come. She called out for her grandfather, but he was nowhere to be found. She was lost in an endless wood, alone.

She could hear the wind shrieking through the trees behind her and the thunder bellowed overhead. Terrified, though she knew not why, Ariana tore through the forest, leaping over fallen

branches, skirting around the thick trunks of trees, struggling through the brush.

All of a sudden she came upon the riverbank and her arms flailed at the short stop to keep her balanced. Instead of water rushing by at her feet, it was crimson, dark and thick with what could only be one thing. That was when she saw the body float by. Horrified, Ari backed up from the riverbank, seeing more and more of them appear, all face down, some shot with arrows, others pierced by sword blades.

Suddenly, the wind caught up with her and slammed into her back. She was thrown forward into the river, the blood instantly rushing into her screaming mouth, clouding her eyes—

“Ari!”

Her eyes snapped open to find a tall, familiar figure kneeling in front of her. She looked at him, gasping, seeing the concern written across his snow-white face and shadowing his green eyes. She flung herself at him and Salazar caught her, startled at her sudden movement.

“You were just dreaming,” he told her. “It’s alright.”

“It was terrible, Adar,” she murmured, calming under his hand, as he stroked her back. “I haven’t had a nightmare in so long.”

“You couldn’t escape it?” he asked, knowing his daughter had always had a knack for manipulating her dreams.

Ari shook her head against his shoulder.

“The rest of us can certainly sympathize with that.” He patted her shoulder. “You’re safe, I promise. Do you want to talk about it?”

Ari shook her head, not wanting to even think about the river of gore again. Salazar nodded and released her, offering a hand to help her up.

“Come on,” he said, pulling her to her feet, “Maybe that stew of your mother’s will help you feel better.” He took the reins of his horse, but did not remount, choosing to walk the rest of the way, keeping an arm around his daughter’s shoulders. “She is making the beef stew, isn’t she?”

“She’s had me chopping vegetables for it all afternoon,” Ari muttered.

Salazar chuckled.

When they reached the house, Ari helped her father untack his mare, then the two went inside together. Rhia was there to meet them at the back door, greeting Salazar with a kiss and a smile. She caught sight of their daughter.

“Alright, Ari?” she asked. “You’re looking almost as pale as your father.”

“Just had a bad dream,” she replied, shaking her head and hoping she wouldn’t be asked about it further.

“Probably shouldn’t have slept so soon after nibbling on those leftover onions,” Rhia remarked with a fond smile. “Hopefully they’ll have worn off by tonight.”

Ari nodded, slipping past her to disappear down the hall to her room, hearing her mother ask of her father,

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“Good day at the castle?”

Ari didn't wait to hear his reply, shutting her door and going to flop out on her bed, still feeling a bit shaken. She reached over onto the bookshelf beside the bed and pulled off the small gold statue there. It was a little dragon, with emeralds for eyes, and elegant knotwork running down its neck and body all the way to the tip of its tail. It had been a birthday present from her grandparents when she'd turned sixteen several months prior. It was a pretty thing, perfectly crafted as only the Etherians could do.

She missed her grandparents as well as Etheria. She had only been to her grandparents' house there a few times in her whole life; most of the time they came to visit on Earth. It was strange, because the other people Ari knew of her own age were mortal, and their grandparents were either dead or old. Being of an Immortal family, Ari's grandmother and grandfather looked no older than her own parents. She missed them, and found herself wondering what her grandfather would have thought of her dream. He knew a lot of things and could always make her feel better when she was sad or frightened.

The evening passed as it normally did; she had supper with her family, then curled up on the chaise by the fire with a book until it was time for bed. As she slipped under the covers for the night, Ari tried not to think of her dream from earlier in the day, not wanting to invite such inescapable nightmares back, but they returned the moment she closed her eyes.

Ariana was back in the Etherian forest. She looked skyward and saw the clouds beginning to gather again.

“No,” she muttered. She closed her eyes and started concentrating on something else. She thought of the shore where her family would go in the summer, but she could not escape there. The stubborn dream remained unchanged.

Thunder cracked overhead and Ari could feel the wind picking up. She started running again. It was all the same. The wind screamed through the trees behind her and in it she could hear a voice crying,

“He is coming!”

Ari looked over her shoulder and saw the wind shaking the trees, and as it did, their leaves began to wither. Ari shook her head. Etherian trees never lost their leaves. The vision was impossible and all the more terrifying. The leaves turned black like ash and were blown ahead of the wind like dark snow. Panicked, Ari shouted,

“Adar!”

She thought frantically about her father riding in on his horse, scooping her up and carrying her away to safety, but the dream did not change. She fled like a terrified doe through the trees, knowing she would soon reach the river.

There it was. She saw it up ahead, just as thick with blood and bodies as it had been before. She could hear the wind howling up behind her, preparing to throw her into the terrible river, and

she brought her arms up over her face, screaming,

“Abadar!”

Suddenly, it was silent. Ari stood there, eyes clamped shut, hearing only the sound of her own gasping breath. She lowered her hands, opening her eyes to see the woods were still and dark. The faint glimmer of moonlight shimmered down through the thick leaves and the wind was but a gentle whisper. She no longer stood on the riverbank, but back among the trees, on a familiar path.

She took off running and soon came to the clearing. The house stood there as it was supposed to, large and familiar, with sharp-peaked roofs, and the tall turret on one end. The proud front door was open and Ari went running up the steps and into the foyer calling,

“Abadar? Grandmother?”

She heard a commotion from somewhere farther back in the house, so followed the hallway around, seeking the source of the noise. There was a high whining sound, a sharp squeaky squawk. Something glass shattered. A familiar voice was saying,

“No! Stop that!”

Ari at last came to the kitchen and looked inside.

Her grandfather, Lask, was there and from the looks of it, he was doing a very bad job of tending to eight baby griffins. They seemed to be everywhere at once; jumping up onto the counters and cabinets, knocking off plates and jars with their cumbersome tails and wings, gnawing on anything they could fit their beaks around, wallowing in the debris on the floor, squawking with glee. Lask was trying to chase after each of them, pulling one back from the fire, saying,

“Don’t get in there!”

He stretched up to reach one that was hanging upside-down from the rafters by her claws. Lask dislodged her and set her back on the floor.

“Get down from there. No—!” He managed to lunge over and catch one that was falling off the top of the spice cabinet. The griffin threw back his head and laughed in delight as Lask caught him, but Lask looked very unamused. He suddenly caught sight of who stood in the doorway.

“Ari?” he said, seeming surprised. The baby griffin writhed in his arms, trying to climb back over his shoulder, but he hung onto the griffin’s back legs, only to be smacked in the head by a wing. Gathering his wits, he said, “Here, lend a hand, would you?”

Ari came inside and waved her hands saying,

“Out! All of you!”

The griffins dissolved like smoke, leaving Lask blinking bewildered scarlet eyes in their wake. Ari rushed over and flung her arms around him.

“Abadar! I’m so glad to see you. I was so scared! I couldn’t get away.”

“What are you talking about, Ari?” asked Lask.

“I was having a nightmare,” she told him. “I had it earlier in the day, too. Normally I can get out of them, but I couldn’t get away from this one. I’m glad you could rescue me this time.”

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"I was a little preoccupied, if you didn't notice," Lask replied. "I didn't even know you were in need of rescuing."

"Oh no, I just managed to conjure you up in my dream and escape out of the other one."

"What do you mean?" Lask asked. "You're in *my* dream."

"No, I'm not," replied Ari. "This is *my* dream."

She looked over his shoulder then to a movement outside that caught her eye. There was, inexplicably, a whale in the yard. It smiled at her, barnacle-pocked skin crinkling around its eyes. Lask glanced over his shoulder and didn't seem surprised.

"No," he said, "No, this is most certainly *my* dream." He looked back down to Ari. "You probably shouldn't even ask about that." He nodded back toward the whale.

"But if you're dreaming," said Ari, "And I'm dreaming, does that mean we're both actually here?"

"I imagine you are just another figment of my dream, although a persistent one."

Ari closed her eyes and suddenly they were standing on a seashore, just out of reach of the lapping waves. Lask looked around, surprised and not knowing the place where they stood, then cast a suspicious eye back down at his granddaughter.

"Are you always able to manipulate your dreams this way?" he inquired.

"Generally," Ari replied.

"Call to Scoarin," Lask told her.

"But I've never met her. I don't even know what she looks like."

"Try."

Ari turned and shouted the dragon's name out over the water. Receiving no response, she called again, then turned back to her grandfather and shrugged.

Just then, there was a low, thumping sound on the air, like a deep heartbeat. Lask looked skyward and Ari followed his gaze, seeing a golden shape come flying in from above the clouds. The dragon landed in the sand nearby, folding copper-colored wings on her back, and looking around with indignant green eyes.

"Who is calling me?" she demanded. "I swear, if it's you again, Socadan—" She caught sight of the two humans standing there on the shore. "Lask?" she asked, surprised. She looked over to the girl. "You must be Ariana. What are you doing? How did you summon me here?"

"I was hoping you might be able to tell us," Lask said. "I know I am asleep and dreaming and Ari claims to be as well. Are you?"

"Yes. I was getting a quick nap before going out for a late-night hunt." She lowered her head down to their level, regarding Lask through a narrowed eye. "Did *you* call me?"

"No, Ari did."

The dragon's enormous head swung over to the girl, eyeing her.

"How did you do it?" asked Scoarin.

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“I don’t know,” Ari replied, nervous under the dragon’s predatory eyes. “I just called your name and you were here.”

The dragon soaked in this information with a thoughtful rumble.

“Make the water disappear,” she said, nodding out toward the ocean.

Ari extended a hand toward the sea and it was suddenly dry. Lask and Scoarin exchanged glances.

“Have you always had this much control over your dreams?” the dragon asked.

“Yes. Why?”

“Can you summon anyone into your dream at will?”

“Perhaps. It seems that way.”

“Call your parents here.”

Ari obeyed, turning to the now dry sea and calling out to her mother and father. Salazar and Rhia appeared on the shore nearby. They each looked around, bewildered and noticed the other three standing there.

“Adar?” said Salazar, confused. “Scoarin?”

“How did I get here?” asked Rhia.

“We were all summoned in the same way,” said Scoarin, “By your daughter.”

Ari looked guilty.

“I believe,” the dragon continued, “That you might have a great gift, Ariana, for no ordinary person can summon the sleeping conscience of a dragon to them with such ease, nor is it an easy feat to connect with so many minds at once. I believe you may be a Dreamweaver, Ariana.”

“What is that?” asked the girl.

“A powerful being with great magic,” Scoarin replied, “Masters of the dream world. They can see the future in their dreams, create and alter dreams as they please, send them to any mind they wish, summon any sleeping mind to them and enter the dreams of others at will. As they become more powerful they can even put others to sleep and enter their minds, perhaps even kill the mind of a sleeping creature.”

“Sounds dangerous,” Salazar remarked.

“I have only heard of Dreamweavers in legend,” said Lask. “Why, if those stories are true, is there not a better record of people with such power?”

“Because there are so few of them,” Scoarin replied. “I believe Ari may only be the third to have ever existed. There can only be one in the world at a time and even then, centuries may pass before a new one is born.”

“But if I have this power that’s as strong as you say,” Ari protested, “Why haven’t I felt it before?”

“It is likely getting more potent with age,” the dragon said. “Or perhaps there has not been a need for you to have any kind of vision yet. If you can normally manipulate your dreams as you

choose, has there ever been one you had no control over?”

“Yes,” Ari answered. “They don’t happen often, but,” she paused. “I had one today, and it returned again tonight, but I was able to escape it.”

“You shouldn’t,” said the dragon. “Any dream you cannot control, or one that returns several times, you should pay close attention to. It is likely trying to tell you something very important.”

“But it was a nightmare,” Ari protested. “It was a horrible—”

“Still, try to suffer it. It may be that you can prevent a disaster.”

The girl looked around at her parents and grandfather, hoping one of them might tell her not to worry, that Scoarin was wrong, but they all just looked at her, grave and expectant. She reminded herself that magic was not nearly as new and novel to them as it seemed to her, that in the world of her fathers, things like this were normal and necessary to the world’s fate. Ari’s mind was reeling. If Scoarin was right and she *did* hold that much power inside her, then it would surely come at a great price and with much responsibility. The prospect of being able to hold that much sway over the minds of others, to be able to see and alter the future, suddenly terrified her.

“I need to think,” she said. “Leave me be, please. All of you.”

“Ari,” said Salazar, “Wait—”

She waved her hand before he could finish, and her family and Scoarin dissolved, drifting away like smoke as if they had never been there. Alone, Ari sank down to sit on the beach, replacing the water in the sea so she could be lulled by the waves. The crashing water seemed to whisper,

“Ariana... Ariana...”

Concerned, she got back to her feet, looking into the water for the source of the voice. Just then, the wind came rushing in, crashing into the water. The sea parted before it, great walls of water rising before her, and Ari looked on, amazed, as the water was transformed and she found herself once more standing among towering trees. The wind began to scream in the distance, but this time, Ari held her ground. The storm blew up before her, and as the leaves began to wither and swirl on the wind, she shouted,

“Stop! You frighten me! What do you want?”

“Ariana,” whispered a voice in the wind. “Listen, Ariana...”

The wind rushed forward and hit her, but instead of knocking her to the ground, it swept her up among the leaves and Ari found herself borne away over the treetops.

“He is coming,” said the voice in the wind.

“Who is coming?” asked Ari.

She looked down below on an open field and the winds showed her a bearded man on horseback, dressed in blue, bearing the crest of a golden lion. Behind him came an army of uncountable soldiers and hundreds of horses, pulling terrible machines of wood and metal. Ari did not know what they were. The army swept over the land like a crashing wave, and they left in their wake fire and blood.

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“He is coming,” whispered the voice again.

Ari looked on, horrified, as she was carried over the carnage; thousands of bodies, miles of ash. The winds dropped her then and Ari fell to stand at the very peak of a great waterfall. She looked out over the forest, and all of it burned. The ancient trees were consumed in the flames, the smoke choking the sky, and where water should have rushed by around her, there was only blood. Carried in the current were creatures of all kinds; humans, birds, horses, griffins, centaurs, deer, shredded roses, anything that was alive now rushed by on the grotesque river, dead, falling away over the edge into the blazing crimson oblivion below. Ari watched, rooted with terror, and heard a bird-like shriek from above. She turned her eyes skyward to see a black hawk, turning and turning in a widening circle, lost amid the smoke, the feathers of his wings ablaze. He screamed in the burning sky, falling, plunging into the deathly river below.

“He is coming,” whispered the voice in the wind.

“*Who?*” Ari shrieked. “Who has done this? Who is coming? Tell me!”

Suddenly everything went dark and all was still. Then, from the shadows, came a whisper,

“Vortearigan.”