

# Nightfall

— THE RISEN —

D. W. Vogel

NIGHTFELL: THE RISEN

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Published by Outland Entertainment LLC  
3119 Gillham Road  
Kansas City, MO 64109

Founder/Creative Director: Jeremy D. Mohler  
Editor-in-Chief: Alana Joli Abbott

ISBN 978-1-947659-19-3 (Paperback)  
ISBN 978-1-954255-35-7 (Ebook)  
Worldwide Rights  
Created in the United States of America

Editor: Alana Joli Abbott  
Copy editor: Scott Colby  
Proofreader: Lorraine Savage  
Cover Illustration: Nicolás R. Giacondino  
Cover Design: Jeremy D. Mohler  
Interior Layout: Mikael Brodu

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Printed and bound in the United States of America.

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## — CHAPTER ONE —

**T**he bedroom of Dolen and Rayli's small house smelled of sweat and blood. Dolen's hand had long since gone numb under his pale wife's strong grip, squeezing harder with every contraction. At the foot of the bed, a midwife kept peering under the sheet draped across Rayli's legs. Her expression grew more worried every time she met Dolen's eyes.

"You're doing great, honey," Dolen said, prying his hand out of Rayli's and giving her his other hand to squeeze for a while. "It can't be much longer. You can do it."

A noise like a dying ghote tore from Rayli's throat as another wave hit her. She was beyond words, and had been for over a cycle, hours bleeding into each other in the unending darkness of Nightfell.

Just one more cycle. Twenty-four more hours of pale, interrupted moonlight before the Eyes of the Atamonen opened in the sky, eight blinding suns to warm the land and drive away the horrors of the dark.

"Don't push yet," the midwife said from between Rayli's legs. "The baby is breech. I hoped he'd turn, but he hasn't. I'm going to have to reach in and turn him myself." The old woman wiped a hand across her brow, leaving a streak of blood.

Dolen hadn't looked under the sheet for hours. He leaned down and forced himself to peer at the bed beneath his wife. Blood. So

much blood. He turned back to Rayli, whose thinned lips were white, eyes squinted shut against the pain. "You'll be fine," he comforted. "Just a little while longer."

It wasn't going well. Rayli was a Lightshaper, and in the first hours of her labor, the lanterns in the room had flared with every contraction, her power to magnify and shape the light running wild as she strained. Now the tiny flames barely flickered. Her strength was failing with each wave.

The midwife stood and nodded for Dolen to follow her.

"Just a minute, honey. We'll be right back."

Dolen followed the midwife through the curtained doorway of their bedroom, out into the cottage's main room. One of the living ranch hands and three of the Risen were waiting at the long wooden table where Rayli served their meals every day. The Risen didn't actually have to eat, but they stayed stronger and needed fewer embalming herbs if they were well fed.

"How is she?" one of the Risen hands asked.

The midwife answered for Dolen, speaking in a whisper so Rayli wouldn't hear through the curtain.

"She's in trouble. The baby is sideways, and I'm going to have to try and turn him. She's lost a lot of blood already, and turning him risks tearing the sac inside. If she can't deliver him fast, she could bleed to death very quickly."

Dolen felt his face go white. "But you have herbs for that, right? Something to stop the bleeding?"

She shook her head. "I already used everything I have."

"Well, go get more!"

Her eyes dropped. "*Everything* I have. There is no more."

Mayla, the living hand, spoke up. "The caravan would have some, wouldn't they?"

*Yes! The caravan!*

"But where is it? Are they close?" Desperation clouded Dolen's voice.

"Usually passing over the high mountains around this time, if they keep to their usual schedule. It's almost Daybreak, and they'll

be losing their Risen help. I know they leave them to freeze in the high pass so they'll stay fresh for next Nightfell when they Rise again."

The Risen ranch hands looked at the floor, obviously not keen to be reminded that when the Eyes of the Atamonen opened, they would fall, returning to the dreamless, timeless world of the dead until they rose again next Nightfell, some ninety years in the future. Dolen and Rayli would be long gone by then, but perhaps their son would live to see it, a very old man meeting these same Risen who were here for his birth. Dolen and Rayli would Rise as well, to meet the future generations of their family.

If their son was born. If he lived. If Rayli lived.

"I'll go." Dolen reached for his fur-lined boots and heaviest coat.

Mayla offered to go with him, but Dolen shook his head. "Stay here in case anyone needs anything." Of course the Risen couldn't go. Their undead bodies would freeze much more quickly than living humans. For ranch work, they stuffed the inside pockets in their clothes with heated stones, but they still had to come back to the house every few hours to reheat. Without the support of a caravan, Risen didn't last long in the mountains.

Dolen pushed through the curtain, avoiding the blood smear where the midwife's hand had touched it. He knelt next to Rayli's bed and took her hand again.

"We need some herbs that will make it better," he said, smoothing away blonde hair glued to her sweaty forehead. "I have to go find the caravan to get what we need, but I'll be back just as quickly as I can. You just try to rest. Don't push. Just wait for me. I promise I'll be back. I love you so much." Tears filled his eyes. "I promise, Rayli."

She nodded, too exhausted to speak.

When Dolen kissed her cheek, it was cold and clammy. As if she were already dead and Risen herself, a walking, talking corpse held together with embalming herbs and the grace of the Atamonen gods. Dolen clutched the large, smooth stone that hung

from his neck, whispering a prayer to Ata Lashka, whose eye was etched into its surface.

He paused at the curtained doorway, averting his eyes from the crimson stain that seeped into the bedsheets at Rayli's feet. Her eyes were closed, breath coming in short, quick pants.

*Go now.*

The midwife hurried past him, back into the bedroom. She would do what she could while Dolen was gone, but he had to hurry. The caravan wouldn't be easy to find in the northern passes. And Rayli didn't have much time. He had seen it in the midwife's furrowed expression.

"Any clue where to start?" he asked Mayla, filling a travel pack with some chitin scarab coins; a canteen of water and a hot rock to keep it from freezing; a few dried strips of ghote meat; and a small, hard loaf of bread. He wouldn't need the food. He'd be back long before he got too hungry. Surely he would.

Mayla shrugged. "No one knows for sure where they leave their dead, but I'd try Zigzag pass first. It opens up to some flatter land up top. Prob'ly a good place for them to camp at Daybreak."

Dolen knew Zigzag well enough. His father had died up there, chasing down a lost ghote in a storm. No one ever found his body, but whenever Dolen had to secure one of the flock from the twisty passage, he looked in vain hope of finding his father's corpse in the snow that never melted.

"Take this." Jak, one of the Risen ranch hands, held out a long, curved knife made from the sharp mandible of a skitter. A weapon of metal would have been better, but metal was a luxury few could afford. It was the most formidable weapon he had, and Dolen buckled the sheath around his waist gratefully. There were worse things in the high passes than ice.

He strapped the travel pack over his shoulder as another moan came from behind the curtain.

*Hang on, Rayli. I'm going for help.*