

# Mountain Echoes

## Chapter One

“I am a vessel for truth, a weapon to be used for right, an instrument for good, a...whatever. I have a gift.” The mantra shifted through her dreams with the soft caress of a warm summer breeze.

A wheezing cough rattled through Sloane’s mantra, chasing it away like the streaking of dawn chased the night back for the break of another day. Keeping her eyes closed, she rolled over to onto her side and listened to the coughing again. Baellian was old. He had always been old, but he had always been with her, as far back as she could remember. She imagined that if she had a grandfather, she would want him to be like Baellian. She stretched her muscles to warm them up. Even midsummer mornings were cold on the high peaks of the Zairyn Mountains.

Still drifting through slumber, fragments of memories floated through Sloane’s mind...a flash of white silk against her cheek, the searing heat of fire, a scream shattering the darkness...she bolted up, fully awake. Tears streamed down her face, and she quickly wiped them away.

“Why can’t I remember more?” she whispered to herself once again.

The silence that echoed back in her mind blackened her mood. Baellian had told her long ago that she would remember more when the time was right. Then he had turned away with a worried look and a shake of his old bald head. She pushed her dark thoughts away and listened to the familiar sounds around her. Again, coughing filled the little hut Sloane shared with Baellian. The banked fire cast a soft glow of strange ghostly shapes dancing along the walls.

Commented [DF1]: DP: As she drifted through slumber

Crawling out from under the warm covers, Sloane moved over to the fire pit and knelt on the hard-packed earthen floor. She swiveled the fire crane toward her. She poured water from a large earthen jug into the kettle, set it on the hook, and swung the crane back over the fire. She felt Baellian start moving around behind her as she coaxed the banked fire back into life. She knew, from countless mornings just like this, the rustle ~~of~~ his well-worn robes made as he slipped them over his stooped shoulders. She smiled as she ~~feed~~-fed more wood to the fire's hungry flames. Pulling the ends of her sleeves over her slender fingers to retain some warmth, she sat back on her heels waiting for the fire to chase the early morning chill from the air.

They had shared their little one room hut all her life...well, as much of her life as she could remember. The rough-cut wood walls had weathered ~~grey~~-gray long ago. Baellian used d to repair the thatch roof every summer, till he almost fell off when Sloane was seven...she did it after that. That was when she discovered how much she liked being up above her world. It was also when she started talking to the mother goddess.

"It seems morning comes earlier every day." The familiar grandfatherly whisper broke into her thoughts. She closed her eyes as she listened to the wheezing that laced his words.

Sloane smiled to herself. Since midsummer's eve had not yet come, the mornings ~~where~~ were getting earlier. She filled a small fabric pouch with tea leaves, pulled ~~it's~~-its drawstring tight, and dropped it into an old, chipped ceramic pot, careful to keep the long strings dangling down on the outside of the pot. When the water came to a boil, she poured the hot liquid over the pouch, and filled the pot. The water quickly turned a rich amber color. Swinging the kettle back over the fire, she left the water to boil away, filling the hut with moist heat. Baellian busied himself with preparing honeyed bread for them to break their fast. Sitting at a tiny table, they ate quickly. Then Baellian looked around as if he had lost something.

“Where is Lahal?” Baellian’s voice became stronger as he breathed in the warm steam. His coughing eased.

“He didn’t come home, but he is close.” She said matter-of-factly. She stood and swung the kettle away from the fire, poured the little amount of water left in the kettle into a basin and added water from the earthen jug. She set the empty jug next to the door so she would remember to take it to the river later to refill it. Baellian nodded, wrapped his withered fingers around his walking stick and slipped out of the door.