

## DARK QUETZAL

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extract from chapter 5

Her pallet was moving – a horrible, swaying, sideways motion – and someone was crouched nearby, giggling. Kyarra groaned and turned over. “Go away, Lianne,” she mumbled, hiding her head under the covers. “Leave me alone.”

“I know you’re awake,” said a girl’s voice. “So you might as well get up. Father’s put me in charge of you, and I’m warning you now, I’m not standin’ for no high and mighty nonsense, so stop moanin’ and get on up!”

The covers were dragged off her, and something cold and wet landed on her chin. “Here – mop your face. Make you feel better.”

Kyarra struggled up and peered in confusion at her tormentor. A grubby face framed by tangled red hair swam into view. Interested eyes studied her, reminding her of another pair of eyes that had studied her in exactly the same way as their owner had crouched before her, squeezed her chin, and asked who she was shouting to.

“Where’s Caell?” she demanded. “What did they do to him?”

The girl frowned. “Who?”

The rest of it was slowly coming back now. Creeping out of the Echorium, the mist, the men with their faces hidden behind scarves, the poor villager and the orderly they’d knocked out . . . Kyarra stared round in panic. Her bed wasn’t a pallet on the floor, but a type of sack suspended from the ceiling by chains. And this wasn’t the dormitory in the Echorium, but a tiny wood-panelled room that tipped and swayed around them.

“Where am I? What happened to my friend? Where is he?”

“Ain’t no boys here.”

“He was with me in the village. He saw me go into the hut!”

The girl shrugged. “Then I expect Father silenced him.”

Kyarra struggled to get her legs out of the sack. It was difficult at first, then suddenly the whole contraption tipped sideways and deposited her with a painful thud on the floor at the girl’s feet. She was wearing scuffed boots and boy’s trousers. Thrust through her belt was a little dagger with a glittering blue handle.

The girl laughed. “Never slept in a hammock before, huh? You’re not what I expected, I must admit. Do you always wear a skirt? Is your hair really that colour?”

“Get off me!” Kyarra batted her curious hand away and used the hammock to pull herself to her feet. “If you’ve hurt Caell, I’ll . . . I’ll . . .” She couldn’t think. She clung on to the chains, swaying with the motion of the cabin. Her head throbbed. She raised a hand to the back of her skull, felt a little star-shaped weal, and shuddered. “Where are you taking me? I remember now – that bully your father called Blackbeard knocked me out!”

The girl sighed. “What’s the matter? You never been stunned before? Stop makin’ such a fuss! I don’t know what happened to your friend. I wasn’t even on your stupid island. Father made me stay on the ship.” She pulled a face. “Don’t you even want to know my name? I know yours. You’re Ky-aahra.” She pronounced it funny, with a long, drawn-out ‘a’.

Kyarra scowled. “*Kyarra*,” she corrected, eyeing the dagger in the girl’s belt. It looked more decorative than useful, but if she could get hold of it she might have a chance.

The girl shrugged. “Whatever. I’m Jilian. I’m the only girl in Father’s band who’s allowed to go on raids!” She tossed her hair over her shoulder and smiled. “Last year I stabbed a man. Bet you’ve never done *that*, huh, Kyarra?”

Kyarra’s stomach twisted with anxiety for Caell, and anger at herself for being afraid. The cabin had a small, round window. Through the glass, she glimpsed spray and the open sea. She quickly looked away, tightened her jaw and picked up the wet cloth Jilian had thrown at her earlier. She pressed it to the sore place on the back of her head and tried to think.

“Singers don’t need to stab people,” she said. “Our Songs make fighting unnecessary. This one, for instance . . .” Softly, she began to hum.

*Aushan, Aushan makes you scream.*

Jilian quickly reached beneath her tunic and pulled out a thong on which a familiar-looking star of black crystal was threaded. She dangled it before Kyarra’s eyes and laughed when Kyarra shrank back. “I know what you’re trying to do! Father said you might try your enchantments on me. You’ve already seen one of these, haven’t you? They don’t just knock people out, you know. This is a magic black crystal star from the Lord of the Forest himself.

Your Songs won't work on any of us while we're wearing these. With a little smile, she pushed the star back under her tunic. "But don't you try takin' it off me, mind! I might just stab you by accident." She fingered her dagger and giggled again.

Kyarra's head was still hurting. She looked at the door. It didn't seem to be locked. As Jilian chuckled to herself, Kyarra tested her balance then suddenly let go of the hammock and barged past the girl. The door opened more easily than she'd anticipated. She stumbled through, but tripped over an unexpectedly high step and sprawled across the passage outside.

Jilian was on her in an instant, her sharp knees pressing on Kyarra's arms, a hand tugging at her hair. Used to similar fights with Lianne, Kyarra made herself go limp. When she felt the girl begin to relax, she twisted out from under her, got an arm free and made a lunge for the star pendant. Her fingers caught the thong. But Jilian's teeth sank into her wrist, and she had to let go. The dagger appeared at Kyarra's cheek, suddenly not so small and pretty. She froze, the fear returning. Had this girl really killed a man?

Panting, Jilian glared down at her. "I told you, Kyarra, I'm not standing for no high-and-mightiness! Try that again and I'll tell Father to tie you up for the rest of the voyage like he had to do to that woman we picked up from the fish-people on our last trip out this way. She was all sorts of trouble, real stupid. I thought you had more brains. We're doing you a favour, you know, rescuing you from that Singer island. So you'd better start actin' grateful!" She put the dagger away, climbed off Kyarra, and planted her hands on her hips. "Get up. And let that be a lesson to you. Next time, don't try messing with Jilian of the Hills!"

Kyarra gritted her teeth and did as she was told – but slowly, as if dazed by the fight. She used the time to study the passage. There were two more doors like the one to the cabin she'd woken in, and a ladder at the end leading up into a grey mist. Was her mother behind one of the other doors? If the way she'd acted in the hut was anything to go by, they wouldn't even have to lock it to keep her inside.

"Where's my mother?" she demanded. "Is she here, too?"

Jilian put her head on one side, watching her with interest. "So that's who you were running to, is it? You're wasting your time. She can't help you. Singers did her in proper. Why don't I show you?"

Kyarra looked at the girl suspiciously, but it didn't seem to be a trick. Seizing her hand, Jilian led her along the passage to the furthest of the two doors. She didn't bother to knock, simply opened it and pulled Kyarra inside. "Mind the step!" she said, grinning.

Kyarra stepped carefully over the ledge, her heart beating hard. The woman Asil had taken from the village lay in a hammock similar to the one Kyarra had woken in. Her beautiful hair trailed over the edge in a thick, dark waterfall and the fingertips of one hand brushed the floor as the hammock swung to and fro with the motion of the ship. Her eyes were open but stared right through Kyarra without seeing her, just as they had done back on the Isle. Her expression was so blank, it made Kyarra shiver.

"Mother?" she whispered, going down on one knee beside the hammock and taking hold of the trailing hand. It was warm, not cold as she'd expected, but it didn't so much as twitch when she held it. "Mother? Can you hear me?"

"Father says she can't talk," Jilian said. "But she does what you tell her. Watch." She picked up a jug and poured some water into a cup, which she held out to the woman. "Drink!" she ordered.

The hand pulled itself out of Kyarra's grasp and obediently took the cup. The woman roused herself, drank without spilling a drop, then held out the cup for Jilian to take off her. Only when Jilian had done so did she lie back in the hammock. All the time, her eyes stared unblinkingly at the wall.

"See?" Jilian said. "But she'd never have drunk without being told to. If I didn't come in here and see to her regular like, she'd soil her hammock and starve to death. Nice work, huh? Your precious Singers did that to her."

Tears sprang to Kyarra's eyes. "They gave her the death-Song, but when the merlee told Caell she was living in Windy Corner I thought that meant it hadn't worked. She's so young . . ." She picked a black curl off the smooth cheek and pushed it behind a delicate ear. "They didn't tell me."

"Wouldn't, would they?" Jilian took her hand again and tugged her back out of the cabin. "Wanted you to grow up like them, didn't they? Grow into a good little Singer, so's you could help them turn other people into zombies like her."

*Kyarra had not planned to leave the Echorium in the company of pirates, but now she has no choice. Find out what happens when she reaches the mainland and encounters a dark secret from her past in the final book of the Echorium trilogy "Dark Quetzal".*