

Author's Preferred Edition

THE PATH

A Sundered Lands Saga Story



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THE PATH
A SUNDERED LANDS SAGA STORY
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DESERT DRAGON PUBLISHING

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Cover by Lexy Wolfe

DESERT ECHOES

THE MERCILESS DESERT SUN beat down on the solitary figure stumbling through the barren wastelands, his shadow sharp and dark against the bleached sand. Taking shelter in the shade of a rust-colored rock overhang, the young man dropped to his knees, pressing the heels of his calloused hands against his throbbing temples. The echoes of his tribal kin's emotions through the *bayuli-volsha*—the invisible silver thread that tied them all, no matter their distance from each other—rang through his mind without mercy, each thought a searing needle.

Disapproval like bitter gall, disgust that curdled his stomach, disappointment that crushed his chest, and anger that burned hotter than the midday sun drowned out the fragile tendrils of love and worry from his siblings, overwhelming the precarious mental barriers he attempted to build to protect his aching heart and wounded soul. With an inarticulate sound of desperation—half sob, half growl—he drew the gleaming Naming Blade from its leather sheath. He looked at the image of the Totani who granted him his adult name, a mountain cat etched in gold and glittering on the hilt, his whisper harsh as windblown sand. "Forgive me, Kailee. I know not what else to do to be free of him. The only path is to sever my tie to the na'Citali tribe." As he slashed his wrists with fluid motions, the clamor of emotions finally went silent, like a sandstorm abruptly calmed.

With a mixture of relief washing cool through his veins and shame burning behind his eyes, he watched the pale sand turn crimson with his lifeblood before he collapsed like a broken doll. A single tear escaped his eye, carving a clean path through the dust on his cheek, before silent darkness claimed him like an old friend.

AWAKENING

CHILL NIGHT WIND SLICED across Radisen's face, and a dissonant shriek—like metal scraping stone—jolted him awake. He blinked away the haze of unconsciousness and stared. Silvery moonlight bathed the distinctive form of a drizar, its scaled hide gleaming with iridescent patterns that shifted as it moved. The beast's serpentine neck arched proudly above a muscular body that resembled a horse, yet its taloned feet and spiked tail marked it unmistakably as one of the reptilian drizzen that roamed Desantiva's deserts. Momentary terror gripped him—visions of those razor-sharp teeth tearing his flesh—before confusion washed it away. The creature's horns and deadly claws had been capped with intricately etched bronze that caught the starlight. His muddled thoughts struggled to remember where he had heard of the atypical traits.

When he attempted to sit up, white-hot pain lanced from his raw, leather-bound wrists through his entire body. A guttural cry of agony escaped his parched lips as he collapsed back onto a rough-woven sleeping mat. The familiar sloshing sound of water drew his attention, followed by a weathered water skin appearing before his face. He encircled the small, calloused hands holding it with his own trembling ones, his thirst a desert more vast than the one surrounding them, driving him to gulp the tepid, mineral-rich liquid before finally raising his eyes to meet those of his savior.

"Rest." Feral, green-gold eyes as hard as a bird of prey's caught the moonlight like polished stone. "You lost much blood before I found you. Most men would have died," the small woman stated, her Desanti an unfamiliar accent to him. Copper skin gleamed against the night, her bronze-brown hair streaked with distinctive metallic gold and copper strands that seemed to shimmer of their own accord—traits he recog-

nized through the stories all the tribes whispered of a terrible tragedy that occurred when he was a child.

"I thought the na'Zhekali tribe had been extinct since I was a boy," he blurted, his physical state robbing him of tact.

The woman's stony expression clouded, then hardened. "I have no tribe. I am Githalin Swordanzen."

Recognition struck him like lightning from a desert storm—the legendary title and distinctive beast companion could belong to only one person. "*You* are Storm il'Thandar?" She did not answer him, her glare murderous at the perceived insult—whether toward her birth tribe or her gender. He held up his hands. "I meant no insult, Githalin Swordanzen. I had only heard stories about you, but none described you...only *him*." He gestured towards the drizar. Somewhat mollified, she settled back into a hunter's crouch and ignored him. He offered tentatively, "I am Radisen na'Ci—" He broke off, then sighed, looking away in shame, moving his hands to display his bound wrists. "I am no one. I have no *bayuli-volsha* any longer."

"I know who you are, Radisen. Thandar told me. Kailee told him." She flicked a glance towards him. "The Totani do not forget those who earn their adult name from them, especially when his pain is so intense it reaches her in the Rumblelands." She gazed out into the night desert. "Nor do they ask for the lives of the unworthy to be saved. It is rare for Citali to reach out to any, but he did for you. He found the paths that let me reach you in time."

He blinked and looked back at her. "But I tried to kill myself. Suicide is the gravest of sins, especially for a na'Citali."

"You tried to kill yourself? Truly?" She turned her hard gaze back to him. "That is not what Citali told Thandar. He said you were driven away from your tribe and sought freedom from unbearable torment. Are you saying your tribe's patron Totani or my Githalin Totani are lying?"

Radisen winced and looked away. "No."

She held out her waterskin to him. He accepted it without hesitation, taking a long pull on it. With a grimace, he forced himself to sit up, looking back to see he lay on her sleeping mat. "You had been unconscious for several days. Drizar guarded you from scavengers for me while I found water."

"Thank you," he said in a low voice.

Instead of responding to his gratitude, she turned fierce eyes back on him. "Tell me." Calloused fingers touched his chin to turn his face

towards her, studying his eyes that shifted from tawny brown to true gold. "What would drive a Su'alin to break his tie to his tribe? To his Path? No one is blind to the dangers of being without *bayuli-volsha*. I know it is a greater danger to spiritwalkers."

"I am not Su'alin," Radisen snarled, turning away from the woman; Storm frowned, but let him speak. "I was attacked during a spiritwalk, and I was too weak to defend myself. My sister got me to safety while our mother fought the *su'dinnais*. We did not realize she was too injured, too tired from the fight, that she could not return across the blade from the dreamscape. My failure impaired my spiritwalker vision and killed my mother. My father was training me to be his heir to lead the na'Citali tribe and Path of the Spirit. Now, the edge of the blade within the dreamscape blurs and wavers—one misstep and I could drag others across the blade into death with me. A Su'alin who cannot walk the spirit realm is worth less than dust. I cannot serve Desantiva as I was meant to." Blood seeped from beneath the leather binding his wrists as he clenched his fists. He hissed, "I am nothing but a worthless warrior."

"The Path of the Spirit considers itself above the Path of the Sword?"

The hair on his nape bristled at her words. He grimaced, his eyes finding sudden interest in the sand between them. "The Alanis Su'alin would say yes," Radisen answered, his voice hollow as an empty waterskin. "He would say we spiritwalkers...those blessed by Citali...hold greater power because we traverse the boundary between life and death at will. Su'alin fight the *su'dinnais* that hunger for living spirits where warriors can only face the *dinnais* on this side of the blade. We—they can anchor souls to this realm. Warriors?" His mouth twisted. "They merely push others across that threshold, never crossing it themselves until they are too weak to answer a challenge and fall themselves."

Silence met the statement for so long, Radisen spoke a silent prayer in preparation to meet his life's end. Yet still, nothing happened. "Perhaps he is right in part," Storm stated with thoughtful, almost sad tones. He looked up in shock, staring at her profile as she gazed into the desert. "I would give much if my skills could preserve life as much as protect it from itself."

"But a warrior is not worthless. *No one* is worthless if they serve our great Father through living life to its fullest, finding joy and love in what they do for others and themselves. Striving each day to be better than the day before. Life is the greatest gift, the most precious treasure. It should be cherished. Protected so it has the chance to flourish." The

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brief glimpse of loneliness vanished behind a hardened veil. "To think otherwise is an insult to Him."

He reached out to touch her cheek, but stopped, letting his hand drop to his lap. The faintest strands of hope stirred within him as he contemplated her words. "I would serve the great Father as you do, Githalin Swordanzen. The Path of the Spirit is closed to me. Would I be welcome on the Path of the Sword?"

"You cannot train to become Swordanzen without a tribal bond. When a Swordanzen is Named by the Totani, they sacrifice the *bayuli-volsha* so they can sense the nuances within the land and from all living things equally. Few can endure for longer than five turns of the sky wheel once worthy to carry the sword. They either lose the will to survive or give up their sword to regain a tribal bond.

"As you are now, training would steal valuable time from your service to Him. Nor would you be welcome to share the *bayuli-volsha* with those in either the settlement of elders in First Home or the settlement of Citadel's protectors, where those who give up the sword or those born to them call home." She took his hand and lifted it to regard the bound wrist. "Even if I explained and told them otherwise, they would see disgrace, not the suffering you had endured that drove you to this."

His shoulders sagged. "Then I beg of you, Githalin Swordanzen. Kill me. If I cannot serve our great Father as either Su'alín or Swordanzen, I have nothing left. Only outcasts would accept me. That is a path no less dishonorable than suicide. I cannot live with that shame."

Storm did not flinch. "I did not say you could not become Swordanzen ever," she snapped, the words cutting as sharply as any blade. "I said you need a tribal bond, or else the isolation will drive you mad." She jabbed a finger at the sleeping mat. "Sleep. You must recover your strength. I must think."

Radisen, still weak from blood loss and cold gnawing at his limbs, had nothing further to say; he sank down onto the mat. As soon as his head touched the rough fabric, his eyes closed, and he dropped into sleep, leaving Storm alone with her thoughts.

POTENTIAL UNSHEATHED

THE SKY FADED IMPERCEPTIBLY from the deep indigo of night to the pale promise of early morning, blue seeping into the darkness until the last stars surrendered. Though the land might have seemed still and barren, quiet as a prayer, the subtle stirrings beneath the hush told a different tale: arachnids clicking over stone, tiny reptiles scuttling from their burrows, all rousing in the cool margin before dawn claimed the world entire. Each sought their piece of shade, their morsel of life, before the sun's rule—a reign so pitiless that nothing dared defy it once its heat spilled across the dunes.

"If you think he has potential, of course I would take him as my student," a muted, male voice stated as Radisen roused. He slit open his eyes to watch the two speakers, noting the man wore a Swordanzen Naming blade as Storm did, but not the paired blades she carried.

"You know I would not suggest it if I did not believe it, Chase." Storm's voice held the full measure of her impatience and irritation. "Once the Alanis Su'alín restores his tribal bond, I know he will do well in your care. I must attend to that task first. It will be a pointless exercise if I do not."

"You know I would never question your judgment, *th'yala*." Chase grinned at her as if the whole matter were a jest, but there was a ripple of mischief in his words that could not quite conceal deeper concern. She only snorted, dismissing his bravado. The levity crumbled, and his hand found her arm, anchoring her as his voice turned searching, earnest. "You are upset. Why? Because of him?" Chase's gesture made Radisen close his eyes, the unspoken wound as raw as if it had been voiced aloud. "You remarked on his strength already."

"How much did the Alanis Su'alín make his *own son* suffer that he would seek death and loss of his soul to escape him? Escape his own tribe?" Storm seethed, her fury so great Radisen could see she trembled

in the dim light of the approaching dawn. "I would give everything I am to have my tribe back, and he was driven from his? If I did not know Radisen would protect that horrible man, I would—!"

Chase quickly put his arms around Storm, pulling her tight against him as he hushed her. "Dwelling on his torment will only lead you to remembering your own tragedy. I would not wish you to suffer reliving those deaths again, especially if Thandar cannot come to save you from becoming lost in the past. Or for any other to suffer your vengeful rage if your self-control slips. The Alanis sounds arrogant enough to challenge your worthiness to bear Thandar's mark. I would hope not foolish enough, but we all choose our own paths. You've ended enough fools their journeys on their own."

"I live with the memory of the na'Zhekali massacre every day, Chase," she stated without inflection, letting him hold her. "I have since it happened. My self-control will not slip." She heaved a sigh. "But you are right. Only my tribe's murderers deserve to taste my vengeance. Radisen's sire will tempt me."

"Of course I am right." He reached over to remove his sleeping mat from his gear, handing it to her. "Get some sleep. I'll keep watch with that beast of yours." The drizar looked away from Chase's female drizzen he nuzzled to hiss at the other Swordanzen, baring his teeth. The Swordanzen man merely returned the gesture in kind. The animal rewarded him with a derisive snort and kicked dirt towards him with his back foot.

After waiting several minutes, Chase considered the woman, once certain she was asleep. "You do not need to stand so alone, my *th'yala*. I would travel with you always if it would spare you a fraction of the solitude you have suffered for so long."

Radisen closed his eyes, his fists clenching. "She is more alone than I have ever been."

GITHALIN'S CHALLENGE

BRILLIANT COLORS BLEED OUT in wild streaks across the sky as the sun kissed the horizon when the small group caught up to the na'Citali tribe. The drizar's shriek tore through the hush, and the tribe's own herd of drizzen answered in uncertain chorus. People emerged from the many tents, faces tight with fear or worry, all eyes drawn towards the unmistakable beast and his rider. At a light touch from his rider, he sank down to allow her to easily dismount, the men behind her following suit. Radisen hung back, shrinking into himself, gaze pitched towards the sand at his feet, tortured by the flood of emotions upon returning to the tribe he had fled.

Predator-sharp, green-gold eyes swept the gathered faces with unwavering focus, hawkish in their intensity. When the man she sought failed to appear among them, her gaze darkened, her lips twisting into a dangerous scowl. She squared her stance, her voice slicing the silence. "I am Githalin Swordanzen Storm il'Thandar! I demand to speak to Alanis Su'alin Roshisan na'Citali. Now!"

The drizar beside her trumpeted a challenge, his piercing call nearly swallowing the final word. Storm shot a glare at the beast, the annoyance clear in her set jaw, but she did not scold him. Instead, she let his warning resound—a promise that if she had to hunt down her quarry herself, the tribe would bear the brunt of her wrath.

"Radisen!" cried a delicate girl wearing a traditional Su'alin veil that covered only her eyes, bolting from a tent to leap into the young man's arms. A young man not long out of childhood who appeared a few years younger than the errant na'Citali son, followed her at a slower pace. He was no less worried and relieved to see him. "Oh, Radisen, we were so afraid when we could not sense you anymore. We thought you died!"

"I'm sorry, Kiya, Rengi," he said gruffly, eyes closed tight as his younger sister and brother embraced him. "I'm so sorry for leaving you both. I

just...I couldn't..." He fell silent, his arms tightening around his siblings as both embraced him.

A tall man wearing robes with ornate beading denoting his position and an opulent veil hiding his eyes strode out. Chase narrowed his eyes, about to chide the man on the barely respectful bow he offered Storm. He remained silent when Storm held up a hand. He rubbed his drizzen's chin and muttered, "Arrogant prig."

The Alanis looked Storm over with an air of superiority and grunted. "I heard there was a survivor of the na'Zhekali massacre. It surprises me a Cursed child could survive so long." Storm narrowed her eyes, crossing her arms, but said nothing to the provocation. "What do you want of the na'Citali, Githalin Swordanzen?" he asked bluntly in the Swordanzen holy tongue, taught only to those leading of one of the Paths, offering no welcome.

Storm's gaze met his, unwavering. Replying in flawless, fluent Swor-danzen, Storm's tone was almost casual, but the words themselves belied the edge beneath them. "Uncover your eyes, Spiritwalker. I have no fear of your gaze. I will not speak to a coward."

The man stiffened, flipping the veil back over his head. "You dare call *me* a coward, *warrior*?"

"You dare think yourself above Thandar's Githalin?" she responded, her tones still conversational so the other members of the tribe who kept a respectful distance could not hear them. "What is there for a Cursed child to fear from the likes of you? Just because you can willfully taunt death in the dreamscape does not make you any stronger than me. I had experienced death for each member of my tribe killed in the na'Zhekali tribal massacre."

"A Cursed child trailed by the scourge that took her tribe. And our great Father still allowed you to live?" he asked, critically.

"You dare question Him?" She snorted derisively. "Citali must find some merit in your existence. I will ignore your disrespect given your bereavement." She gestured absently towards the huddled siblings. "Radisen wishes to follow the Path of the Sword. I ask you, as the na'Citali chieftain, to restore his *bayuli-volsha* until the Totani deem him worthy to bear the Swordanzen blade."

"No." The man stared down at the smaller woman, his eyes tawny brown. "He made his choice when he turned his back on his tribe. His family. Let him suffer for—" He paled when Storm's expression shifted, unable not to take a half step back from her.

"Look at me with Citali's gift, Alanis Su'alin," she stated in dangerous tones. Reflexively, his eyes waxed from tawny brown to true gold, and his back stiffened at what he saw. "I am the Daughter of the Heart of Desantiva, chosen Githalin of Thandar the Golden. I alone survived the massacre of the na'Zhekali. I know death in ways you best pray you never, ever have to experience.

"The Totani do not judge you, but I do. You claim your son turned his back on you, but I know. I do not need Citali's gifts to see it in his eyes. You turned your back on him first. Even worse, you used your influence to turn the tribe against him, too. You spurned him and turned the blessing of the tribal bond into a curse to punish him every day until he could bear no more and did the unthinkable to escape. What sort of chieftain turns on one of his tribesmen? What sort of father turns on his own flesh and blood? I should rip your heart out through your ear for failing him.

"But I will not." She closed the gap between them, hissing at him. "I am slave to no one, divine or mortal. Even if the Heart Himself demanded anything, I am free to choose to act...or not. An Alanis is responsible for the whole of their tribe, as is the Alanis of the Paths. You bear both mantles and have failed to live up to the demands of either of them.

"You live only because your son begged me to forgive you for your grief at the loss of his mother, and Citali asked you to be spared my anger. Do not think I will forget what you have done. I certainly do not forgive you for it." She stepped back and demanded, "Restore the tribal *bayuli-volsha* to Radisen, or you will join him in the lack."

Despite having a darker skin color than Storm or Chase, the tall, broad-shouldered man was sickly pale at the unvarnished threat he could not deny she was capable of fulfilling. "As you wish, Githalin Swordanzen." He turned to Radisen, as much in obedience as desperation to get away from the dangerous woman glaring at his back. "Radisen," he stated, drawing his knife and cutting his palm.

Unsure, Radisen nevertheless echoed his sire's actions, grimacing when the man grabbed his cut hand in a hard grip, their wounds touching, a sharp, tingling sensation danced across his palm. He felt the tension across his shoulders ease as the bond was restored. Without a word, the Alanis turned on his heel and returned to the tents.

"Say your farewells, Radisen," Storm stated in curt tones. "We ride for the Citadel to formalize your acceptance as Chase's Swordanzen trainee."

"Yes, Githalin Swordanzen." Radisen looked to his brother and sister, then closed his eyes, turning his face away in shame. "Forgive me for not being stronger," he whispered.

"Are you sure this is what you want to do?" his sister asked, her worry and love for him untarnished. "No matter what Father insists on believing, Citali knows the truth. What happened when Mama died was not your fault."

"I am certain. I cannot be Su'alin, but I will serve Desantiva. One way or another. If not through the Path of the Spirit..." He looked over his shoulder towards Storm as she checked her drizar's saddle straps. "Then I will through the Path of the Sword."

His brother frowned, crossing his arms. "No na'Citali has ever followed the Path of the Sword. What if you do not succeed?"

"I will succeed, Rengi," he stated evenly, putting his hand over his heart. "I know I will because I know the Heart of Desantiva believes in me. Because she believes in me." His bitterness echoed in his expression, posture, and tone when he looked towards the encampment. "More than Father ever has since Mother died saving me."

Rengi narrowed his eyes. "Are you doing this because you want to be a Swordanzen, or because you want her?"

Radisen glared at Rengi, clenching his fists. "Do not dare criticize Storm il'Thandar! You know nothing about her. She has suffered more than you can imagine."

"Stop it!" With a kick to his shin, Kiya scowled up at the younger brother. "You are sounding like Father. We nearly lost Radisen because all Father did was hurt him!"

"Fine, fine," Rengi held his hands up in surrender. "Sorry, Radisen. Besides..." He looked towards the pair of waiting Swordanzen. "I like the idea that warriors are seen with greater value beyond our tribe. Father does not allow us to interact with outsiders unless it is as Su'alin, and I have no spiritwalker gifts."

Kiya hugged Rengi's arm. "I do not care if you do not have Citali's blessing. You and Radisen mean everything to me. I'd be alone without you since everyone else is afraid of me for my gift being active since birth and not only from my fifth birthday." Rengi sighed and nodded, trading a sad, knowing look with his brother at Kiya's isolation.

Radisen touched Kiya's cheek gently. "Be strong, little sister. You know if you need me, I will sense you through the *bayuli-volsha*. I will come to you."

"Until you become Swordanzen and your bond to the na'Citali becomes a bond to all Desantiva, at least. I know." She hugged him fiercely tight, then released him. "I hope you find what you seek. I just wish it would have been with our tribe and us." Rengi clasped his brother's hand tight for a moment before the pair turned to return to the encampment.

Radisen watched them leave, then turned away, joining Storm and Chase. Squaring his shoulders, he told the two Swordanzen. "I am ready to leave, Githalin Swordanzen Storm, Swordanzen Chase."

Storm mounted the crouching drizar, thumping his shoulder. The beast stood, shaking his head and prancing arrogantly. She looked at Radisen, and he thought he glimpsed sadness in her eyes. "I know." She looked forward. "I am glad I could return your family to you."

"But, what about you?" he began, reaching out to her.

"I am not your concern, Radisen na'Citali. Focus on the path you have chosen to walk. It will demand everything from you." She urged the drizar to head away from the encampment.

Chase rode his drizzen over, offering his hand to Radisen to help him mount behind him. "To dedicate yourself to the Path of the Sword is to choose to separate yourself from those you care most about to protect them. She never had that choice. She has dedicated her heart and soul to prevent others from suffering her fate."

"But who protects the protectors?" Radisen asked as he settled behind his trainer. "Who protects her?"

Chase laughed sadly. "Who indeed? The great Father knows I try my best. It is difficult for someone like her, whose heart still bleeds from the tragedy that stole the First Tribe from the people, who has been alone for so long it is nearly impossible for her to let anyone close enough to protect her." He looked over his shoulder. "You would understand."

Radisen closed his eyes. "Yes. I do understand her. Far too well." He clenched his fists, ignoring the pull on the mending gashes hidden beneath the leather wrapping his wrists. "I will not fail. Then she will not be alone."

Chase glanced over his shoulder at his new student, then looked towards Storm ahead of them, shaking his head with a sigh.