

Sentinel of the Sun

Eira Morgan-Jones



Cadno

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Graffeg Limited, 15 Neptune Court,
Vanguard Way, Cardiff Bay CF24 5PJ,
Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom.
Tel: +44(0)2022404970 www.graffeg.com

For my parents, who taught me the family motto –
‘never let the truth get in the way of a good story.’

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Way, Cardiff, CF24 5PJ, Wales, UK.
Tel: 01554 824000. croeso@graffeg.com.
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This book contains some violent scenes and
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Eira Morgan-Jones

Illustrations by Elliot Upton

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PART ONE



CHAPTER 1

The Luminary

Eighteen years before the wave

Had the Luminary known that night that his actions might bring about the end of the world, there's a chance he might have stayed his gun. A chance. The wetlands north of his capital felt especially primal in the dark, the air thick with the scent of water-saturated earth and blooming chlorophyll. He was struck by the sudden unsettling thought that the rise and fall of civilisations had been of little more note here than the rise and fall of distant trees.

Thunder punctuated the sucking sound his boots made as he trudged towards the bird hide, a wooden shack squatting in the long grass. Sludgy moonlight revealed nothing but frog-spawning brown swamp in every direction, flickering periodically with far-away lightning, while the night sky rumbled in warning. The door nearly collapsed in his hand, hunks of rotted wood crumbling to his feet like wet newspaper, but he squeezed inside and crouched, propping the muzzle of the rifle against the narrow viewing strip. Back in the calm of his study he had known what to do with absolute clarity, but now as he brushed the cobwebs from the low ceiling and wiped his hands on his coat, the truth seemed remote and uncertain. 'Have faith,' he murmured to himself, and fixed his hard grey eyes again on the sky, his lined forehead heavy and his steel-streaked hair damp.

The rhythmic ticking of his pocket watch dispassionately

observed the passing of the minutes as he squatted on his heels, alert to every flicker in the moody clouds, calf muscles burning. He considered adopting a more comfortable position, but the anxiety that kept his gaze fixed on the strip of landscape through the viewing hole warned him against getting relaxed. In the distance the sky glimmered with an ominous light like the flickering of a dying bulb, casting strange shadows across the dark ground. He shifted his weight awkwardly, flexing the muscles in his legs to relieve their cramping, and was just about to release his grip on the gun for a second to adjust his coat, when blinding-white fingers of lightning burst the storm cloud on the horizon and stabbed the earth.

A speck hung illuminated by the flare of angry brightness, a black dot in the distance growing bigger. He lifted his rifle and lowered his eye to look along its length, squinting against the intermittent flashes of light. His fingertip itched on the patient curve of the trigger. The bird was dead ahead, the arches of its wings outstretched against the clouds as it rode the waves of wind. A millisecond late and he would miss his shot. 'Squeeze, don't pull,' he whispered to himself. 'Guide me.' He closed his eyes.

The explosion of the gun ripped through the air, the recoil slamming into his shoulder like a punch. Hundreds of wild fowl erupted from the marsh, squawking and flapping as his eyes raked the sky. Chaos ascended, but one of the shapes was spinning, tumbling over and over in the air, plummeting down towards the earth. The gun clattered on to the dusty floorboards as he staggered towards the door and down the few steps to the muddy ground. Blood rushing back to his stiff legs and the soles of his feet full of needles, he jogged as fast as he could towards the patch of open grass where the bird had fallen.

It seemed so small up close, on the ground and near to death, such a fragile little thing, all tiny bones and pale feathers. Its chest movements were slowing as he picked it up to inspect it. He smoothed its soft down as its eyes rolled back in its head and the last of its strength went limp in his hands. He had expected more. He wasn't sure what, but it was just a dead bird. He stood for a while there on the marshland, the water slowly oozing through the thick fabric of his boots, but nothing happened. He tucked the bird inside his coat and walked stiffly back to retrieve the gun.

*

It hadn't taken him long to return home. The roads were empty in that black stretch of night, the car's headlights slicing through lonely shadows on his way back to the city. His footsteps had clattered, disruptive as drums in a graveyard, up the stone staircases of the Ziggurat, the white pyramid where he lived, but he saw no one.

Instead of heading straight to his own chambers he veered off early, making instead for hers, for the woman who had dispatched him on this strange mission. Lara. *Watch for the falcon*, she'd said. *Kill it and secure peace for all eternity*. He had done as she had asked and now, despite his tired eyes and the cold that had needled its way right down to the bone, he smiled a little in anticipation of how happy she'd be. How happy this would make her.

His face dropped as he approached her room, his fists tightening nervously at his side. Flashes of light licked like fire from beneath her door, illuminating the white stonework of the long corridor. He heard her scream cut across the close space and bound forward, his hand clasp the door handle even as he barged it open. The heat hit him like a weighted blanket,

stealing the air from his lungs and burning his eyes. Around the room small fires smouldered and the ceiling billowed with smoke, clouds of it snapping back and forth like sails in a storm.

Lara was crouched in the centre of the room with her back to him. Her hair, normally an elegant sheen of black against her silver robes, was as wild as a witch's thatch and singed in several places. Her whole body pulsed with silver light, illuminating the room like a star made flesh. Convulsing on the floor in front of her was a guard, his black hood thrown back and smoking. His eyes scorched into the Luminary's, two embers burning so brightly in their sockets that the Luminary threw up his arm to block the sight of them, white spots still dancing on the back of his eyelids.

'Lara, what is this?' he cried over the guard's moans.

She turned to face him, her filthy cheeks smeared with tears and ash. 'It's not working,' she sobbed. She pressed her hands, the open skin of them covered in fresh weeping burns, on to the guard's chest and a burst of golden light jumped up to meet her own silver, the flash of it scorching across the room, obliterating the smoke clouds even as it sparked more fires into life. The guard's back arched agonisingly up off the floor, his body writhing like a worm in vinegar, and he screamed, a stomach-churning rip of noise that made the Luminary's breath catch in his throat as he looked desperately around for water.

'Where are the other guards?' he shouted in panic, leaning out of the door and calling down the hallway. 'Guards!'

'No!' Lara bellowed in response. 'No one can see. I sent them all away.'

The Luminary stared at her, disbelieving. 'But –'

'Stop distracting me,' she shouted. 'Just stay back.'

The Luminary shrank against the wall, his fingertips scraping

against the warm plaster beneath them. He squeezed his eyes closed. *She is holy*, he forced himself to remember. *Have faith.*

The guard arched up off the floor again and she pushed him back down, bright golden light bursting in rays from within him, streaks of it erupting from his mouth, nose and ears. His skin was glowing, blistering and cracking as it tried to force its way out. ‘Cai,’ Lara sobbed, holding his burning face in her hands. ‘I’m so sorry.’

He said something then. The Luminary didn’t catch it, but he saw the man’s paper-dry, peeling lips move between the bursts of blinding, burnished gold that poured from his mouth like concentrated sunlight.

Lara leaned closer. ‘Cai?’

The guard screamed again and twisted on to his side, his hands knotting into the hems of Lara’s tattered robes. She grasped them in her own, twining her fingers between his. The twin suns of his eyes had sunk into his ghostly face and he retched, vomiting rivers of burning light across the flagstone floor, melting scorched swirls into its surface.

‘Cai!’

He was trying to speak again and the Luminary leaned closer, trying to catch the words as they rasped from his mouth.

‘Ca –’ he gasped. ‘Ca –’

‘What is it, Cai?’ Lara urged.

In the space of a sudden exhale the light within him seemed to dim, the coals of his eyes going dark and his burnt skin sinking back blackened over his bones. With the last trace of breath in his lungs he choked out the word ‘Carys’.

CHAPTER 2

Alexis

The day before the great wave did not begin well. In the marbled morning light that reached across their breakfast table, Alexis gnawed at a loose thread in the cuff of her jumper and glared narrow-eyed at the door. The angry knocking from the other side was making flakes of paint fall from the frame and dust the floorboards like snow.

‘Stay there and be quiet,’ her mother said in low warning as she went to answer it.

The tithe collector’s massive shadow dropped across the room as he filled the doorway, his pudgy hand extended like he was inviting Alexis’s mother to dance. ‘Carys Wilde,’ he snapped. ‘Your tithes are overdue.’

Carys twisted the wooden bangle on her arm, standing before him with her feet turned in in that timid way she had. ‘Good morning, Mr Probert,’ she said meekly. ‘I am sorry we’re late again.’ She gestured to the interior of their home. ‘We lost more slates off the roof in the last quake and there’s damp coming through the back wall now. It all costs money to repair.’

The hairy pink hand did not move. ‘You have to make do like everyone else, Ms Wilde. The temple needs maintaining too.’ He twitched his stubby fingers at her.

Carys attempted a shy smile and tucked her mousy hair behind her ear. ‘Surely the Source would see his followers safely sheltered first?’

Alexis gripped the edge of the table, the coarse wood clammy beneath her fingers.

'You're meant for something more, my wild bird...'

The tidal wave that destroys Alexis's home sends her into hiding in the wilderness – the latest in a long series of natural disasters shaking her world.

Unsettling events are occurring in the distant capital and a mysterious stranger has arrived in Alexis's shattered valley. Beings older than civilisation and as powerful as the forces of nature are gathering, trying to set right the disruption to the balance of the Earth. If Alexis is to survive the wild she must uncover the truth of her own place in it, even if it costs her her life... and maybe not for the first time.

'Sentinel of the Sun is at its core a love letter to my Welsh ancestry.'

EIRA MORGAN-JONES



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This book contains some violent scenes and scenes of a sexual nature.

Young Adult