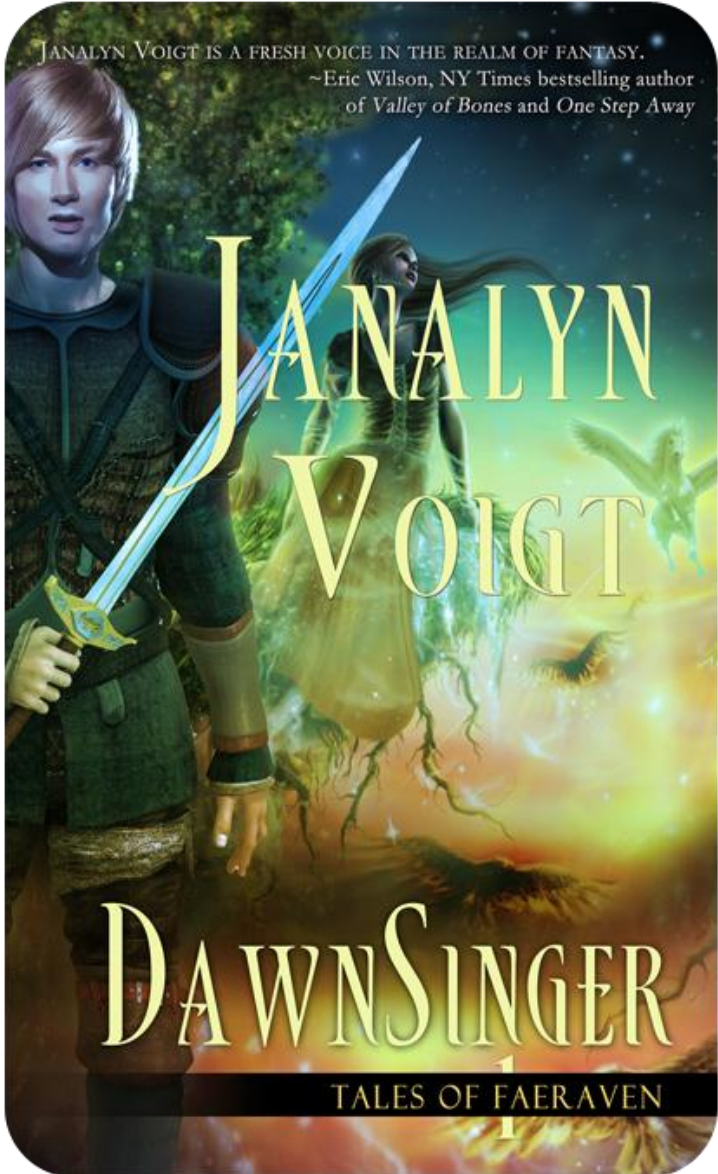


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JANALYN  
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DAWNSINGER

1  
TALES OF FAERAVEN

# DawnSinger

*(an excerpt)*

Janalyn Voigt

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

**DawnSinger**

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# Part 1: Summons

## 1

### *The Whispan Tree*

A crosswind caught Kai's *wingabeast* as lightning flared too near. Shrilling, the winged horse tilted in flight, and Kai's stomach lurched. A gust snatched the hood from his head and roared in his ears. He blinked to clear the stinging rain that drove into his eyes. Thunder boomed like a timpani, shaking the air. Flecht shuddered beneath him, and Kai placed a calming hand on his wingabeast's straining neck. He did not like this long flight through the wild night any better than did Flecht.

An image rose, unbidden—*Lof Raelein* Maeven, Faeraven's High Queen, upon her deathbed, her sea-green eyes surging with life. As a guardian of Faeraven and as a friend, he would die to appease the hope that had flared in those eyes.

Wind howled and lightning flashed close enough to blind. Kai wondered if his own death neared. He would not—could not—halt his journey, although it took him into the teeth of danger. Necessity drove him as he pushed onward, past endurance. If he survived the storm, he would deliver Maeven's last summons.



Shae put up her hood and left the shelter of the stronghold to follow the graystone path. A chill wind rippled through the folds of her cloak, and she shivered. Overhead, clouds unfurled in a pearling sky. She passed into green scented shadow, where notes of damp moss and ripe humus met her.

She shouldn't have yielded to temptation and escaped into nature unescorted. In earlier days, she had roamed the grounds in freedom with no one caring. She couldn't get used to the strictures placed on her now that she'd grown older. When would she learn to be more like Katera? She couldn't remember her winsome twin ever causing their mother concern.

She would go back, but first she needed fresh air to ease the tightness in her chest.

Shae wandered beneath boughs laced with new growth and came at last to her favorite place at the garden's heart. Although the voice of a stream beckoned in the near distance, she paused beneath a stand of gnarlwoods, their ancient branches stretched wide. These trees had witnessed the construction of Whellein Hold, and they would remain when the stronghold's mortar crumbled and its stones fell away. She emerged from the copse into a meadow dotted with early flowers and bathed in morning light. The flutter of wings beat an accompaniment to the warbling of birds, and a wingen flitted through the lesser canopy to light in a nearby whispán tree. She stilled to avoid frightening the tiny bird, which dipped and bobbed its bright head to preen scarlet feathers. With its grooming complete, the wingen lisped into sweet-sad song.

Shae smiled. "Sing, small one."

But a shriek ended the wingen's song. Darkness extinguished its colors. Blood dripped from the foliage of the whispán tree, pure white only an instant ago. Terror gripped Shae by the throat, choking off her scream.

The giant raptor had descended from nowhere and now flailed ragged wings as it rose, screeching in victory, its black eyes trained on Shae.

Pulse thrumming in her ears, she crept backward. Back, back she moved, her gaze never leaving the leathery beast in the air.

This made no sense. How could a welke have ventured so far north?

Her heel caught the hem of her cloak, and she slammed into the ground.

Fear yanked her to her knees. Shock brought her to her feet.

The whispán tree stood pristine as new snow. No blood stained the smooth bark. No movement stirred the silken plumes. No sign lingered of wingen or welke.

And yet she had seen...*what?*

*"Lof Yuel! Does this vision warn of danger?"*

Wind stirred the leaves. Branches rubbed and creaked. A stone turned in the stream bed.

Another sound whispered at the edge of hearing.

Shae paused to listen. The sound resolved into a steady flapping, and her heart picked up its pace. She ran into the meadow and scanned the pale sky.

With a toss of its silver mane, a wingabeast spiraled toward her.

The rider sagged, and the spiral went amiss, but the wingabeast recovered with quick grace. With a

ripple of muscles, its neck arched, and the feathered wings lifted. Shae rushed toward the rider before the creature's diamond-shod hooves found purchase on the ground.

She reached for his arm as he slid from the saddle, but he shrugged off her help and steadied himself against the shifting beast.

She searched his face. "Kai?" Strain etched her brother's features.

He turned and with one finger, traced forgotten moisture at the corner of her eye. "Shae?"

She shook her head to silence his question. "You've ridden through the night?"

He didn't answer but pushed her away with gentle hands.

"What troubles you?"

His long silver-gray eyes glazed with tears. "Lof Raelin Maeven lies on her deathbed."

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. What could she say to ease him when the news pierced her like a blade? Tears seeped down her cheeks, silent as the grave.

Kai touched her arm. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have spoken so. You formed a heart-bond when she visited Whellein Hold."

"What other way is there to speak it?" The image of the wingen and welke returned to her. "Death is death."

His head bent in acknowledgment, the movement slow.

She touched his arm. "I'm sorry, Kai. I know she means much to you."

"Could but my hope and my prayers save her, she would live." He spread his hands in a helpless gesture.

"Such power is not mine."

"Only Lof Yuel has the wisdom to command life and death. We must leave such things to him."

He looked at her with a somber expression, but then tousled her tangled curls. "Truth from a babe!"

"One day, my brother, you may understand I am grown, or nearly so." She raised her brows at him, but then sobered. "Does Lof Raelein Maeven...suffer?"

"Little. She does not ail. Life ebbs from her, it seems, by choice."

Shae let out her breath. "I'm glad she feels no pain."

He nodded; his expression strange. "You love her, as she does you."

"How can such a thing come from one meeting?" She spoke again the puzzle that had long occupied her.

"Love has no logic. Come. I must tell Father this news."

"Then you must wake him." At his look, she added, "Last night's revelry kept him late."

"Revelry? Oh!" His eyes widened, and he gave a moan. "How could I forget the celebration of the founding of Whellein?"

She fell into step beside him as he led Flecht toward the stronghold. "Pay no mind. No one faulted you for not being here. You are given over to the Lof Raelein and must go or stay as she pleases." Struck by a sudden thought, she grasped his arm. "Her death will release you from your promise. Will you not then serve her son when he is made Lof Shraen of Faeraven?"

Kai turned to her. "I may serve Elcon...if I do not undertake our older brother's duties here at Whellein as Father wishes."



She considered his words. "Is it not possible to do both? For in serving one, have you not served the other?"

"Such a thing can only be in the realm of dreams."

"But not in wakefulness?"

He passed a hand across his eyes. "Such an ideal lies far from my reach. I can only hope Daeven will return from his adventures and relieve me from the choice."

Their older brother had been gone for what seemed an eternity, and she missed him with each passing day. Of her many siblings, only Kai held a closer place in her heart.

She smoothed a stray lock of Kai's hair. "You will know best when the time comes."

He sketched a smile. "Such blessed faith I cannot deserve!"

She gave him an arch look. "Faith has no logic."

His eyes widened, lightening from gray to silver. Laughter broke from him. "Such medicine I find in you!" He sobered. "Now tell me why I come upon you unkempt, unhappy, and alone outside Whellein Hold."

She gave no excuse. "I woke with the dawn and made my way to the garden to listen to the heartbeat of creation."

"In that you follow the habit of all Kindren. But you disregard wisdom to seek nature alone. I'll warrant our mother has no knowledge of your whereabouts. I thought you old enough to leave such mischief behind. You must stop this carelessness, Shae. Even within Whellein in these times of peace, the lands outside our stronghold are not safe."

She murmured an acknowledgment and broke contact with a gaze that had become too piercing. How

could she explain the need that drew her from the constraints of life and into the freedom of nature, if only for a time?

“And the tears?”

She shrugged and looked past his ear. “I tripped on my cloak and fell.”

“But you have no cloak.”

Despite the morning chill, she’d been too preoccupied to notice its absence. She forced a smile that wavered. “I must have lost it when—when I heard you coming.”

“Where did you lose it? I’ll help you look.”

“In the garden. Kai, I welcome your company but regret keeping you from your rest.”

His hand cupped her chin and tilted her face. “What brings the tremor to your voice? Did something frighten you?”

“No.” She pulled away and ignored the puzzled glance he gave her. She still did not understand what she had seen. How could she explain the unexplainable?

“I’ll lead while you ride Flecht.” Kai guided her onto the wingabeast’s back. “Now, where did you lose your cloak?”

She looked down at him, her hands tangled in Flecht’s silken mane. She would have felt more secure if Kai had ridden with her, but he seemed happy to walk. Perhaps he meant to spare her contact with his sodden clothing. She guided him to the emerald cloak, puddled below the whispán tree. Kai gathered it, and she accepted the rough woolen garment with thanks.

Mottled light swept the garden, creating an illusion of movement. The air rippled, on the edge of hearing, with the bittersweet song of a wíngen.

Shae sucked in a breath, and her gaze flew to the whispian tree, but its branches remained innocent and bare.



Flecht quivered under Kai's hand. Shae must have communicated to the beast the tension he read in her face. Why did she stare at the naked branches of the small, white tree? He drew his brows together but didn't speak. Her eyes, so green they reminded him of deep shadows in an old forest, told him nothing. As she settled the cloak upon her shoulders, burnished tangles cascaded down her back. She looked beautiful and far too grown.

Something had upset Shae—that much seemed obvious. Equally obvious was her desire for privacy in the matter. Well, he didn't question such things. He already held enough secrets to quell any desire for more.

After his long ride, Kai relished the chance to walk. But he should not linger further. He swung into the saddle behind Shae and reached around her for the reins. Flecht adjusted to the additional burden with trained ease. Shae relaxed against him, and Kai smiled to himself at the small gesture of trust. Would that it could always be so between them.

Kai led Flecht to the path, and the wingabeast's hooves rang against stone in a steady cadence as the garden fell away behind them. The ancient fortress rose before them sullen and gray, while the fields and orchards beyond glowed with new light. The sharp scent of tilled soil and fresh herbs carried on the wind as they passed into the shadow of Whellein Hold.

They entered the ancient fortress through the gatehouse archway beneath the raised iron portcullis. Following the graystone path along the sward, they skirted the great hall, which rose to impressive heights.

As they neared the stables, voices, thuds, and the rustlings of crisp straw reached Kai. He dismounted and lifted his arms to Shae. Light as she was, he had to step backward when she leaned into him. He steadied them both, and then turned to instruct the groom. When Kai looked for her again, Shae was gone. A smile touched his mouth as he went through an archway in the inner curtain wall. He would keep his knowledge of Shae's morning activities to himself.

His mother's voice carried past her maid, Tahera, at her parlor door. "Let us start with soup of boar sausage and wild greenings dressed in sweetberry vinegar, then follow with smoked whitefish in savory sauce and—"

"I hope you have enough for one more." Kai entered the snug room.

A gold-edged mirror above the ornate mantle reflected his mother, Aleanor of Whellein's surprise and delight. She rose and pressed her slight frame into his swift embrace.

Kai held her at arm's length to gaze upon her. How long had it been since he'd seen her calm gray eyes and basked in her smile? He marked, with sadness, the progress of time across her face. Furrows marred a brow once smooth, and lines fanned from the corners of eyes that sparkled. His mother wore a simple woolen tunic of blue, girt with an embroidered sash. Her silver hair coiled in braids about her head.

She smiled. "We have stores aplenty for a Son of Whellein. But how come you by morn and not by eve?"

"I did not stop the night. I couldn't contain my excitement at nearing home." His gaze drifted past her to the muscular Cook garbed in a brown tunic, who smiled at their exchange.

Mother met Kai's look. "I think we shall continue later, Maeric," she said without seam. "I won't detain you from your duties longer. Tahera, please bring cider, cheese and bread."

The door to the raelein's parlor closed with a click behind Maeric and Tahera, and they were alone.

Kai went to the fire, grateful for its comfort as he steeled himself for what he would say.

"You must sit." His mother gestured in invitation as she resumed her seat on the bench. "Now tell me what has brought you on such a difficult journey."

"I've come for Shae."

Mother let out her breath in a long sigh. "And so I am to lose another child."

"Lof Raelein Maeven sends for her while on her deathbed."

Her hand flew to her throat. "The time has come, then."

"It nears, yes." He ignored a frisson of uneasiness. Of course, he spoke of more than Maeven's death. "It's long past time Shae learns her true identity as *Raena* Shaenalyn of Rivenn. On her dying bed, Lof Raelein Maeven yearns for her daughter."

His mother squared her shoulders as if recovering from a blow. "I thought I had prepared myself for this, and yet..." Her voice faded to a whisper.

"You've raised her well."

She looked down at the hands clasped in her lap. "I wish I'd done more to treat her as one of my own."

Kai knelt at her feet. "You did your best. Ever

since I brought her to you as a babe in arms, you've kept her hidden from those who would destroy her."

Aleanor raised eyes shiny with tears. "She'll return to danger at Torindan."

"You have my promise to protect her." Each word fell from his lips by its own weight.

"When do you leave?"

He spoke with reluctance. "At first light."

She arose and took the place at the fire he had vacated, putting her arms about herself as if cold. "I will not say goodbye to her. It is better so."

Kai stood. For Shae's sake, he wished his mother would look beyond her own needs. But he cut short the reply that rose to his lips. How could he censure her when he did not know her pain? He hesitated, and then lowered his voice. "Have you word of Daevin?"

Mother lifted her head, and he read in her face what he should have already known. He need not have worried his question would quicken his mother's pain. She carried her missing son in her heart as surely as she had once carried him within her womb.

She shook her head and turned toward the fire. "None."

The word echoed through his mind. Kai shouldered its weight, but wished again for the freedom to search for his brother.

He crossed to one of the tall windows overlooking the inner ward with its herb garden. New growth burgeoned in all its beds, ready to erupt with life. His hands clenched into fists. He wanted to rejoice in such things. He wanted to comfort his mother. He closed his eyes, shut in by his own dark thoughts.

A touch on his arm, feather light, called him back. He turned and read the plea in his mother's face. "The

Lof Raelein's death will free you to return to Whellein, as your father wishes."

He met her gray gaze and told her what she already knew. "My duty at Torindan calls for my pledge of service to Elcon when his mother dies."

"Surely Elcon would not rob the House of Whellein so." She clasped her hands together so hard the knuckles showed white.

"Mother, let us leave this conversation." He put his hands over hers to still them. "You know I must decide my own course, for good or ill."

Tahera returned, bearing on a tray a tankard of steaming cider, a selection of cheeses, and a fragrant loaf. Kai cleansed his hands in the laver the servant provided and fell upon the repast.

His mother sat silent while he ate. She would not try again to win his promise, but he knew she ceded the battle only.

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