


KELCIE MURPHY
and the HUNT for the
HEART OF
DANU



TOR BOOKS BY ERIKA LEWIS

Game of Shadows

THE ACADEMY FOR THE UNBREAKABLE ARTS

Kelcie Murphy and the Academy for the Unbreakable Arts

ERIKA LEWIS



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DANU



STARSCAPE



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK • NEW YORK

*For Jack,
You inspire me every day.*

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A Starscape Book
Published by Tom Doherty Associates
120 Broadway
New York, NY 10271

www.tor-forge.com

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-1-250-20830-9 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-250-20829-3 (ebook)

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First Edition: 2023

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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All who play the game of war know that
when the enemy catches you unaware,
the battle is already over.

Already lost.

PROLOGUE

WINTER

A THUNDEROUS RUMBLE WOKE Lexis before dawn. Half-asleep, she stumbled out of bed to the window. During daylight hours, from her room in the Saiga Den at the top of the tallest of the Eternal Peaks, Lexis had a good view of the frozen tundra below, the Dauour Forest to the north, and in the east a sliver of the toxic mist swirling hundreds of feet above the Abyss, but right now it was too dark to see much of anything.

Another rumble, and Lexis shuddered, afraid and confused. Her barefeet planted firmly on the floor sensed it came from the east, from the Abyss. But that was *impossible*. Nothing *ever* came out of the Abyss! The ebony waters that plummeted straight down into a never-ending waterfall was noiseless, the unnatural thing strangling even the water's gurgle before it could make it out. The thing gave Lexis chills every time she looked at it.

As if someone was deliberately trying to confuse her, the next quake came from the north. She glanced at the alarm button on the other end of the room, every instinct telling her to pull it, but hesitated. No one else had stirred.

A tick later, the sun peeked over the mountain, just enough for Lexis to see into the forest's gloomy shadows. Everything *looked* normal.

Maybe it's the drill, Lexis mused, relieved. Aífe, their preceptor, *had* been promising an all-school drill for weeks now.

Petrified trees in the forest uprooted in wide thudding swaths. The vampire owls, normally turning in at this hour, suddenly

spirited away, screeching like someone or something was about to eat *them* for a change. Crunching, like the sound of heavy boulders rolling on hard-packed snow, escaped the forest—slow at first, but gaining speed. Raging roars shredded what was left of the easing dawn. Lexis gulped. Whatever it was, it was heading for everyone’s favorite escape from school: the small village of Volga.

Okay. This isn’t a drill.

This isn’t a drill!

“Wake up!” she yelled at the thirty sleeping bodies. She tripped over cot legs, running for the alarm. “Wake up!”

“What is it?”

“What’s going on?”

“Will you shut up!”

With trembling hands, Lexis yanked the lever beside the door and let the alarm answer for her.

MINUTES LATER SHE boarded a creaky flatbarge along with the rest of the students twelve and over. The vessel, normally used for training exercises, was flown by Aífe’s sacred pets, Potham and Wallace, who were strapped to it with harnesses. They were the very last two wyverns left in the Lands of Winter, and the most majestic beasts Lexis had ever seen.

The launch bay door—a granite section of the mountain—retracted. Old and creaky, Wallace’s and Potham’s enormous hairless wings beat the air fast and furious to achieve enough lift for launch. Lexis gripped the railing so hard her knuckles turned white. If she’d only seen what they were facing, then she might have a clue how to fight it, but as it was, they were heading into their first battle blind.

“Listen up!” Aífe said, her long red hair fanning out behind her. She always wore the same black Braverwil uniform as her students because she liked them to see her as a friend as much as a teacher. Like she was one of them, something Lexis really ap-

preciated. She climbed up on the railing, hopping onto Wallace's strap for balance, and raised her flaming spear. "Summer has found a way to do the impossible. *Cewr* have broken into Winter."

Nervous mumbles spread around the deck.

"Giants?" Someone called.

"Yes. Giants. How? We have no idea, and no time to ponder. Troops are on their way, but they are engaged in three other locations with them. We will have to do all we can to save Volga! There could be one or there could be ten."

Ten? Lexis's palms broke out in a cold sweat. She was scared. There was no harm in admitting it to herself, but she could never let it show. That was rule number one for fianna leaders. If she was afraid, her fianna would be too. Fear led to mistakes, and mistakes led to injuries, or worse.

Lexis squared her shoulders.

"This is a day for Braverwil cadets to show me what you're made of! Cold hard steel!" Aífe raised her spear. The flatbarge jolted from stomping and cheering, Lexis's among the loudest. "You will not let me down!"

Lexis's powers heated with rising adrenaline. Letting Aífe down was something she never, ever wanted to do, not after all the preceptor had done for her.

Lexis's parents had never wanted her to go to Braverwil. Abbots at the Fomorian temple in Mezron, they were pacifists, and didn't believe in war. Or training for war. Or wielding weapons of any kind except a kitchen knife. They hid Lexis away, never letting her attend any formal school, refusing to let her use her powers at all, but Aífe found her.

On her tenth birthday, the preceptor showed up on their doorstep with a letter from the Queen demanding to know why the pulse elemental hadn't reported to school. It was the best day of Lexis's life, and the worst. She never saw her parents again. They said if she chose to go, chose to fight, that she was no longer their daughter. She belonged to Aífe. Lexis never looked back.

She turned to say something inspirational to her fianna, but Swappy stretched, farting at the same time.

Lexis chuckled, shaking her head, relishing the tension release. Swappy Toots was small for his age and the youngest in her fianna, still eleven. He was the craftiest of changelings except for one little problem that would always give him away. He fizzled whenever he got excited—or nervous—or sad. Really any emotion could bring on the gas.

“I heard that,” Jack growled.

Swappy smirked. “Better than smelling it.”

Jack Postal was a legend. He could morph into his saber-toothed tiger familiar first year. His mother was Badb, one of the three Morrígna, and a goddess of vengeance, which was why he never forgave Lexis for choosing Swappy to be in their fianna. She chose Jack for his eyes, so blue they glowed during Selection, so intense they rattled Lexis, and challenged her ever since.

Behind him, the last member of their fianna ignored them. Pavel was busy, scrutinizing every square inch of his ice armor. He bent his elbow, testing movement, then shaved a millimeter off, only to add it back again. Ever since word came that his aunt was imprisoned in Summer, Pavel had turned into an extreme perfectionist, as if preparing to go and get her back.

Two years Lexis had led them. Two years—they were more than her best friends. They were her family. If anything happened to them, Lexis would never, ever forgive herself.

The transport halted. Earth-shaking crashes were followed by murderous roars and frantic screams. Cadets rushed the railings, Lexis and her fianna included. Her breath caught. The five giants Lexis could see were at least twenty-five feet tall, made entirely of boulders, and storming through the streets in raging fits, pulverizing building after building. The Frosty Cone where they got flavored icicles—gone. The shop of the tailor who fabricated and repaired all of Braverwil’s uniforms—reduced to rubble. Then Lexis saw the bookstore she frequented during break

when everyone else went home, and her heart stopped beating. There was nothing left. She felt terrible. She never knew the name of the woman who owned it, but she was always nice. Let Lexis borrow books when she didn't have enough money to pay for them. All she could do now was hope she wasn't inside when the walls came crashing down.

"Summer is going to pay for this!" Jack spit.

Her sentiments exactly.

Aífe raised her spear at the wyverns, and the transport lowered until it was only ten feet off the ground. "Pick your target! Keep them busy! And don't *die*!"

The older kids leaped off without looking. Most of Lexis's classmates hesitated, choosing a safe spot to start their descent. Lexis was choosing a giant, like Aífe told them to do.

Directly beneath the transport one stood on the crushed remains of an ice house. A fairy, maybe five, still in her pajamas, was trapped under its big toe.

"That one! Pavel, Swaps, see what you can do to move it away from the house," Lexis ordered. "Jack and I will help the girl."

Swappy smacked Pavel's cheek, rousing an annoyed groan from their ice fairy.

As a changeling, Swappy could turn into anyone he wanted, he only had to touch them. In less than a second, his pale, skinny body tanned and grew a foot. His curly green hair shrank until he, like Pavel, was shaved bald. Canines elongated. His eyes went from green to solid white and butterfly wings sprouted.

The giant ripped an electric pole from the ground and hurled it, spearing poor Potham through his wing! Shrieking, he dipped, falling, dragging the transport down on one side. Lexis and Jack were close enough to the railing to grab hold. Others weren't so lucky. They plummeted toward frozen ground or worse, the giant's sharp teeth.

Pavel and Swappy jumped, joining the other fairies in the school scooping classmates out of the air.

Potham screeched, struggling against the leather strap that

was tangled around his neck. At the same time the little girl screamed again.

“Jack, you’ve got her!” Lexis ordered. “I’m going to release Potham and I’ll be right there.”

“You better be!” Jack let go of the railing, transforming into his saber-toothed tiger familiar on his way to landing on his feet on the ground beside the pinned girl.

Adrenaline turning her blood cold, Lexis slid down the railing, careening into the steel loop where the taut strap was tied. The giant’s fist pounded the flatbarge, causing Wallace to lose precious altitude, moving Potham within the it’s reach.

Lexis was out of time. Holding on with one hand, she made a fist with the other, sparking fire, her favorite and most practiced element. Her blazing dagger burned through the strap with a single hard slice, setting the wyvern’s free. Potham chicken-ran one way while Wallace, weighed down by the barge, flapped in a wild panic, barely escaping the giant’s mad grab.

Lexis jumped off the transport, diving the last eight feet, tucking into a roll when she hit the ground. She lost her bearings, but then found Jack on the other side of the giant. He was still struggling to get the little girl free. His curved, sharp canines bit and scratched the giant’s massive foot, but nothing he did got the monster to move.

“Hey! Rocks for brain!” Lexis sprinted around to the front of it, rapid-firing airballs, landing a winner right up its nose. It sneezed so hard it stumbled forward enough for Jack’s fangs to pull the little girl out by the back of her pajamas.

The giant was chest-pounding *mad*. Before its two-ton foot landed on Lexis’ head, she rolled out and ran, taking cover behind the last remaining wall of a house. But the giant found her. She was barely able to put up an air shield before rubble crashed down on top of her.

When the dust finally cleared, she was relieved to see Jack giving the little girl a piggyback ride, taking her out of the danger zone, and surprised to find to giants grappling across the road.

One was on top of the other, throwing a flurry of punches. The one on the bottom getting beaten to a pulp fumbled two fingers skyward, the signal Lexis had taught Swaps so she could always tell which was him when he was in trouble. And he was in big trouble.

“Swappy!” She panicked. “Ignis!”

The giant turned, unhinging its jaw, and, to Lexis’ grave disappointment, ate her massive fireball, swallowing it whole without so much as a flinch. No wincing indigestion followed! Or a stuck out burnt tongue! The mass of rocks went right back to pummeling poor Swappy.

Lexis needed help. She saw Pavel circling and whipped an airball at him, catching his attention. As he dive-bombed, she tried distracting the giant again.

“Hey! Firebreath!” Lexis nailed it in the back of the head with another fireball. “Try and catch me!”

But she only made things worse for Swaps. He yelped as the giant ground a knee into his rocky chest, chipping off bits to pivot and stretch to reach her. Pavel buzzed its head, blasting ice, smothering the giant’s eyes until the fairy’s well ran dry. It would take him a few minutes to replenish his power. Until then, he was helpless and Lexis was on her own. The blinded giant flailed, beating the ice with fury, leaving Lexis with only seconds to help Swappy get out of there.

Lexis only had time to spin her arms once, praying it was enough.

“Mistral!” Her gust knocked the giant off balance, giving the changeling the advantage he needed. He flipped the giant over his head, then, to Lexis’s horror, transformed back into himself.

In a mad dash, Lexis ran to him, throwing up an air shield only a second before the giant’s foot would’ve landed on Swappy’s head. She strained under the pressure, her knees shaking, when she heard the rising sound of a thousand buzzing ice fairy wings, giving her a tiny snowflake of hope.

The reinforcements from Winter's armies had finally arrived. If she could just hold on a little longer . . .

Blue hail-flumes shot down with precision in a single coordinated whoosh. The frozen giant toppled over on its side. Shoulders sagging with relief, Lexis helped Swappy stand up, which wasn't easy. He was frantically waving at the squadron flying overhead, who weren't looking back. There was another giant, and another after that, but still Swaps waved his gratitude, and burped a loud, "Thank you!"

HOURS LATER, LEXIS walked with her fianna around the frozen giants, somberly taking in the heavy damage to the village as they looked for Aífe. Lexis found a book in the middle of the street, and picked it up, thinking she should hold it for safe-keeping for the shop owner.

"It's lucky that so many heard the giants before they got here, and were able to escape into the woods," Jack commented.

"They can rebuild," Swappy offered, ever the beacon of hope.

But how could anyone begin to rebuild after suffering so much loss? Lexis touched the book's torn leather binding. "Why would Summer want to destroy this little town? Hurt innocent people?"

"It wasn't just here," Jack answered. "You heard Aífe on the transport. They hit several towns."

"Summer is turning up the heat on this war, and if something isn't done soon, Winter is going to be in real trouble. And I for one am not going to stand by and let it happen!" Pavel yelled, firing off an ice dagger at a frozen giant's head. "First you take my aunt, and now this?"

"How do you even get something the size of a giant into a Sidral?" Swappy asked, shrugging.

"I don't know," Lexis fumed. "But Pavel is right. They're going to pay." She hurled the book at the giant.

A few minutes later, she spotted Aífe at the end of the road, stitching Potham's wing. "There she is."

As they approached, the wyvern's long snout tucked beneath his body. His barbed tail coiled and he growled. This was the closest any of them had ever been to him. His leather skin flaked, and it was obvious this was not the first time his wing had been injured. There were several other long scars. Lexis really hoped he was going to be okay.

"Quiet," Aífe stressed to him, tying off the last stitch. He nipped at her as she rolled the extra copper wire around her hand. "Yes, I've had enough of you too." Holding the bloody foot-long needle straight up, she slid off him.

"Don't come closer. He's in a bad mood. Not that I blame him. He's going to have to walk back to school." She set the needle and thread down and padded over to speak with them. "You four will ride back to school with me."

Lexis saw Aífe's horse-drawn chariot parked a few feet away. Her stomach tightened. "Did we do something wrong?"

"Quite the contrary." Aífe gave Lexis a confidence-building half smile. "The Queen has asked me for the best fianna in your class for a mission, and that would be you four."

"Yes!" Pavel high-fived Jack.

Swappy nervously twitched. "Like, a real mission?"

Pride swelled, only to be dampened by apprehension. Third-year cadets, only twelve years old . . . "What kind of mission, ma'am?"

"Top secret. I know very little except that I was asked for you to arrive tonight."

WITH THE SUN setting, they were given no time to change. Aífe put them directly into the Sidral at Braverwil.

It was the last time Lexis or any of them would see her or their school for months. Had she known, Lexis probably

would've chosen a better thing to say than, "I really need to use the bathroom."

A SINGLE GUARD DRESSED in a blue-and-black tabard escorted them through a tunnel beneath the Boreal Citadel, Queen Kefyra's impenetrable sapphire fortress.

Pavel sweat profusely. His ice armor flaked off, leaving a trail of puddles in his wake. But that wasn't nearly as bad as Swappy letting a loud ripper go. Jack growled, morphing a hand, ready to take a swipe at Swaps, but Lexis caught his wrist and shook her head. The guard's gag from the smell was bad enough. If they started fighting in the hallway, they would lose this mission before they even found out what it was.

A door at the end of the dank tunnel was ajar. Once all four crossed the threshold, the guard closed it behind them.

Queen Kefyra looked up from an empty gray table with no chairs. Lexis had never seen her in person before. *Imposing* was the only word that came to mind. She was at least eight feet tall, with folded wings that brushed the ceiling, a bob of white hair, and skin so pale it was the color of fresh snow. She wore the same uniform as all Winter soldiers: a plain white unitard. The one striking difference was the diamond diadem resting effortlessly on her forehead.

Two soldiers flanked the Queen. Lexis only had a second to look at them. With so many silver snowflakes stitched into their collars, they must be the two Advisors Pavel's aunt had mentioned before. Their identities were always kept as secret as the missions they doled out—only their matching ice-blue eyes were visible behind their expressionless, polished silver face masks.

Bowing along with her fianna mates, Lexis strained to keep her knees from knocking.

"Stand up."

The Queen narrowed blazing yellow eyes on Lexis, then on

each of her fianna as they folded in behind her to a single-file line.

“What are you, ten?” She sounded annoyed.

“Twelve, Your Majesty,” Lexis answered. “Except our changeling, he’s eleven.”

“I was hoping for the best of your class, and Aife sends me . . .” She snapped her fingers and one of the Advisors pulled a piece of paper out his sleeve, then gestured to Jack.

“A foundling arrested in Galanta for stealing, who chose Braverwil over the workhouse,” he read disapprovingly.

Jack brazenly morphed to his full sabertoothed form, growling at the insult. Lexis rolled her eyes and pressed her heel on his paw, silencing him.

Queen Kefyra wrinkled her strong nose, pointing a long, sharp nail at Swappy.

The Advisor lifted the paper again. “A clown, an embarrassment to his noble family.”

Swappy lowered his head. Pavel felt the sting next. “An orphan raised by a disgraced aunt who now sits caged in Summer’s prison.”

Lexis braced for her turn.

“And the daughter of shirkers who hide their cowardice behind a shield of benevolence.”

The Queen leaned over Lexis. “Are you a coward too?”

“No, ma’am!” Lexis was nothing like her parents, especially after today. She would do whatever it took to protect the Lands of Winter.

The Queen stepped back while the Advisor folded the piece of paper until it was so small he could swallow it, and did. Lexis cringed.

“You witnessed firsthand what Summer is now capable of. Volga has been sacked, but also Bushmills and Noir.” She held up a bit of fabric with writing on it. “But in all that chaos, something miraculous happened as well. News from Summer that gives us a chance to stop this from *ever* happening again. In

order to take it, you four will have to go deep undercover in Summer. The mission wouldn't be easy for a fianna with years of experience."

Swappy, Jack, and Pavel twitched excitedly. Lexis's stomach cinched. Deep undercover? For how long? Nausea rising, she asked, "What do you want us to do, Your Majesty?"

"To steal the *Croí na Bandia*."

"What's that?" Pavel asked.

Lexis's jaw dropped as she remembered an unforgettable story her father had told her about that very thing when she was little. "Danu's Heart."

Queen Kefyra gave Lexis a calculating grin.

"Aife was right. You are the right fianna for the job. You will go and bring it back to me. We will bring Summer to its knees, and end this war once and for all."