

KYANA — and the — STONE DRAGON



The Map That Could Burn the Kingdom

Please note: This is not the entire book, it's just an excerpt so you can see the quality of writing & design art:

Chapter 1: The Ash Tube



The highest room in Briarwatch Keep was not the watchtower, though most people thought it was.

It was the map room.

Kyana liked that.

She liked that the kingdom's safest secrets lived above the bells, above the barracks, above the shouting kitchens and the echoing great hall.

Up here, the air smelled of dry paper, dust, lamp oil, and cedar shelves warmed by the afternoon sun. Wind pressed at the narrow tower windows, making the old panes hum. Below, the mountain roads twisted through dark pines and silver rock, disappearing into passes full of snow even in late spring.

Most people found the map room dull.

Kyana found it full of choices.

A road on a map was not just a line. It was a question. Who had walked there? What were they carrying? What were they running from? What were they hoping to find?

She stood on a three-legged stool, stretching to slide a rolled survey back into its cubby, and said aloud to nobody, "North ridge, east shelf, damaged corner, terrible handwriting."

Her voice came back softly from the round stone walls.

"Talking to maps again?"

Kyana nearly dropped the scroll. She twisted around to see old Master Orin standing in the doorway with a bundle of courier tubes under one arm.

"I was not talking to them," she said. "I was correcting them."

Master Orin lifted one eyebrow. His beard was white and thin, and his robe pockets always held more chalk than sense. “A dangerous habit. Maps dislike being corrected.”

“They should learn to be more accurate.”

He snorted and set the bundle down on the sorting table. “These came up from the gate. Landslide damage from the west road.

Most are routine tallies, tax routes, grain counts, and one complaint from a lord who believes snow should obey him.” He pushed his spectacles higher on his nose. “I must attend the council bell. Sort them by seal and leave the closed tubes closed.”

Kyana gave him her most innocent look.

He pointed one crooked finger at her.

“Closed,” he repeated.

“Yes, Master Orin.”

He narrowed his eyes, as if measuring exactly how much trouble one girl could fit into a single afternoon. Apparently deciding the answer was too much to count, he sighed and shuffled back down the spiral stair.

Kyana waited until his footsteps vanished.

Then she turned to the bundle.

“Sort by seal,” she murmured. “I can do that.”

Most of the tubes were ordinary: wax marked with mill stamps, merchant knots, and the hawk crest of the western road wardens. One had split along the side where a stone must have struck it. Another was damp. A third rattled with a pebble trapped inside.

At the bottom of the pile lay a tube that did not match the rest.

It was made of dark ash wood, almost black, with iron caps instead of brass. The wax seal had been cracked long before the landslide, and whatever mark it once bore had melted into a smear. It felt warm.

Kyana frowned and touched it again.

Not warm from sun. Warm like a stone left near a fire.

She glanced at the stair.

Quiet.

She told herself she was not opening it. She was checking for damage. That was nearly the same thing.

The lid resisted, then came free with a dry scrape. Inside was a rolled sheet of old parchment, pale and blank.

Blank.

Kyana blinked.

“That can’t be right.”

She tipped the tube upside down. Nothing else fell out. No letter. No seal ribbon. No hidden note.

Only the parchment.

She unrolled it across the table. It was thick, rough-edged, and older than anything sent by the western road wardens. The surface was empty except for faint scorch marks near one corner, as if it had once been held too close to a flame.

A blank map was worse than no map at all. It was an insult.

Kyana bent closer. The parchment smelled strange. Not musty. Not mildewed.

Smoky.

The stair creaked.

She jerked upright, but it was only Tavin, the blacksmith's son, carrying a basket of coal for the map room braziers. He was broad-shouldered, freckled, and always looked as if he had run up too many stairs too fast.

"You heard?" he asked before he was fully through the door.

"Heard what?"

Tavin set the basket down with a thump. "The western beacon lit before dawn. Red flare. Not alarm red. Fire red."

Kyana crossed her arms. "That is not a real difference."

"It is when soldiers start running." He lowered his voice. "My father says Westfire Hold took a burning hit in the night. Not lightning. Not raiders. Something worse."

Kyana tried to look unimpressed. "Your father says everything is worse."

"He said the outer stones melted."

That landed.

Stone did not melt.

Not in any story that ended well.

Tavin noticed the parchment on the table. "What's that?"

"Nothing," Kyana said too quickly.

He grinned. "So it's either treasure or trouble."

"In this room, those are often the same thing."

He laughed, fed coal into the brazier by the wall, and headed back to the stair. "Council's gone loud," he said. "If Master Orin returns with both eyebrows still attached, it'll be a miracle."

When he had gone, the room felt quieter than before.

Kyana looked at the parchment again.

Westfire Hold.

Burning hit.

Warm tube.

A blank page that smelled like smoke.

She moved toward the brazier, then stopped. Master Orin had said leave the closed tubes closed. He had not said anything about blank parchment.

That was not a good sign for her future.

She held one corner near the brazier's heat.

At first, nothing happened.

Then a line appeared.

Not drawn in ink. It glowed up from the page itself, thin and red-orange, like the last living seam in a bed of coals. Kyana gasped and almost dropped it. More lines spread outward, branching, curving, joining. Mountain ridges. Rivers. A pass. A ruined tower marked by a symbol she did not know.

No, not ruined.

Buried.

She laid the parchment flat and watched the map bloom into full shape beneath the heat. The kingdom's western border rose out of the blankness. The Ashen Peaks. The Blackpine road. Westfire Hold.

Then beyond the places marked on common maps, the lines continued upward into a region left empty on nearly every chart in Briarwatch's collection.

There, in the high stone teeth of the mountains, a single mark burned brighter than the rest.

An X.

Not ink-black. Ember-gold.

Kyana leaned so close her hair nearly brushed the brazier flame.

Words emerged beneath the mark.

HEART OF NARROK

She had never heard the name.

At the lower edge of the map, another symbol brightened slowly: a dragon's eye cut into a circle of stone.

Kyana knew that symbol.

She had seen it carved above the oldest arch in the keep, half worn away and ignored by everyone except children and historians. The sign of an old royal legend.

The Stone Dragon.

Her pulse began to hammer.

She should roll the map up. She should put it back. She should absolutely not touch the glowing symbol with her finger.

She touched it with her finger.

The parchment went hot.

A streak of light shot across the map, tracing a route from Westfire Hold to the mountain mark. It moved with frightening speed, as if showing the path to someone who had no time left.

At the end of the line, letters flashed into being, then dimmed before she could read all of them.

Only three words stayed clear.

DO NOT WAKE

Kyana's mouth went dry.

The stair door banged open hard enough to strike the wall.

Master Orin stood there, breathless, one hand pressed to the stone frame. For a heartbeat he only stared at the map.

Then all the color left his face.

“Kyana,” he said, and she had never heard her name sound like that before. Not angry. Not surprised.

Afraid.

“I didn’t mean to—” she began.

He crossed the room faster than she would have thought possible and snatched the brazier poker, shoving the coals back so the heat dropped at once. The glowing lines on the parchment dimmed, but they did not vanish completely. Faint fire still ran through the roads like blood under skin.

“Where did you get this?”

“In the courier bundle. The black tube.”

He shut his eyes for the space of one breath. “Then the rumors are true.”

“What rumors?”

But he was already moving. He rolled the map with careful hands, though his fingers shook, and thrust it toward her instead of taking it for himself.

Kyana stared. “Me?”

“Put it in your satchel.”

“What?”

“Now.”

She obeyed.

Master Orin swept the tubes off the table and dropped a stack of dull tax records over the empty space just as voices rose from the spiral stair below.

Boots.

Armored boots.

Several pairs.

Kyana felt the sound through the floor before the men reached the top.

Master Orin turned to her, and the fear in his eyes sharpened into something harder.

“Listen to me,” he said softly. “Do not speak unless I tell you. Do not mention the tube. Do not mention Westfire. And whatever happens next—”

The stair door opened.

A captain in the Regent’s gray-and-red colors stepped into the room with two soldiers behind him. His gauntlets were soot-streaked. One side of his cloak had been scorched black.

He looked first at Master Orin.

Then at Kyana.

“We are searching for a courier delivery from the west road,” he said. “A damaged ash tube bearing no current seal. It was sent here by mistake.” His gaze settled on the satchel at Kyana’s hip. “Hand over anything unusual.”

The room seemed to shrink around her.

Master Orin did not move.

Neither did Kyana.

For one impossible second, all she could hear was the wind pressing against the tower windows and the wild thud of her own heart.

Then Master Orin said, very quietly, “Kyana.”

She looked at him.

His face did not change, but his meaning did.

Run.

Chapter 2: The Bell Rope



Kyana did not think.

That was probably why she survived the next three seconds.

She snatched the satchel strap tight across her chest, kicked the stool backward into the nearest soldier's shins, and ran for the far side of the map room instead of the stair.

"Stop her!" barked the captain.

The soldier cursed as the stool clattered under him. Master Orin swung the brazier poker sideways, not hard enough to break a bone but hard enough to smash into the captain's gauntlet with a ringing crack.

The man recoiled. Hot coals spilled across the flagstones in a scatter of sparks.

Kyana leaped over them and reached the narrow window alcove at the back of the round chamber.

There was no door.

No hallway.

Only stone wall, a slit window, and the old bell rope dropping through a square opening in the floor beside the arch.

She had climbed it once when she was seven and nearly lost her lunch.

Below, the rope vanished into dark air.

"Kyana!" Master Orin shouted.

She grabbed the rope and swung herself through the opening.

For one breath she hung in emptiness, boots scraping rough stone. Then gravity remembered her.

She slid down hard, palms burning through the leather wrapping. The tower rushed upward around her in a blur of shadow and passing beams.

Above, angry voices echoed.

“She’s gone below!”

“After her!”

The rope swayed. Kyana clenched harder and dropped another ten feet before her boots slammed into a crossbeam beneath the great bell.

The bronze giant loomed above her, green with age and wide enough to swallow her whole. Wind pushed through the tower slats, making the bell groan softly in its frame.

She scrambled onto the beam, chest heaving.

The rope continued down into the belfry ladder shaft, disappearing toward the lower floors.

Not safe.

Not hidden.

Just less impossible than the stair.

She swung onto the ladder rungs bolted into the inner wall and began descending. The iron was cold and slick.

Below her, the keep opened into layers of sound: kitchen pots, courtyard shouting, hammer blows from the forge, a dog barking twice and then going silent.

Above, the captain’s voice boomed through the tower.

“Seal the north gate! Check the lower corridors!”

He had not said east gate or south gate.

Which meant he didn’t know where she was going.

That was something.

Kyana dropped from the last rung into the bell chamber below and nearly ran straight into Tavin.

He stared at her. She stared at him. His eyes fell to the satchel, then to the tower above, where boots thundered.

“I knew it,” he said. “Trouble.”

“Tavin, move.”

“That bad?”

“That bad.”

He did not move.

For half a second Kyana wanted to shove him aside. Then she saw the look on his face. Not fear exactly. Something quicker. Sharper. He was already thinking.

“The soldiers came through the lower yard,” he said. “Three more by the front arch. They’re looking for someone small.”

“That is not helpful.”

“It is when I know somewhere small people fit better than soldiers.”

Another shout sounded overhead.

Tavin jerked his head toward a side hatch set low in the stone wall. “Coal chute.”

Kyana made a face. “Absolutely not.”

“Then enjoy being arrested.”

He lifted the iron latch. Cold, dusty air breathed out from the dark opening beyond.

Kyana heard boots hit the ladder above.

That decided it.

She dropped to her knees and crawled into the chute. The passage angled downward so sharply that it stopped being crawling almost at once and became sliding.

Coal grit and dust scraped her palms, her sleeves, the side of her face. Tavin came after her, one hand braced against the wall to control his speed.

The chute spat them into a narrow storeroom under the bell tower in a heap of black dust.

Kyana sat up coughing.

Tavin shut the inner grate just as footsteps pounded overhead.

They froze.

Dust drifted through a shaft of light from a cracked ceiling board. Someone crossed directly above them. Another pair of boots stopped. Kyana could hear the heavy pull of a soldier's breath.

"She can't vanish."

"She knows the keep."

"Then search faster."

The steps moved on.

For a moment neither of them spoke.

Then Tavin wiped a black streak from his nose and said, "You look like a chimney goblin."

"You look worse."

"I do not."

"You truly do."

That almost made her laugh, which felt wrong enough that it nearly turned into crying instead. She swallowed it hard and pushed herself up.

The storeroom smelled of coal dust, old onions, and damp rope. Barrels lined one wall. Broken lantern frames hung from pegs. There was another door leading into the service passage beneath the kitchens.

Tavin studied her face. “This is real, isn’t it?”

Kyana tightened her grip on the satchel strap. “I don’t know what it is.”

“That means yes.”

She opened her mouth to deny it, then shut it again. Tavin was annoying, but he was not stupid.

“I found something in the map room,” she said. “A courier tube from the west road. Soldiers came looking for it.”

“From Westfire Hold?”

Her head snapped toward him. “How do you know that name?”

“My father was shoeing a messenger’s horse when the man came in half dead from the western pass.”

Tavin’s usual quick grin had vanished. “He said the outer wall at Westfire ran like candle wax. Stone. Running.”

Kyana remembered the words that had burned across the map.

Do not wake.

She pulled the satchel open just enough to see the edge of the parchment still tucked inside. The faint scent of smoke rose from it, even now.

Tavin saw that and went very still. “That’s it, then.”

“What?”

“The something.”

Boots rattled down the service stair beyond the outer door.

Kyana snapped the satchel shut.

“Can you get me out of the keep?” she whispered.

Tavin’s jaw worked. “Maybe.”

“Maybe is not comforting.”

“I’m thinking.”

“Think faster.”

He glanced toward the ceiling, where another echo of shouted orders rolled through the stones. Then he pointed at the far wall.

“There’s the ash cart tunnel. Kitchen boys use it to haul cinders down to the lower yard. It comes out near the old cistern under the east wall.”

“The east wall is inside the keep.”

“The old cistern is not. Not exactly.”

Kyana blinked. “That is a terrible explanation.”

He grabbed a short-handled shovel from the wall, jammed it under a warped crate lid, and heaved. Under the crate lay a square iron hatch dusted gray.

“There,” he said.

Kyana stared. “You knew about this?”

“I know where all the forbidden places are. I’m surprised you’re offended.”

That was fair.

He hauled the hatch open. A wave of stale, cold air rose from below. Narrow stone steps spiraled down into darkness.

Kyana listened. No voices. No boots. Just a distant, steady dripping.

“What’s in the cistern?” she asked.

“Water, if you’re unlucky. Rats, if you’re normal.”

“And if I’m very unlucky?”

Tavin considered. “Soldiers and rats.”

She glared at him.

He spread his hands. “I like to be thorough.”

A knock thundered on the outer storeroom door.

Both of them jumped.

“Open!” shouted a soldier.

Tavin shoved the hatch wider. “Go.”

Kyana hesitated.

It was not the tunnel. Not the rats. Not even the soldiers outside.

It was leaving.

If she went through that hatch, she would be choosing a side of whatever this was. She would be running from the Regent’s men with a magical map in her satchel and no proper plan beyond not getting caught.

Briarwatch Keep had always been the place from which adventures were measured, not the place she might have to abandon before supper.

The pounding came again, harder.

Master Orin had said run.

Not hide. Not wait. Run.

Kyana swung her legs over the opening and climbed down two steps, then looked back up. “Come with me.”

Tavin blinked. “What?”

“You know the keep. And the tunnels. And where forbidden places are.”

“That is not a list any sensible person hears as praise.”

Another blow hit the door. The latch groaned.

Kyana held his gaze. “Please.”

Tavin’s expression changed at that one word. Not into courage exactly. Into decision.

“My father will skin me,” he muttered.

“Only if we live long enough for him to try.”

“That is the least comforting thing you’ve ever said.”

He dropped into the hatch, pulled it halfway shut above them, and together they hurried down the spiral steps.

The air grew colder with every turn. Moisture slicked the walls. Kyana trailed one hand along the stone to keep from slipping and felt mineral ridges under her fingers, as if the passage had been cut through the mountain by water before masons ever touched it.

At the bottom they reached a vaulted chamber no bigger than a stable stall. A channel of black water ran along one side and disappeared through a low arch clogged with roots.

Broken clay pipes jutted from the walls. The whole place smelled of wet stone and old ash.

Tavin took a lantern from a niche, found a striker, and lit the wick with three quick sparks.

“You carry that around?” Kyana asked.

“It lives here. Because I am sensible.”

“You just climbed into a secret tunnel with me.”

“That is different. I brought a light.”

They crouched under the arch and followed the ash cart path into a long crawlspace beyond. The floor sloped. Twice the ceiling dropped so low Kyana had to press one shoulder into mud to squeeze through.

Once something skittered over Tavin's boot and he made a noise she decided she would remember forever.

"That was not a rat," he whispered.

"It was absolutely a rat."

"No, it was too fast."

"That is somehow worse."

Ahead, the passage widened. Pale daylight showed through a broken grate tangled with ivy roots. Fresh air spilled in, smelling of pine, wet earth, and the sharp clean bite of mountain wind.

Kyana pushed the grate. It shifted outward with a groan, shedding dirt into a thicket on the far side. She crawled through first, blinking in the light.

They had come out in a hollow below the east curtain wall, hidden by thorn bushes and a slope of loose stone. Above them, Briarwatch Keep rose gray and jagged against the sky. Pennants snapped from the towers. Farther left, men were running along the battlements.

Running toward the north gate.

Not here.

Tavin wriggled out after her and shoved the grate back into place.

For one dizzy second Kyana just stood there, breathing the open air.

She had done it.

She was outside.

Then a horn sounded from the upper yard.

Not the watch change. Not mealtime. A search signal. Three short blasts.

Tavin looked up. “They know you’re gone.”

Kyana’s hand moved to the satchel again. The map inside felt heavier than parchment had any right to feel.

“We need Master Orin,” she said.

“We need not to be caught.”

“He knows what this is.”

“He also told you to run.”

The words landed like cold water.

Yes. He had.

Because he had known he might not be able to leave with her.

Kyana stared back at the keep. One narrow tower window near the top of the map room flashed briefly with light. Sun on glass, maybe. Or a signal. Or nothing at all.

Then she noticed something else.

From this angle she could see the eastern postern road winding below the walls toward the village smithy and the lower market. Riders were pouring out from the main yard now, splitting in pairs.

Some headed north.

Some west.

One pair turned east.

Toward the village.

Toward Tavin’s home.

“Tavin,” she said quietly.

He followed her gaze, and all the color drained from his dusty face.

“They’re not just searching the keep,” he said.

“No.”

The eastern riders were already picking up speed down the road.

Looking for her.

Maybe looking for anyone who might help her.

Kyana’s thoughts jumped like sparks. If she ran into the forest now, she might escape. If she stayed, the soldiers might reach the smithy first.

Tavin’s father would ask questions in the wrong tone to the wrong men and get himself thrown aside—or worse. And if the captain guessed Tavin had helped her—

She did not let herself finish that thought.

“There’s a shepherd path above the old quarry,” Tavin said quickly, already thinking the same thing. “It cuts to the lower market faster than the road.”

Kyana looked from the riders to the hidden path climbing through juniper and stone.

This was the choice.

Run for safety.

Or run toward danger before it reached someone else first.

She shoved a loose strand of hair out of her face and started uphill.

Tavin stared. “Where are you going?”

“To beat them there.”

He made a strangled sound somewhere between outrage and admiration, then sprinted after her.

Behind them, Briarwatch's search horn cried out again, and the sound chased them into the pines.