

Guardian Spirit

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Prologue

(2782 C.D.)

The man stared in horror as the head of the black dragon came closer. The sheer size of the being was hard to comprehend and its imposing presence seemed to suck away all the hope and light from the world. Its black scales were like large shields. The spread out wings blocked the sun and made the sky seem like a black, leathery blanket. The horns of the dragon were like huge, spiralling trees that crowned the majesty of its horror. As the dragons jaws opened the man found himself wondering whether the wagons he had back home would fit in the beings mouth with one bite.

The horror that had petrified him was broken when one of his comrades ran into him, just barely pushing them both away from the dragons closing jaws. The air current caused by the close encounter blew up sand and pushed the man and his companion further away.

“Remember why we are here! We can not lose you or the sword before the sealing is done!” his companion yelled at him before standing up and running towards the dragon.

The man stood up and looked around him. The black lizard seemed to fill the entire valley they were in. He saw the small figures by the dragons body trying to hit it with swords and arrows. He shook his head. Such weapons would not hurt the dragon in any way. He tightened his grip on the sword in his hand. It was the only weapon they had to fight the nightmare before them.

He ran towards the centre of the valley, doing his best to avoid the dragons attention. As he looked around to the edge of the valley and the hills that surrounded it, he was relieved to see the priests were in position. Some had already began the rite.

The man struck down a cultist with one fell swoop of the sword, barely slowing down his pace. He had no time for such conflicts. Two hundred paces. One hundred. There! The centre of the valley.

He looked around to ensure his own safety. His companions seemed to be

doing a good job of keeping the cultists busy and the dragons attention was drawn to a fire elemental that had been summoned. He knew the elemental would provide only a temporary reprieve and as he thought of that, the dragon breathed out a deadly, dark mist, that engulfed the elemental being. Even such a being would not survive and he noted with sadness that some of his companions were caught in the mist as well. All that would be left of them would be their bones.

He shook his head and struck the sword deep into the ground. He grabbed the sun shaped pommel and knelt.

“Loriel, grant us your strength. Your brother must be stopped,” the man muttered in a silent voice before starting the official rite. He could only hope the priests were doing their part.

To his relief he began to feel the energies gather not only from his own efforts, but from those of the other priests. The energies started to become visible to the naked eye as they swirled and gathered around the grounded sword in a dance of blue, red, brown and white light.

The dragons head snapped around and its gaze focused on the sword and the man knelt behind it. It let out a thunderous roar that seemed to shake the very ground and darted towards what it deemed to be the greatest threat to it.

The man raised his gaze, only to close his eyes from the horror that was headed for him. He doubled his efforts to finish the rite in time for he knew death would be upon him if he did not. To his relief he felt the last bits of energy settle in their place. He rose from his knees and faced the approaching dragon with a steady gaze.

“Deremoth!” the man shouted in a voice filled with strength. “Your time is at an end!” With those words, the man released the energies.

A multicoloured beam of light shot out from the pommel of the sword and struck the dragon. The mighty lizard shrieked in anger. It tried to move away from the beam, but its movements were slowed down and ultimately stopped by a crystal like casing that was slowly but surely engulfing its entire body.

Realizing it had lost for now, the dragon laughed. It was a horrible sound that would haunt the survivors until the end of their days.

“You think you have won?” the lizard asked mockingly. “You have merely

delayed the..” The last words were never heard as the crystal like casing snapped shut around the dragons mighty jaw. Encased in its prison the mighty being still managed to invoke a last rush of power. It shattered the valley floor.

The earth shook, tossing anyone still in the valley to the ground. A deep rumble could be heard from deep beneath and then, the world seemed to explode. Rock, men, the sword used for the sealing – all were thrown in the air, some never to be found.

The ground beneath the imprisoned dragon gave in. The mighty beast fell, splashing down in a basin of molten rock. The lava spewed upwards. For days the ground shook, fell and rose. When it all ended, where there once had been a valley, there was now an ash spewing volcano.

Moroth's Tooth had been born.

Part One

Risings

Chapter 1

(3085 C.D.)

A lonely roe deer grazed at the sunlight bathed clearing. A small breeze swayed the tree branches, filling the air with the rustling of the leaves. Summer was at its prime and nature was blooming. The birds were hurrying around to gather food for their fledglings, their singing and chirping creating a concert of voices. The grass covering the clearing was thick and long and the occasional patches of silver grass and flowers added bright spots of colour to all the greenness.

A young elf sneaked to the edge of the clearing and observed the roe closely from behind a bush. The elf's green cape, pants and tunic blended with the forest almost seamlessly, but failed to hide the feminine figure of the elf. Only the golden brown locks of hair that had slipped from under the capes hood showed against the forests greenness.

The roe had not noticed her. Nala went through her father's teachings in her head and looked around for the best path to approach the roe. She soon noticed a path — sheltered by thick patches of hay and covered by thick moss — that seemed to be easily passable. A small breeze blew across the clearing, from the roe towards Nala. She quickly secured the sword and dagger that hung from her belt and made sure they wouldn't accidentally cause a rustle. The young elf nodded to herself and slowly and silently started sneaking from the bush towards the roe.

The path she had chosen offered her cover and led her over soft patches of moss that would silence her footsteps. Her movement was so silent that the voices of the forest drowned out any small noises she made. A gust of wind threw back the hood of her cape and revealed her long, golden brown hair and the delicate face that was so typical of elves. The high cheekbones, pointed ears, narrow face, all trade marks of an elf. Nala pushed a lock of hair behind her pointed ears and looked at the roe with her almond shaped, green-blue eyes. The animal had not noticed her and continued its grazing.

The roe was only five feet away when Nala stepped astray on a dry twig. The loud snap alerted the roe. It quickly raised its head, noticed Nala and ran off to the shelter provided by the surrounding forest. The young elf was left at the clearing to curse her bad luck.

At the opposite edge of the clearing an older elf let out a small chuckle. There was no denying the girl was skilled for her age, but she still suffered from the lack of concentration and observation skills. The young elf was only approaching her fortieth birthday and was still considered to be a child by her own kind, but the older elf knew she was already moving better than many experienced forest guardians.

The older elf stepped out into the clearing and walked to Nala who was still looking after the roe.

"What went wrong?" the older elf asked carelessly.

The young elf quickly spun towards the voice. She had not heard a single sound as the master guardian had walked to her. Granted, it could have been the fact that she was so focused on the roe, but she found it more likely that there had simply been nothing for her to hear. She knew the skills of her teacher were still far above hers.

"I was below the wind, just like you've told me so many times, and moved like you have taught me. I observed the ground before me, but I still didn't see the twig." The young elf looked at her father a bit frustrated. Her father still looked young, despite being several hundreds of years old. His long brown hair was tied behind his head in a ponytail and his brown eyes were lively and gave him an image of cheerfulness. "I should have succeeded. I was so close that I could have touched the roe with my fingertips."

"And that's why you failed," her father said. "Your mind was on the roe instead of your next step." Ameter put his hand on her daughters shoulder and gave her an encouraging squeeze. He was almost a foot taller than her. "You're still young and your mind wanders. You'll succeed, once your mind has settled down and you've had more practice."

"But I was so close," Nala complained.

Ameter laughed and wrapped his hand around Nala's shoulder. "Patience

my little lily, patience. Come, it's almost dinner time and you know how your mother hates it when we're late."

"Next time I will succeed," said Nala as she pulled up the hood of her cape and ran off. Even when running she made so little noise that Ameter could barely hear her. He shook his head. How skilled would his daughter become? Sneaking and moving quietly were not the only things she was good at. She could hold her own against many a warrior in a sword fight, even though fighting with a long sword and a dagger was hard to learn. Still, nature magic was where Nala shone the brightest and had already surpassed her father. Though Ameter had to admit magic was not one of his strong points. That was the realm of his wife, Kyla, and under her guidance Nala would grow to be strong. How good would she be after an additional twenty years of training? Ameter shook his head wondering and ran after his daughter, towards the edge of the forest and the warm meal that was waiting.

Nala ran through the forest in an experienced manner and at a fast pace. The route was familiar to her and she knew where a fallen tree would block the path and where the ground was treacherously soft. The forest was her backyard and she had tended to it and defended it against trespassers for twenty years now.

The elves were a race with a very close relationship to nature, a relationship that bordered on being one where the elves could not live on without their forests. What ever forest one might enter in Balaria, it was very likely one would encounter elves taking care of it. Officially, the various kingdoms of Balaria accepted this practice and it had been going on for nearly a millennium. Not only because the elves kept away evil creatures, such as orcs, but they kept the forests in goods shape and filled with game. The kingdoms of Balaria didn't need to worry about patrolling the forests and could afford to put their soldiers where they were more needed.

Unofficially, there were elements that did not look upon the forest guardians in such a positive manner. Some said the elves were there simply to expand the elven kingdom and to take away the forests from the humans. Sometimes villagers living close to a forest got riled up and struck out against the

elves who lived in the forest. Usually the attacks ended up with a few wounded, but some times casualties occurred on both sides.

Nalas family lived in a forest in the northern part of the kingdom of Ramyn. The nearest city, Cerena, was to the south, twenty versts away. In the east, the forest was limited to the lake Cerena and in the west, the hills of Wroth created a barrier between the forest and the kingdoms of Wroth and Ramyn. In the north, a small slice of plains separated the forest from the mountains of Karan.

Nala's family weren't the only elves in the forest, even though it was a fairly small one. An experienced woodsman could travel through in a few days. Still, several families of forest guardians lived there, guarding and tending to the forest with their magic and swords.

The forest guardians lived in small and isolated family communities and rarely saw others. Usually an emergency — like an attack from a large orc tribe — was required for the families to get together. They did hold monthly meetings to discuss matters regarding the forest, but those were usually limited in attendance to the heads of each family. The forest guardians were accustomed to such an way of life, even though it was very different from the normal life of an elf.

Cerena's Forest, as people called it, was a peaceful area. Attacks from orcs and goblins were rare and those that occurred were small in numbers. Nala and her family – which consisted of only herself and her mother and father – had plenty of time to tend to the forest and as such it was in good shape. The trees were thick and strong and the forest floor was filled with lush undergrowth. In many places, a thick layer of moss covered the ground and in other places large ferns and may apples filled the ground. In the fall, the forest floor was filled with a golden brown and orange carpet as the trees let their leaves fall in anticipation for the coming winter. In the winter, the snow bent the tree branches, forming natural arches over the many paths that went through the forest. Now, at the prime of summer, the tree branches formed one thick green canopy. The forest floor was filled with fern, flowers and thick moss that was still moist from the nights dew.

Nala jumped over a fallen tree trunk and looked behind her. She smiled as she saw her father following right behind her. Today she would not lose to the old

man. The two often had a contest which one would reach their elf tree first. Most of the time the winner was Nala's father, he did have centuries of experience of moving in the forest, but sometimes Nala took the longer straw. After failing to touch the roe, she had decided today would be one of those days.

She took one more look behind herself and jumped off from the mossy path. Even though the path was much easier to run on than the wild forest, it wasn't the most direct way. Nala's running was fast and light and she quietly hummed a spell. Persuaded by her magic, the low hanging branches gave way as she passed them.

On an earlier exploration trip Nala had found an almost completely overgrown path which would lead her well ahead of her father. A jump over a small brook, a small dash through an area covered by young birches and the path was before her. Nala smiled and increased her speed.

A hare ran off before Nala, scared off by her. She only caught a glimpse of it with an apologizing expression on her face before it disappeared into the forest. The distraction made her trip on a moss covered branch, but she managed to maintain her balance and continue ahead.

A sound coming from the forest made Nala stop. She wasn't sure what it was. The bird singing had turned into warning chirps and she could hear something that didn't belong in the forests normal sounds and that something was making a lot of noise. Silently, Nala started to make her way towards the source of the noise. She sneaked through bushes and the forests thick undergrowth and soon got the cause of the noise in her sight. She could observe the cause from the shelter of a thick bush.

A man dressed in a grey robe was cursing loudly and trying to pull his robe free from a thorn bush. Nala had not seen a human in flesh and blood before so she took her time in relishing the man. He was clearly old. The wrinkles on his hands and the white hair and beard told that much. His long beard was tangled and several burrs were caught in it, making it look even more bedraggled. Even though the man was old, his posture was straight, making him an impressive sight. Nala figured the man was at least six feet tall, almost a foot taller than her. Nala was short grown for an elf, but on the other hand, the man was tall even on

the human's scale. On the ground, besides the man, laid a wooden staff.

“By Herides, who created this vile plant?” the man cursed in the human language and pulled his robe from the thorn bush. All he managed to do was create a large tear in the robe. Nala knew the human language as her mother had taught it to her so she knew what the man was saying. She pondered how she should regard the odd old timer as she watched the man’s fight against the thorn bush.

“Hahaa!” the man yelled out victoriously as his robe tore away from the bush. The yell quickly turned into a surprised scream as the man lost his balance and fell to the ground.

Nala noticed her chance had come as the man fell to the ground. She quickly pulled her sword out and ran out of the bushes in which she had been hiding. Before the old man had could react, Nala's sword was pointing at his throat.

Not looking too surprised, the man observed the elf who had appeared before him. She was beautiful by any standards. Her long golden-brown hair framed her delicate face, her skin was tanned by sunlight and her green-blue eyes had a warm inner light in them. The man let his gaze wander downwards and noted to himself that the elf before him was definitely a woman. The man looked at the staff that was laying on the ground next to him, but gave up on the though as the tip of Nala’s sword pressed against his skin.

The man coughed nervously and looked Nala in the eyes. “Why such a hostile greeting?” The man’s voice was steady and deep.

Nala tilted her head and looked at the man a bit closer. The white hair and beard made the man look older than he was. His brown eyes were not those of an old man, but a young one – lively, full of wander lust – yet there was some hidden wisdom in them.

“You’re a long way from the traditional routes, old man.” Nala spoke the human language with a barely noticeable dialect. “It’s suspicious and dangerous at the same time. Even though we elves look after this forest there are still dangerous animals here.”

“Quite, quite..” the old man nodded and smiled disarmingly, “but I’m just

an harmless old man who has lost his way. Is that sword really necessary?"

Nala hesitated, but she didn't see the old man posing any sort of threat so she lowered her sword. Faster than she thought possible, the old man grabbed the staff from the ground and swiped Nala off her feet. Nala was fast, but not fast enough to soften the fall and it almost pushed the air out of her lungs. She ignored the pain in her back and managed to be on her feet at the same time as the old man and she still had her sword in her right hand.

"Hmm..so you do have some skill after all" said the man and swung his sturdy staff with ease and skill.

"I have more skill than you, old man." stated Nala and dodged the staff that was swung at her head. Nala attacked, making a series of stabs and broad swings. However, the wooden staff was always there to block her strikes. Nala soon realized that the old man wasn't as helpless as she had thought and began to wonder how she should handle the situation. She didn't want to harm the old times as he hadn't exactly done anything wrong.

A stiff strike hitting her left arm woke her from her thoughts and made her jump backwards a bit surprised. The old man shook his head.

"This is no time to be thinking how you'll do you hair tomorrow, girly." The man gave added weight to his words by making a series of strikes that forced Nala on the defence.

Nala blocked a strike from the above with her sword and could just barely move her sword to block another strike made with the other end of the staff. The old timer was skilled at using the wooden weapon and faster than Nala could react, he turned the staff and landed a blow to her side. She blocked another strike with her sword, but it was clear she was at a disadvantage. The two continued to exchange blows: being constantly on the defence was eating at Nala's patience. As the man swung his staff again, she noticed a weakness in his defences. It was risky, but it would end the fight. She smiled and prepared for the attack.

A suitable opportunity soon presented itself and Nala made a strike aimed high, towards the old timers head. As she had expected, the old timer raised his staff high to block the strike. Both of the man's arms were up so a perfect

opportunity presented itself to Nala for her to take the risk. She quickly took a step forward and passed under the man's arms. She took her dagger from her belt and held the blade against the man's throat. The old timer froze and dropped his staff. He sighed. "You've certainly trained her well, Ameter," the man said in a loud voice.

Nala was surprised to see her father step to view from the very same bushes she herself had been hiding in.

"I see you've met Skander," her father said. She let her dagger fall from the man's throat and put it back on her belt. She took a step back, away from the man.

"He's an old friend," Nala's father continued, "From the times your mother and I were still wandering around the world, looking for treasures and adventures. Be glad he only used his staff. Had he used his magic, you'd be finding yourself in a lot worse situation."

Skander winked at Nala and pulled a red rose from his sleeve and offered it to Nala with a deep bow. "Skander Joligan, at your service, my lady. It is a pleasure to meet you, Nala Temera."

Ameter laughed a bit as he saw Nala's confusion. "Come. We will soon be in hot water for being this late for dinner."

Nala's father put his hand on Skander's shoulder and the two started walking away, talking to each other cheerfully. Nala looked after the odd couple with a baffled look on her face. The red rose was still in her hands.

Chapter 2

Nala arrived at the clearing that housed her home right behind her father and Skander. A small spring and a brook that flowed deep into the woods offered a fresh water supply for the family. A large tree grew at the centre of the clearing, rising several hundred feet above the ground and its trunk nearing the size of a fairly large house. The huge branches and thick foliage created a green roof over the clearing centre and cast a large shadow over parts of the clearing. The tree trunk had a door in it and several windows. As Nala looked up towards the foliage, she could see several more windows up the tree. For an Elf Tree, the tree was fairly small, but it could offer a comfortable living space to Nala and her family.

Elf Trees were grown and moulded by magic to provide homes for the elves. The size of Elf Trees varied greatly, but the largest competed with even the forts built by the dwarves. Nala's mother and father had grown their own tree when they arrived in the forest of Cerena. After many years of patient magic use and caring, the tree had grown big enough to live in. The seed of each new tree came from the Mother Tree that was located at the centre of the Great Forest, at the heart of the Elven kingdom.

According to a thousands of years old elven legend, the seed of the Mother Tree was given to the first elven king, Aren Tenera, by the goddess Lorie. The elves had held Lorie close to their hearts ever since and worshipped her as the goddess of nature. Due to the magical nature of the trees, there were many legends associated with them and they were used for many things. Though rare, even swords were known to be made from Elf Trees, as the tree could be moulded to be as hard as steel, but much lighter.

Nala hurried forward and entered the tree right after Ameter and Skander. The large room behind the door was bright and it filled almost the whole tree trunk's width. A round table, that seemed to appear straight from the tree itself, dominated the centre of the room. The table's surface was smooth and shined as

if it had been polished for years. The circle shaped bench surrounding the table seemed to appear straight from the tree, much like the table. On the left side of the door, a staircase started. It circled the whole room, slowly leading upwards. The engravings decorating the staircase gave it an elegant look and made the room seem much more alive. On the right, beneath the staircase, there was a fireplace with a small fire burning in it. Even though the fireplace was made out of wood, like everything else in the house, the flames didn't even create a black stain on the surface beneath it. In front of the fireplace, there was a small table and some comfortable looking chairs in a circle.

Opposite to the door from which Nala had entered there was another door. A flickering light shone from there and a sound of kettles clattering could be heard. Nala's mother appeared from the door with a steaming pot in her hands, which she set down on the large table.

"Skander. How long has it been since we last saw each other?" said Kyla without looking too surprised at the guests arrival. She was rarely surprised or caught off guard. Nala had inherited the colour of her hair from Kyla, among many other things. Kyla's eyes were green-blue and she was a bit taller than Nala. Her body build was different from Nala's. She wasn't as muscular and she looked to be more used to holding books in her hands rather than a sword.

"Must be closer to ten years," smiled Skander, "been busy, you see."

"Too busy. You've lost weight and you look tired. I'm going to have to fatten you up again." Kyla walked around the large table to give Skander a friendly hug. "Welcome, old friend."

She broke the hug and took a closer look at her old friend. The man had grown older and there were new wrinkles on his face and there was something in his eyes that had not been there before. Still, she could see the same old and familiar inner flame in them.

"Fatten me up?" asked Skander jokingly. "Surely there is not enough food in this entire forest to accomplish that!"

Kyla let out a laugh and was soon joined in it by Nala and Ameter. "Come. Sit down. The food is ready," she said and walked back into the kitchen to fetch more steaming and good smelling pots and pans.

Nala took her sword and dagger from her belt and placed them on a rack on the right side of the door. She then joined the rest of her family and Skander by the large table. Nala's mother was an excellent cook. The stew in the steaming pot was delicious, the boiled vegetables were cooked just right, so they were a bit hard in the middle, but soft on the outside and the freshly baked bread was soft and just warm enough to slowly melt the butter spread on it.

Skander provided the entertainment during the meal by telling stories and reminiscing the past adventures he had had with Nala's parents. Nala listened to the stories of her parents with fascination. She was hearing many of them for the first time in her life. The story of her father and an unfortunate encounter with a bear that resulted in a lost salmon and several scars for her father had her laughing until tears rolled from her eyes.

As the pots and pans started to be empty of food and the darkness of the night was creeping upon the forest, the four moved to sit in front of the fireplace. Ameter dug up a small barrel of elven wine from his secret stash and Skander happily helped him empty it. Nala sipped the wine from her cup with many thoughts and questions running through her mind. With boosted courage from the elven wine, she dared to ask some of the questions on her mind.

“Skander, how old exactly are you? You talked of times when my mother and father met, but that was nearly seventy years ago. You were a grown man even then, but you don't look that old.”

“How old?” the man laughed. “You have no idea how often I get asked that very question. I never respond, but since it is you who asks the question, I'll make an exception. I was born when Fender the third was the emperor of Ramyn,” the old man pondered for a bit, as if counting years. “I guess that makes me about two hundred and forty years old.”

Nala looked doubtful, “How is that possible? Humans don't live that long.” After a bit of hesitation she added, “Do they?”

Skander grinned and winked at Nala, “Ordinary humans don't, but I'm not an ordinary human. I'm the high master of one of the Five Towers of Magic. It would take a long time to explain it all, but the evening is too nice for philosophical and theological debate, so I'll simplify the matter. You could say

that Death and I have a sort of an arrangement. I don't meddle in his affairs and he doesn't meddle in mine."

Nalas eyes widened, "So you're immortal?"

Skander laughed, "Not quite, but close enough."

Nala was somewhat unsatisfied with the answer, but she let the issue rest. It was clear she was not going to get a better answer. Instead, she moved on to ask a question on something that had sparked her interest in Skander's answer. "What are the Five Towers of Magic?"

A bit surprised, Skander looked at Nala's parents, "Haven't you taught her anything besides using a sword?"

Kyla smiled and sipped some wine from her wooden cup, "She's young. It is important to know how to walk before you can think about where you're going. She can take care of herself and she knows how to move in the forest. What more does a young forest guardian need to know?"

Skander shook his head and sighed, "Elves. Always protecting their young ones from the outside world. All right, I'll tell you." The man took a comfortable position in his chair and refilled his empty wine cup. "The Five Towers of Magic is an academy situated in the city of Ramyn. As the name suggest, there are five towers, one for each kind of magic. Earth, Fire, Air, Water and Free magic. The afore mentioned four are forms of magic that are tied to their elements. A Fire magician can't raise a wall of stone out of the ground and an Air magician can't summon a water elemental. There are quite a few of those who are skilled in using one or more of these elemental forms of magic, but those who can control Free magic are rare."

The man looked at Nala who was listening intently, "Free magic is a whole other chapter compared to the elemental ones as it is not tied to any specific element. The power comes from within the caster as well as around him, from the scattered energies left over from the times of creation and the elements that surround and make up the world. A skilled Free magician can command all four elements and do things no one of the elemental magicians can do."

The expression of wonderment Nala had on her face made Skander smile. Never had she thought such powers to be possible. Noticing Skander's smile, she

sipped her wine to hide her face behind the wooden cup.

Skander grinned, understanding the young elf's emotions, "But I seem to have strayed from the original question. What was I talking about? Oh, yes..the Five towers of Magic. Each tower has a high master who looks after matters regarding the tower and makes decisions regarding the teachings and so forth. I'm the high master of the Tower of Free magic, but personally, I hate all that paper work."

The old man chuckled to himself for a bit, "I can imagine how the other high masters are tearing off their hair because I decided to make this trip. Now they'll have to do my work too. In fact, one of them happened to walk into the room while I was in the middle of casting the transportation spell." Skander burst out laughing, "He distracted me and that's why I was in the middle of the forest instead of appearing in front of this tree." The man laughed at something that could have easily gotten him killed. He could have materialized inside a tree and that would have been the end of him. The three elves just shook their heads.

Skander's laughter slowly died down as he saw no one else was amused. Clearing his throat, he continued "Anyway, The Tower of Free magic only has a small number of students compared to the other towers, but it's still one of the most prestigious of the towers. The purpose of the towers is to gather students who are skilled in the arts of magic from all over Balaria to study and experiment with various magic. Commonly, one might call the towers a school for magicians though the term elementalists is more suitable for the four elemental towers."

Nala thought about what was said for a moment and soon realized something, "You said there were five forms of magic, but I myself know nature magic. Does that not mean there are six forms of magic?"

Skander chuckled and asked, "And what is nature made out of?"

Nala looked a bit baffled at the obvious question, "Trees, animals, rocks..everything we see around us."

Skander nodded, "And at their basics, what are all those things made of?"

Nala began to understand what Skander was getting at, "What you are trying to say is that nature magic is nothing more than a combination of the elements?"

“Ah, you are not a hopeless case after all,” Skander said with a smile.

“But do not all elves know nature magic? Does that mean we can control all the elements? And does that not make us odd in that we can control all the elements?” Nala asked.

“The elves have great affinity to the elements of earth, air and water and control of those elements is what enables much of what the magic of nature is about, though there is some free magic involved as well. Nature magic is not about forcing the elements to do what you wish, but more about persuading them to do so. This lends to the form a relative ease of achieving simple, non-destructive feats, but makes greater feats a much harder task.”

Nala knew from her own experience this to be true. The magic she wielded was more akin to negotiating with the nature around her to do what she wanted and forcing rarely lead to success. Simple tasks were easy to cause, such as the spell she had used earlier that day to make an easier path through the forest, but greater things were often difficult and time consuming to accomplish. Intrigued, she focused again on listening to Skander.

“Very few elves have great ability at handling the element of fire and even fewer have the mindset to forcefully bend the elements to their will when needed to achieve greater feats. Those few who have that potential are sent to study under the leadership of skilful masters in the Mother Tree. I believe your mother is one such person.”

Nala looked at her mother a bit surprised. Kyla smiled at her, “You did not think I had learned all I know simply from my parents? Most of what I know, most of the books I have, I received during my time at the Mother Tree.”

“I always thought your parents did all the teaching,” Nala mumbled and felt embarrassed and confused. Her knowledge of the world outside of the forest of Cerena was limited. Truthfully, she had never left the forest and her parents had never told her much. Then again, she had never asked much as the forest and her studies had kept her mind and body busy. She had, of course, been to the edge of the forest and watched the view before her, but she had never ventured far from the cover of the trees. There was much she did not know of even her own kind.

Kyla noticed the frustrated look on her daughters face and guessed what the girl was thinking, "Nala, you've been brought up like a forest guardian should be brought up. The secrets of the forest are the most important things for a guardian to know. You know a lot about forests and how to care for them, but you do not yet know everything. Still, maybe it is time for you to get to know the world outside this forest."

Nala's father smiled at his young daughter and made a suggestion, "Skander here is one of the most knowledgeable people about this world. Why don't you take advantage of the situation?"

Nala gave Skander a pleading look, causing the man to grin widely, "My dear girl, ask me what ever you want and I shall answer to the best of my abilities."

Nala smiled happily and spent a moment thinking, "What is the world like? I mean, what is out there? I know that Cerena is a couple of days journey to the south of here, but what comes beyond that?"

Skander slowly poured some more wine into his cup before starting, "The outside world is divided into kingdoms, empires and various alliances. It is important to understand that, because the relations between two nations aren't always friendly and that can cause some problems to a traveller. Cerena and this forest are a part of the empire of Ramyn. In the north, the empire is limited to the mountain range of Karan and the Dwarven kingdom that controls it. They simply call their kingdom Karan. In the east, the limit is the ocean, though beyond the ocean, there is the continent of Meledor. In the west, the empire is limited to the kingdom of Wroth. The border is fairly close to this forest, right in the middle of the hills that are west from here. In the south, the empire has a joint border with Wroth and the kingdom of Voroht. There the border goes along the forest of Gerum. These days there is peace between the empire of Ramyn and the kingdoms of Wroth and Voroht. Centuries ago, the areas of the two kingdoms belonged to the Ramyn empire. The secession was far from peaceful, but it was a long time ago and over the generations relations have improved. But I'm wandering off from the original topic again..where was I?"

"You were talking about the different kingdoms and empires," Ameter

kindly reminded the old man.

“Ah..yes, quite. These three nations are mainly inhabited by humans. There certainly are members of other races in them, but they are a minority. South of Voroth lies the kingdoms of Garachi, Seren, Das and Geshe,” Skander paused for a moment. “I really should have a map for you to get a better picture of it all.”

Ameter stood up and removed the wine barrel from the table, “Why not create one, then?” he asked Skander.

“Ah, yes, splendid idea,” the old timer said as he stood up and took on a look of concentration. Nala could feel the energies slowly gather to him, she even felt the tree itself respond to the man's prompts. Small bumps began to appear on the table's smooth surface, soon growing in size and shape to create small mountains. Nala watched in awe as the vast mountain ranges took form, followed by tiny trees which soon made up entire miniature forests. Parts of the table were left lower, indicating lakes and rivers to complete the miniature map. Nala stood up from her chair to inspect the wonderful map closer.

Skander inspected the map as well, along with Nala's parents. He nodded in approval, “That should do.”

“Still the sculptor I see,” said Kyla dryly.

Skander shrugged his shoulders, “It is a skill not easily forgotten.”

Nala's father nodded in approval at the map.

“Now then. Let us see where we are,” Skander said and examined the map. “We are here,” he said after a while and pointed at a small forest near the edge of the map. The forest was nestled next to a small lake and there were miniature hills surrounding it all along its western and southern edges. To the north there was a mountain range right before the map was cut off by the edge of the table. Nala looked on curiously.

“Cereana is here,” Skander continued and moved his finger south to point at the mouth of the river that flowed from the lake. Nala noticed she could actually see tiny buildings on the map to indicate there was a city there.

Skander continued south with his finger until he arrived at an island in the middle of a river, “And here is Ramyn.”

“It's huge,” Nala said as she focused on what Skander was pointing at.

Indeed, even on the miniature map the city sprawled out to cover a huge area and was clearly visible. Cerena seemed minuscule compared to it.

“It is the largest city in this part of the world,” Ameter interjected.

“A city built of cold stones..not a place for elves,” said Kyla, clearly not appreciating the city at all.

Skander ignored the snub at his home city, “To the west is Wroth,” his finger gliding along the river to where it met the lake Ramyn, “and beyond it is The Great Forest, home of the elves.”

Nala had to admit the forest lived up to it's name. The miniature trees that began at the edge of the lake seemed to continue on forever to the south. Taking a wider view of the map she realized the forest covered nearly a quarter of the entire area the map presented. Even with the map before her she found it hard to grasp the vastness of it.

Skander continued to move his finger south from Wroth and stopped after what would be a journey of hundreds of versts if undertaken in reality, “Here is Voroth nestled next to the lake that has received its name from this very city. Still further south are the kingdoms of Garachi, Seren, Das and Geshe,” Skander pointed out each city and kingdom as he mentioned the name.

Nala measured the map, trying to figure out the proportions to the real world. She realized that a trip to Geshe would be measured in months instead of weeks or days. All of this made her home forest shrink in size in her mind as she began to realize how vast the world beyond it truly was.

Skander continued his explanation, “Though the kingdoms and cities I have mentioned are mainly inhabited by humans, they differ from each other vastly. The people of the Ramyn empire are mainly peaceful and highly educated. The people of Geshe occupy themselves with mining gold from the mountains of their kingdom and jealously guarding those riches. Seren is famous for its fast and durable ships and skilled seamen.”

Feeling his mouth dry from all the talking Skander took a sip of the wine before pondering, “Much like we mould our environment, the environment moulds us. The inhabitants of each kingdom have over generations adjusted to the demands of their main livelihood, so it is fairly easy to say from what kingdom

a person is. Of course, there are other distinctive differences, such as skin colour.”

Realizing that if he continued to explain everything in such detail they would not be done in days, Skander decided to limit the talks to things that would serve to perhaps save the young elf's life should she venture outside the safety of her home forest, “The north-west part of the land is controlled by barbarians.” He explained and pointed to the large lowlands between the mountains and the Sea of Zereth, “They are a savage lot and looting raids to the southern nations are a favourite pass time for them. If you ever have to venture out to the world, you should be careful not to stray in to their lands. Your very life might depend on it as the barbarians are weary of races other than humans..and there are some tribes who even eat those who stray in to their lands uninvited,” he gave Nala a stern gaze to put weight to his words.

The young elf simply nodded, not really knowing how to react to such revelations. She knew the world outside was not as safe as the forest she lived in and that bad things happened, but she had never though there would be things of such disgusting nature lurking there. The mere thought made her tense up.

“Do not scare her too much or she will never leave this forest,” Kyla said softly as Ameter poured some more wine to Nala's cup. Her soft voice seemed to have a soothing effect on her daughter and she relaxed again.

“I would rather she is slightly scared now than dead later,” Skander retorted with a wry smile. Content that Nala had taken his words seriously, he continued and pointed to the map, “In a valley west of The Great Forest, surrounded by the mountain range, lays the kingdom of the trolls, Dasrak. Do you know what trolls are like?” Skander asked Nala, who shook her head.

“I'm not surprised,” said Skander and stroked his beard, “They are a rare sight outside their own kingdom. They are human like creatures, though they're much larger. They can grow to be up to eight feet tall and their body is covered in a fine, but scarce fur. They have pointy ears, large pointy noses and some might have large tusk like corner teeth.”

“They sound dangerous,” said Nala.

Nala's parents chuckled along with Skander, who reassured the young elf,

“Despite their appearance they are not monsters, though they still try to avoid other races. Just never anger one or you’ll be in more trouble you can handle. The troll wars pounded that into humanity’s mind. They’re fierce fighters and they have a strange ability that allows them to heal fast and even re-grow lost limbs.” Skander sipped some of his wine, “If you meet a troll, do so with an open mind. Do not let the appearance fool you.”

Nala nodded with gleaming eyes. Though the world seemed to have many dangers to it she could barely wait for a chance to explore and see it all for herself.

“Final words of caution for you,” said Skander to Nala and pointed to two places on the map. A large mountain near the kingdom of the trolls and to an area north of Wroth. “The mountain, called Moroth's Tooth, and the Swamp of Gereth. No kingdom has claimed these two places as their own. Monsters and other creatures of the dark and evil inclination rule these places with an grip that has not been able to be broken by the humans or any other well meaning race. Few people who venture to these locations ever return and the most that has been found of those unfortunate souls are a few severed limbs. You would do well to avoid these places at all cost.”

“Alright, that should be enough scaring for one evening,” said Kyla and waved her hand, causing the marvellous map to slowly sink back into the table, leaving behind only the smooth surface that had been there before. The expression of Nala's face grew sour for she had hoped to examine the map further still.

Skanders face grew darker as he sat back down to his chair and emptied his wine cup with a single gulp. It was already dark outside and the moon was starting its climb towards the sky. “Talk of these dark places has reminded me of why I came here. To bring you news..and to warn you.”

Kyla and Ameter looked at each other and then at Skander, “What do you mean?” Nalas father asked.

“I know that the forest guardians live a secluded life and seldom hear of events that happen in the outside world. You seldom hear of even your own kind or other guardians.” Skander looked at Nala who was still in a world of her own,

thinking about the new world that had opened before her. He seemed to ponder whether to continue or not.

“It is alright. What ever news you have, you can tell in front of her,” Ameter said.

Skander sighed, “Very well. During the last few weeks, I’ve heard news of forest guardians being killed in a very brutal manner.” The room was filled with silence. Ameter and Kyla looked calm, but the expression on Nalas face was a bit fearful as she was drawn from her thoughts back to reality.

Skander continued with a worry filled voice, “At first I thought it was just rumours or the ordinary peasant conflict gone bad or that it was the doing of a large orc tribe. Then I heard what happened in the forest of Kabros. As you know, that particular forest is located in the middle of the border between Voroth and Garachi. Several guardian families were found dead inside their Elf Tree homes. Worse yet, on each wall an image was painted in the blood of the slain.” Skander licked his lips. “It was the sign of Deremoth.”

Chapter 3

*K*yla and Ameter looked a bit stunned at hearing the name of an god they thought long dead, or at least forgotten. Nala had heard vague stories and legends of Deremoth and the cult -- the followers called themselves Blades -- that followed him. Deremoth was the brother of Loriei, but when Loriei chose to give the seed of the Mother Tree to the elves Deremoth grew jealous, and ultimately became vengeful. Where Loriei was the goddess of life and nature, Deremoth was the god of death and unnatural forces. Deremoth hated elves as they were so close to nature and Loriei, and, indeed, he blamed them for stealing Loriei from him.

Centuries ago, the followers of Deremoth were powerful and had significant influence in many of the human kingdoms. They incited hatred towards elves and that eventually almost lead to a war between the elves and many of the human kingdoms. Fortunately, a few sound minded men and women remained and they revealed the true plan of the cultists, which was to destroy everything natural and allow Deremoth to walk among the living. The cult was eradicated by the enraged human rulers and over time Deremoth sunk into oblivion.

“Are you certain? How can that be?” Ameter asked. “The cult surrounding Deremoth was destroyed long ago and, indeed, it is believed even Deremoth himself had been destroyed.”

“As certain as I can be of anything. You can not kill a god,” Skander said, “You can kill his followers and reduce his influence, but you can not kill him, so he will still be alive in the plane of the gods, waiting for his opportunity.”

“So someone has began to reassemble the cult around him to revive his strength? Loriei help us..” Ameter made a sign to thwart evil.

“You have brought grave news indeed, Skander,” said Kyla with a sorrowful voice. “This is not something we should keep to ourselves. We must warn the others in this forest and even the elves living in the Elven kingdom.”

Ameter nodded in agreement, “I will send out a call for the council to meet

first thing in the morning. Skander, will you join me in the meeting and tell the news?”

Skander nodded, “Certainly, old friend.”

“Can I come too?” Nala asked, not really caring about the council meeting at all.

Kyla looked at Nala with a knowing smile, “You're hoping to see Tydian, aren't you?”

Nala looked a bit uneasy and Skander asked, “Who's this Tydian fellow then?”

“He's a boy, about Nalas age. She has her eyes set on him.” Kyla responded.

“Mother!” Nala exclaimed and blushed. The tension in the room seemed to lighten up.

Skander laughed and looked at Nala knowingly, adding to her discomfort, “Young love is a beautiful thing.” The man even winked at Nala.

Nala stood up, her face glowing red, “It is late. I will go get some sleep.” She walked to the stairs and started making her way up. When she reached the point where the stair went above the fireplace she heard her father call her. Nala peaked over the railing and saw Ameter looking up.

“We leave early, so make sure you wake up in time.” Ever since she was a child, Nala had slept long and deeply and had trouble waking up in the morning. She was the kind that would turn her back on the sun shining through the window and pull a blanket over her head just so she could sleep ten more minutes.

Nala smiled, “So I can come?”

Her father nodded, “Yes, you can come.”

Nala was happy to hear she could go. She made her way up the stairs to the second floor of the elven tree and down the corridor to her room. The staircase continued its circular rise towards the third floor and above.

The first door on the left led to the guest room and the first door on the right lead to Nala's parents room. The second door on the left lead to a training room. Nala and her father often trained their fighting skills there during the

winter. The second door on the right lead to Nala's mothers study room and library. Bookshelves filled the room and there were piles of books even on the floor. Many of them were about nature magic and various other nature related topics, but some were history books. The third door on the left, the last door in the corridor, lead to Nala's room.

Nala opened the door to her room and stepped in. The moonlight shone in from the window on the right and illuminated Nala's desk and the bookshelf on the left side of the door. Her bed and wardrobe were further into the room, in a darker corner. Nala sat by her desk and lit an oil lamp. Though the matters discussed had been serious, Nala was excited as she had learned many new things and tomorrow she would get to go to a council meeting. She would get to meet Tydian. Nala sighed and looked out the window at the moon. She spent some time just staring out the window before changing into her nightgown and slipping under her bed sheets.



Nala woke up to a knock on her door. The room was still dim as she rubbed her sleepy eyes. She heard her fathers voice from behind the door, “Nala, it's time to wake up if you want to come with us.”

“I'm awake. I'll be right down,” she responded and crawled out from the bed. Silently cursing to herself for over sleeping, she quickly dressed herself in a green tunic and trousers and gave her hair a quick brush.

As she walked downstairs, she could see Skander and her parents were already sitting by the table enjoying breakfast. There was some left over stew from last night as well as bread. There were also freshly picked *Shujian* berries that were typical for the season and were just starting to reach their prime. The red berries were round, around the size of the end of ones thumb, and they were sweet and juicy on the inside. Nala sat next to her father and made sure she got her share of the berries.

“The meeting call has been sent out,” Ameter said, “The word should have

reached everyone by now.”

Forest Guardians used animals – mainly birds – to deliver messages to each other. The animals themselves formed a network that could deliver messages from one side of the forest to the other in a matter of hours.

“Where do you hold these meetings?” Skander asked.

Ameter smiled mysteriously, “You'll see once we get there, my friend. You'll see.”

Skander looked a bit disappointed, but he shrugged it off quickly and finished his breakfast along with the rest who had gathered around the table. Ameter, Nala and Skander prepared themselves for the walk to the meeting place, while Kyla cleaned the table and washed the pots and pans. Nala fastened her sword and dagger around her waist, as did Ameter, and Skander grabbed his staff. The three walked out the door into the morning sunshine.

Ameter led the way as they made their way north, towards the centre of the forest. He knew the paths and the fastest routes so they made good time with little effort. The morning mist had left behind its moistness and the thick moss patches they had to walk over made their feet wet. Skander complained loudly about it, while the two elves just shrugged their shoulders and smiled at him. This, of course, made him complain even more and throw in remarks about crazy elves. The mood between the three was easy going and cheerful.

“Is the meeting place much further?” Skander asked after a while.

“It's not far,” Ameter answered and brushed aside a low hanging tree branch. “In fact, we're here.”

The three stepped into a clearing that bathed in sunlight. Thick forest surrounded it, making it hard to find if you didn't know what you were looking for. There were large tree stumps all over the clearing and in the centre, there was a taller stump that looked almost like podium. Thick and long grass covered the rest of the clearing, almost hiding some of the stumps.

Ameter walked to one of the tree stumps that was fairly close to the large podium like stump in the centre and motioned Nala and Skander to come next to him. As he stepped onto the stump, he explained to Skander.

“This clearing was made by the orcs that inhabited this forest before we

elves drove them away. We've kept it like this as a reminder for us as to why we're here. It is not a happy place for us elves, but the things we discuss here are seldom happy either, so it fits." Ameter looked around with an sorrowful expression on his face. He then continued.

"Each guardian family of this forest has its own stump. The closer your stump is to the podium, the longer you've been in the forest and thus the more your word weights in on issues. The meeting is run by an elected elder and he resides over the meeting from that podium. He hands out speech turns and maintains order."

Ameter looked up to see two elves walk over to one of the stumps. He greeted them with a wave of his hand. The two elves waved back, but they remained on their stump talking to each other. Ameter looked at Nala and Skander who were looking over at the two elves.

"You should leave the talking to me. I'll present the main points and ask that they listen to your story, Skander. The elder might initially refuse to listen to an outsider like you, but I'm sure he'll listen once I explain who you are. They know of the towers and they'll certainly listen to one of the towers High Masters."

Ameter looked around himself and saw that more elves had appeared in the clearing. Nala looked around too, hoping for Tydian to appear. Though the bantering last night had embarrassed her a bit, they had been right. She had her eyes set on Tydian.

Tydian was a few years older than Nala and his family had been in the forest almost a century longer than Nala's, thus they held a higher rank within the forest guardians. The ranking of each family didn't really influence marriage or any other social aspects of life as it was strictly restricted to when a meeting was held.

Nala and Tydian were very close. It was an unspoken agreement between Nalas and Tydians families that the two would marry once they reached the right age and the two youngsters didn't really have anything against that. Tydian made Nala feel at ease and made her laugh. They always had fun together and as they roamed the forest and made discoveries, a mutual feeling of affection had grown between the two. The forest guardian elves weren't particularly strict about what

youngsters did while they were alone. After all, such feelings and actions were completely natural and the elves held nature in high regard.

“Nala!” She turned around to see Tydian, waving his hand and walking towards her. He was dressed in a green cape, tunic and trousers and he was carrying a bow in his hands. His sword was fastened around his waist. Nala gave her father a pleading look.

Ameter nodded and smiled, “Go on. You already know what this is about. You don't have to stay here. Go, enjoy the day with Tydian.”

Nala gave her father a quick hug and rushed to meet Tydian. The two hugged and as they parted, Nala looked closely at the man before her. Tydian was almost a heads length taller than Nala and he had his long, brown hair tied in a ponytail. His pointed ears were clearly visible and the smile on his face made his otherwise narrow and cold face look warm. He was handsome in his own way, a way that Nala found herself liking. Tydian looked at Nala with his green eyes with a curious expression on his face.

“It's good to see you, Nala.”

Nala smiled, “I figured you'd be here so I harassed my father into taking me with him.”

Tydian laughed and looked the way Ameter and Skander were. He was surprised to see a human standing next to Nala's father, “Your fathers message was a bit cryptic. Why was this meeting called? Why is there a human here?”

Grabbing the youngsters hand, Nala said, “Come with me and I'll tell you. Or would you prefer staying here listening to the council talking about it for hours?”

“Do you even have to ask?” said Tydian with a smile.

The two left the clearing just as the elder climbed on to the podium and called the meeting to start. As they wandered through the forest, Nala told everything she knew to Tydian. He listened with an concerned expression on his face. They didn't speak much after Nala had finished her explanation. They didn't want to dwell on such dark thoughts when they had a whole day to spend together in peace.

Nala led the way and Tydian followed her. They had been in these parts of

the forest before and Tydian knew where he was being led. He smiled as the small moss covered clearing came to view. There was a clear watered pond there and the surrounding moss made the ground soft, almost like a natural bed. The sunshine that hit the clearing kept the water in the pond pleasantly warm. They had discovered the clearing by accident on one of their expeditions and had visited it quite often since then.

“A fine spot to spend the day,” Tydian said and looked at Nala with a sly smile. She returned the smile and began undoing her sword belt.

“Come on. Lets go for a swim.”

Tydian barely managed to get his trousers undone before Nala was already naked and in the water.

“You're slow!” she shouted to Tydian from the water.

“I'll show you slow!” Tydian shouted back and quickly finished taking off his clothes. With a short sprint and a high jump, he landed in the water creating a big splash that drenched Nala completely. He surfaced with a big smile on his face. Nala looked at him with a disgruntled expression on her face. She splashed some water on Tydian and began to swim away. Tydian followed her and soon caught up with her. The air was soon filled with the noise of splashing water and two laughing and screaming voices.

Panting, Nala climbed onto the soft moss covered shore. The sunshine warmed her and began to slowly dry off her naked body. Tydian swam to shore and laid down on his side, next to Nala. He looked at the sunbathing young woman with a smile. Her small and firm breasts fit her slender body well and the muscles on her body were well shaped, but didn't diminish her feminine looks. Tydian couldn't help himself as he extended his hand and started to gently caress Nalas body, teasing the young woman with his fingers as he drove away beads of water from her flat stomach. Soon the two found themselves embracing each other and exchanging passionate kisses. The passion swept over the two as they made love on the soft moss bed.

Tydian gently stroked Nalas hair and occasionally caressed the tips of her ears. He knew the tips of her ears were a soft spot for her and the right sort of touch made her shiver with pleasure. The two laid naked on the ground,

embracing each other, cooling down from the moments of passion they had shared. Nala rose to give Tydian a gentle kiss on the lips.

“I wish we could be like this more often,” Nala sighed and pressed her head against Tydian's chest.

“A few years and we can be,” Tydian said, “You'll be old enough to marry then.”

“Two years is too long..” Nala muttered languidly and made Tydian laugh.

“Once it is made official that we are to marry, this is the place we should start fostering our tree,” Tydian said and Nala could not agree more. The clearing was their special place and would serve well as a home.

It was customary that elven marriages were declared publicly at least a year beforehand, more often several years. At that time the couple received a seed for an elf tree and were expected to plant it and tend to it through the crucial early years that were the most vulnerable time for it. During that time the tree bonded with its future residents, stapling them into its very fibres. In the rare cases that the marriage did not happen, the tree died, because in the early years it was not capable of surviving without the effort of both its masters.

“The children will enjoy the pond,” said Nala teasingly, knowing Tydian had not planned that far ahead.

“Children?” asked Tydian with slight worry in his voice. “How many are you planning on?”

Nala smiled wryly, gently nibbled Tydian's ear and whispered, “At least two.”

The young man sighed in relief, “I worried you would be wanting at least five.”

Nala straddled Tydian, who was laying on his back, and pressed her hands against his chest, “And if I wanted five?” she asked in a demanding voice.

Tydian grabbed her hands and pulled her closer, “I would not deny such blessings from us,” he said before pulling the young maiden close enough to kiss her passionately. Her soft breasts pressed against him and the two felt their passions flare again.

Just then they heard the sound of a horn in the distance. The meeting had

ended. A protesting groan escaped both their lips, but they realized they had no choice but to return. The two quickly got dressed, though they managed to sneak a few kisses in between, and made themselves presentable looking again. They then hurried back towards the meeting area. When they arrived, most of the elves had already left, but Ameter was there as was Tydian's father.

"Ah, there you are," Ameter said, "We were starting to wonder where you two had gone." He raised an eyebrow for despite the young couples best efforts, they looked to be dressed in a hurry and their hair was in a mess compared to earlier that day.

Nala blushed a bit and both Ameter and Tydian's father laughed.

"What has the council decided?" Tydian asked. He looked around a bit. "And where is that human who was here?" Nala looked around too, but could not see Skander.

"We talked for quite a bit. Many didn't believe what I was saying until Skander spoke and presented his evidence," Ameter explained, "The council listened to him after they knew who he was. They even gave him the duty of delivering our message to the Elven Kingdom. That is why he is not here. He already left to deliver the message."

Nala felt a bit down for not getting to say goodbye to the old man. She had started to like him despite everything.

"The council decided to forward the information to the Elven Kingdom," Ameter continued, "and also decided to make some preparations, in case we should get such visitor in our forest."

"Will the Elven Kingdom allow a human enter the lands?" Tydian asked. The borders of the kingdom were closely guarded and even though the kingdom was not closed to other races they often found it difficult to enter none the less.

"They know who Skander is. They'll let him pass," Ameter said.

"I fear dark times are ahead of us," Tydian's father said. Ameter only nodded in response.

"How about you join us for dinner? It has been too long since we last talked about certain things," Ameter made a sly look at Nala and Tydian and made them both feel a bit uneasy.

“That is an excellent idea, Ameter,” Tydian's father responded and the four started to make their way back towards Nala's familys elf tree.

Chapter 4

Skander had returned from the Elven Kingdom to bring news that the kingdom would keep an watchful eye over all the forests and that they would send out men to find out more about the incidents that had been reported. He had then returned to his duties in the Five Towers of Magic. Since then, no further incidents had been reported.

The relationship of Nala and Tydian was made official that autumn. The marriage date was set two years away to allow more time for their elf tree to grow for they could not plant the seed until spring. The two met more often and found the prospect of a future life together ever more appealing. Continuing her training, Nala found herself growing in skill at a pace that surprised even her parents. As the winds became colder and winter was but a few steps away, Nala completed the task her father had set her on that very summer. The first sign the roe had of her was her touch on its back.

The winter following Skanders visit was harsh with snow banks that were as deep as Nala was tall. The massive amount of snow made tending to trees difficult and many a old tree in the forest fell under the crushing weight of the snow and stormy winds. The elves had done the best they could to preserve as many as they could, but even they could not fight the full might of nature.

In the spring Nala and Tydian planted their seed at the pond they so loved. Tending to the sapling was almost all they did that spring and summer. It took much of their energy, but they still found the strength to take part in the occasional patrol, though more often they chose to spend that strength tending to each others needs.

The winter that followed put their sapling and the strength of their commitment to the test. It was a less harsh winter than the previous one and much to their relief the spring showed the fledgling elf tree to be in good condition and well on its way to becoming as strong tree. This left both of them with more time for other activities as summer came around and the day of their wedding

loomed only a few short months away.



Nala sat on the large tree branch and observed the ground below her. Her green and brown clothing made her blend seamlessly into the foliage. She listened carefully and she could soon hear noises coming her way. Dry twigs breaking and leaves rustling indicated there was a large group heading her way.

She had been patrolling the forest when she had stumbled upon a camp left behind by a large group. There had been several camp fires and by her estimate at least fifty beings had been in the camp. Following them had proven to be easy as they did very little to hide their trail. It hadn't taken her long to catch up to them and circle around them to get ahead so she could choose a spot for herself from which to observe the visitors.

Nala felt her blood boil as the first of the creatures appeared from the bushes and walked under the tree she was hiding in. Orcs, her mind screamed. She watched with disdain as several of the green skinned brutes walked by. Their faces were pig like, but they also had tusk like corner teeth appearing from their mouth, making them look even more fierce. Nala noted that they were equipped with swords, axes and several had leather armour on them. They were much more better equipped than the average orc tribe. Two orcs walked by, carrying a wild boar that was tied to a wooden pole they carried between them. She counted seventy orcs in total as they walked by her, not realizing they were being observed.

Nala followed the orcs until they stopped at a small clearing. She hid in the tree branches. It seemed like they were going to set up camp and feast on the wild boar. She felt uneasy as there was clearly something different about these orcs. Normally they would have hurried to get out of the forest, but these seemed to be in no hurry to leave. Nala shook her head to disregard the feeling. They're orcs and must be killed no matter what, she told herself.

She let out chirping sounds that any inexperienced one would pass off as a birds singing. In reality it was not a sound any bird would make, but rather an

signal for elves. She listened and heard similar sounds coming from the distance. The word had been sent out and it would soon reach other elves, informing them of her location and of the threat she had found. The orcs continued to set up camp, completely unaware of what was happening in the forest around them.

Nala could soon spot the first signs of other elves gathering around the clearing. She was startled as Tydian silently appeared next to her.

“Orcs, eh? This'll be fun,” whispered Tydian, sounding quite excited and pleased. He had his sword fastened around his waist and Nala could see the leather armour under his green cape.

Nala decided to disregard the remark and whispered back, “How many have come?”

“Fifteen, including us. There should be enough of us.”

Nala nodded, “Still, something doesn't feel right to me. The orcs are acting strangely.”

Tydian glanced over at the orcs, who were getting ready to start a fire to roast the wild boar. He looked around intently, searching for anything out of the ordinary. “They're orcs,” he finally said, “be they normal or abnormal, we have to get rid of them. That is Lorie's wish.”

Nala could not argue against his logic, even though she still felt uneasy. “Standard tactic?” she asked and Tydian nodded. Nala let out another chirping sound, though it was different from her previous one.

Thirteen orcs fell as arrows struck them. None of them got up. The orc camp fell into chaos as they started to realize what was happening. Another thirteen orcs fell to arrows fired by the elves, though this time some managed to avoid fatal hits. Nala unsheathed her sword and dagger and dropped down from the tree branches and ran towards the nearest orc. Tydian followed closely behind with sword in hand.

The first orc Nala encountered tried to hit her with an overhead swing of its sword. Nala didn't even stop as she blocked the hit with her sword and stabbed the orc in the neck with her dagger. It went down suffocating in its own blood. Nala could see the other elves running out of the forest to join the fight and she smiled. Another orc fell in front of her, this time to a stab from her sword.

The orcs were disorganized and in chaos after the salvo of arrows and the elves took full advantage of it. They killed off the orcs one by one before they could form any meaningful resistance. Even though there were still three orcs for each elf, the elves training and skill with their weapons was far superior to what the orcs had. Nala and Tydian formed an deadly combination as their movements complimented each other perfectly. Soon they found the last of the orcs had fallen and the battle was over.

Nala wiped her sword clean on the fallen orcs tattered clothes. Tydian walked to her with a grin on his face. His clothes had some blood on them, but none of it seemed to be his.

“Loriel will thank us for getting rid of these abominations. I can't deny that, at times, it is an exceptional pleasure to serve her wishes.”

Nala laughed, “One might tend to feel a bit worried that you enjoyed this so much.” She got a more serious look on her face and asked, “How did we fare?”

“A few minor wounds.” Tydian responded and then a smile lit his face, “Eleria lost that long hair she so likes. One orc had the misfortune of cutting a large chunk of it and as certain as the sun rises, she made the wretched thing pay for it.”

Nala sneered, “Better her hair than her head.”

The two started to walk towards the other elves, talking and laughing. The smile on Nalas face died as Tydian suddenly jerked backwards and stopped talking. As she looked at him, she noticed the black arrow that had struck his chest. The world seemed to slow down in Nalas eyes as another black arrow struck Tydian. A trickle of blood started to run down from the side of his mouth as he started to fall down. The scream that escaped Nala's lips was filled with sorrow and terror. The man she was to marry in only a few short months fell before her to the ground never to get up again.

The other elves at the clearing heard her scream and started to look for their weapons, but few got the chance to unsheathe them. Black hooded figures appeared seemingly out of thin air, often behind the elves so they could run the elves through with their swords. Those who avoided that fate were tired from the battle with the orcs and couldn't really put up much of a fight against the dark

hooded figures. They fought valiantly against the aggressor, but the hooded figures were skilled and rested and they had superior numbers over the elves. It was a short battle – though a slaughter might have been a more appropriate word to describe it.

Nala was kneeling next to the fallen Tydian and cradled him in her arms. As she looked at him through her tear hazed eyes, she saw that life had escaped from his eyes and she knew her loved one was lost. She didn't hear the fighting that was going on around her. All she saw was her beloved Tydian's body in her arms. She finally looked around herself as the sounds of fighting ceased, but she only saw a dark hooded figure above her until darkness ensued.



As Nala came to, the first thing she noticed was the pain in the back of her head. Slowly, she opened her eyes and saw that she was back at her family's home. She tried to move, but found herself next to the fireplace with her hands tied above her head by a thick rope which was tied tightly to the railing poles of the stairs on the other end. Her feet barely touched the floor.

“You're finally awake, I see,” said a deep male voice with an odd accent to his elvish.

Nala focused on the dark hooded figure that was sitting by the table. The dark hood hid his face and his clothing was very loose, not revealing much of his body build. As the man stood up, Nala noted that he was a bit taller than she was. She also noticed the other figures in the room and counted a total of ten.

“Where is the Sun Blade?” the hooded man asked.

“The what?” Nala asked, not really knowing what the man was talking about. Her voice was a bit croaky and she had to fight to keep the tears from coming again.

The man stepped closer to Nala, so close his unpleasant smell reached her, “The Sun Blade, where is it? I know your father once possessed it!” His voice was passionate, as if nothing in the world meant more than the answer to the

question.

Nala shook her head and looked down, tired and dismayed by the loss of Tydian. She didn't have the will or strength to fight, "I don't know. My father never mentioned it."

The man sighed, "Are you going to be as stubborn as your father was? And your mother?"

Nala's head snapped back up and she looked at the man, "What have you done to them?" she yelled. Her scream was met by a dark laughter from the man.

"They turned out to be useless to me, so I killed them," the man turned back to the table behind him and grabbed something. As he turned around he held in his right hand the severed head of Nala's father and in his left the head of her mother. Their dead eyes peered at Nala, causing bile to rise to her throat. A feeling of surrealism rushed over her.

The man bounced the head of Nala's mother, as if it was talking, and mimicked a female voice, "Please, please, I beg you. We know nothing. Spare us!"

The man spat at the head and threw both of them over his shoulder as he stepped closer to Nala, the disgusting thud of the heads hitting the floor covered by his hate filled words, "You elves. Killing you just doesn't seem enough. You need to be broken, defiled and then erased from the very books of history."

Having recovered from the initial shock of seeing her parents dead, Nala let out an anguished scream and mustered her strength. She managed to pull herself upwards enough to deliver a kick to the chest of the man standing in front of her. The man stumbled backwards and looked for support from one of the figures standing close by. As he did that, he accidentally pulled back the hood of one of them and revealed his face. Nala only saw the face for a moment, but she knew she'd remember it. The brown hair, bearded jaw, broken nose that had not healed properly, wide forehead, she'd remember them all.

The man she had kicked regained his balance and looked like he didn't really mind the kick. The man whose hood had been pulled down stepped next to him and said in a low voice, "She saw my face. We must kill her."

"Of course we will, but before that I will need to visit her mind," said the man who was clearly in charge of the situation.

“Who are you? Why are you doing this?” Nala shouted in a voice filled with grief and anger and tried to keep away the rest of the hooded figures by kicking around, but they soon had her completely tied up so she couldn't move at all.

“Who are we?” the man Nala had kicked asked. “We are the Blades and I am Derian, the first disciple of Deremoth. As to why, well, it is not for you to know. All you need to know is where the Sun Blade is.”

“But I don't know where it is or even what it is!” Nala yelled in desperation, realizing she would not get out alive.

“We'll see about that soon enough,” the man muttered in a cold voice and stepped in front of Nala. He placed his thumbs on Nala's forehead and seemed to focus and mumbled words Nala could not make out. Having received training in nature magic, she could feel the dark energies and forces gathering inside the man. Then the pain hit her. It was as if the man's thumbs were sinking inside her head. She could feel the man's mind probe and violate her mind, pulling out all her memories and disregarding them when they weren't useful. Nala's whole body shook and she screamed as the probing continued. In her mind she could see the many fond memories she had about her mother, father and Tydian. Her whole life, everything she had heard, said and done, flashed before her eyes and she knew Derian was watching. The private moments she had had with Tydian brought tears back into her eyes, as did the many memories of her parents.

As the probing stopped, Nala slumped down and relied on the ropes to keep her up. She was breathing heavily, sobbing and was barely conscious. Derian didn't seem to be affected in any way by the effort.

“She is useless to us. Kill her,” Derian said and walked out the door.

One of the hooded figures stepped next to Nala and drove his sword through her stomach. She let out a pitiful moan. The figure pulled out the sword and laughed.

“She'll die slowly, like every elf should.”

The figures started to leave and soon Nala was alone in the Elf tree home she had shared with her parents for many decades. The stomach wound was bleeding and Nala could already feel her strength escape. The darkness soon overtook her vision and she fell unconscious.

Chapter 5

Derian sighed as he sat down on his softly cushioned chair. The room was well lit and the decorations, fine carpets and other treasures, were clearly visible, no doubt intentionally to impress any visitors. The large desk in front of Derian was filled with parchments and other papers. Tall stacks of books towered on each side of the table. The floor was filled with various items and it was quite hard to even find a clear route to where Derian sat. There were rare statues from Meledor, piles upon piles of books and scrolls from Mandor and even the skull of an Yeti from the northern mountains.

He had sighed because all the efforts of the past few years to find the Sun Blade had gone to waste. The elves had proven to be of no use and even the swords former master had resisted all attempts to pry the information from his mind.

“I need that sword,” Derian muttered, sounding frustrated. “It's the key to unlocking our faith.”

It had taken Derian years of research to find out what was needed to once again bring his master to the world. He had had to travel all around Balaria to find the texts he needed. He had killed people, lied, deceived, bribed, done anything and everything to gain the information. He had visited the great library of Mandor and found bits and pieces of ancient texts and vague references. He had followed those faint leads and they had lead him to the elves and, finally, to Ameter Temera, the former master of the Sun Blade.

The sword had come to Ameter's possession during his adventurous youth, but he had proven stubborn and no information could be gotten from him. His wife and daughter proved to be equally useless. He must have given the sword away, but to whom? Derian sighed out of frustration. A knock on the door interrupted his brooding thoughts.

“Come in!” he shouted and the door opened. One of his lackeys entered, looking a bit scared, but excited at the same time. He was dressed in the black

cloak the members of the group always wore. The man bowed humbly.

“Yes, what is it?” Derian asked impatiently.

“Master, we believe we have found the Sun Blade.”

Derian took a sharp breath out of surprise, but quickly calmed down, “Are you certain?”

“Our contact is very certain of it. He has been investigating the place for months and he is one of our most trustworthy operatives.”

Derian nodded, “At the very least this should be worth investigating. Where is he working? Who has the sword?”

“That is the biggest obstacle. He is in Ramyn, in the Five Towers of Magic..and it is Skander, the master of the Fifth Tower, who has the sword.”

Derian felt his heart sink. Of all the places and of all the people, it had to be there and with him! He cursed out loud and stood up and started to pace around the room. It took him a while to calm down. Slowly, a wicked smile appeared on his face.

“No matter. This is the perfect opportunity to put our new troops to the test and to show the world that we are back. Skander will regret the day he took hold of that sword!”



Nala floated through what seemed to be a green haze. Sorrow and anger gripped her heart and she felt the need to struggle against what she was headed for. She knew she was dead and that her body was being absorbed by the elf tree she had died in. Each elf had their home tree into which they would be placed after death. The tree would then absorb the dead body along with its spirit. The oldest of trees would have literally hundreds of spirits in it, all of which could be summoned by the remaining family members to share thoughts with. Though such a summoning was considered only in the greatest of needs as disturbing the spirits was considered a great offence towards them. But Nala found herself not

ready for a life of peaceful existence with her relatives. She wanted revenge.

Suddenly she felt a warm embrace around herself. The feeling that came over her was much like that of when her own mother had held her in her arms when she was a small child. She could feel her head press against something soft and she could feel the gentle embrace she had been pulled into calm herself and ease the anger.

A soft voice echoed inside Nala's consciousness, "My poor child, how you've had to endure." She recognized the voice immediately even though it was the first time she was hearing it. The goddess Lorie had come for her.

The voice of the goddess continued, "The followers of Deremoth are on the move again and you are far from being their first victim, but you, you have the spirit. You have the anger and grudge needed to stop Deremoth and his followers. Deep down, you also hold other emotions, love for your parents, your husband to be and me. You must remember those feelings and let them act as an barrier to the anger burning inside of you."

"Why me? Why my parents?" Nala found herself asking in her mind. Though no words came out of her being, the soft voice still answered.

"The Sun Blade. It once belonged to your father and that is what led those men to him, you, and the rest of the elves of your forest. Fortunately your father had already given up the sword. Deremoth's followers need it to revive him and to bring him back to this world. They must be stopped as the world will spiral into war if he returns and the elves will be the ones to suffer the most. You have seen what his followers did to your loved ones, yet they are only an shadow of what Deremoth will try to do to the elven race. That sword must no fall into their hands."

"How am I supposed to stop them?" Nala asked, frustrated in the knowledge that her own powers were far from being up to the task, "How am I supposed to find the sword single handedly when they can not find it with all of Deremoth's followers?"

The soft voice of the goddess comforted her, "You will not be alone, Nala. There will be friends that will join you on your journey. I will watch over you and if you choose to accept this purpose for your new life, I will give you the

knowledge and power you need in order to fight Deremoth's followers.”

“New life?” Nala found herself feeling a bit confused and uncertain what was being offered.

“Yes, a new life,” the goddess said sternly, “Make no mistake, you did die, but death is reversible. I am offering you the opportunity to become something only a few elves before you have become.” The goddess paused to give weight to the question posed to the young elf, “Nala Temera, will you become my Guardian Spirit?”

Nala couldn't help but feel a chilling coldness as she heard the words. There had been only four elves in the thousands of years of recorded elven history that had attained the title and powers of a Guardian Spirit. All of them had been men and they all had done great deeds to protect the elves. It had been over 500 years since the last Guardian Spirit helped end the Troll Wars at the expense of his own life. They never led an easy life and most of their time went by travelling around the lands, solving problems and conflicts that affected elves. The responsibility of such an position to be shouldered by a young elven maid might prove too much. However, the thought of being able to revenge her parents and Tydian's deaths outweighed Nala's doubts.

“Goddess Lorie, I've already served you my whole life. I would be happy to do so for another life time,” Nala responded to the question with joy in her heart.

As soon as Nala had thought of the words images began to flash before her eyes. She saw the actions of past Guardian Spirits, how they lived and died, their powers and weaknesses and what they had felt. The amount of information was so staggering Nala couldn't remember what the previous image had been before a new one flashed before her. Her breathing became heavier and she began feeling pain as the experiences of many lifetimes passed into her. She screamed out in agony. Then, as suddenly as the flow had began, it stopped. She felt the gentle embrace again and the soft voice of the goddess in her head.

“Go now. Return to the world and seek out those who look to harm us.”

“Yes, goddess,” Nala replied in her thoughts and began to float away, back to her mortal being.



Nala began to slowly regain consciousness. As her vision cleared she looked around carefully. She was still pinned to the wall, but not by a rope. Roots from the tree were holding her to the wall. They had dug under her skin and she could see them crossing like a second set of veins or some parasitic worms. She noticed her skin had gotten a brownish tint to it, making her skin almost the same colour as the wood was. Her stomach wound seemed to have healed and even though the roots dug into her in several places, there was no pain.

The room seemed to be in the same state as when she lost consciousness. She looked around the room for the remains of her parents, but their heads were not there. The room she saw had the roots and branches from the tree spread over everything.

An elf tree was much more than a home for the elves. It was tied to their families, their heritage and their death. Nala knew the tree had absorbed the remains of her parents and that they were now a part of it. As she looked around she realized the tree had consumed just about everything in the room. Gone were her mothers pans and pots that had been on the table, gone were her mothers sword and dagger that had been on the stand by the door.

Slowly, the roots and strands began to withdraw from under her skin and lower her towards the floor. As more of her became exposed from under the roots, Nala fully noticed that there was no mark left of the sword wound in her stomach.

The touch of the floor felt cold against her skin as she slumped down on it. For a long time she could do nothing by lie on the floor, crying over the loss of her entire life. The sorrow she felt at that time seemed overwhelming and the happy memories of the place were like waves trying to drown her. The anxiety built up inside her and finally got her to move. With unsteady feet she made her way to the door. She felt a need for open space, something that didn't feel so confining.

Nala stumbled outside, feeling weak and hungry. She stood in front of the door for a moment, wiping tears from her eyes. It seemed to be midday and it was an cloudy day, but there were some cracks in the clouds that let spots of sunlight form. Nala saw one such spot by the small spring that was close to the tree and felt an urge to go to it. With unsteady feet, she walked to the spring.

As she stepped into the sunlight she fell to her knees, her whole body

tensing up in pleasure. It was like thousands of small hands were caressing her in the most pleasurable ways possible. It was like the most intimate moments she had experienced in Tydian's hands. Her breathing became faster and she let out a small moan of pleasure. She collapsed to the ground on her back and writhed on the ground for what seemed to her to be like an eternity filled with pleasure. She felt her strength return, her hunger vanish and very slowly the intense feeling of pleasure began to subside.

After regaining control of her body and gathering herself, she crawled to the spring. She gasped as she saw her reflection on the water. Her hair had turned from golden brown into a lush green, much like the leaves on the elf tree, and grown in length by several inches. Her skin was a darker brown, much closer now to the bark of the tree she had been bonded into moments earlier. The green in her eyes had grown more dominant and a deeper tone. She watched her reflection in amazement. What had happened to her? Was this part of the powers the goddess had promised her?

She pondered the situation and felt a memory being tugged. It was vague, but she realized that similar things had happened to the previous Guardian Spirits. They had bonded with elf trees and in return gained powers, but it had also made them more than mere elves. They had become a part of the tree they had bonded with and were tied to its fate. It was an double edged blessing as, as much as the trees needed sunlight and water to live, so did the Guardian Spirits. Without sunlight their powers would slowly wane and eventually vanish until sunlight was available once more. The good part was that sunlight would also provide her with nutrition and lessen the need to eat. She could get by for months with very little if only sunlight was available.

Nala shook her head. It was so much in so little time. She cupped her hands and sprinkled some water on her face before drinking. The cool water further revitalized her and she felt less tired, less weak. After drinking her fill she leaned back in the spot of sunlight and enjoyed the lights touch on her skin. She tried her best to keep her mind empty of what needed to be done, but was unable to do so. She knew there were still elven bodies on the field they had been ambushed on. It would be a lot of work, but Nala knew she had to do it. The

bodies needed to be placed in the trees the elves had lived in so that their spirits could properly move on. Finally, she was forced to move when a cloud moved to block the spot of sun she had been bathing in.

Reluctantly Nala stepped back inside the home that now seemed more like an cold tomb to her. The roots and branches still covered the room and seemed to be there to stay. Nala made a quick stop in the kitchen and found a piece of bread still laying around. Gratefully she took it with her and nibbled on it as she made her way upstairs to her room. The roots had not grown in the upper levels and the rooms there seemed to be as they had always been. She quickly found clean clothes for herself , the usual combination of green and brown tunic and trousers, but as she entered the training room to take a weapon with her, she found none. She knew there should have been swords there, daggers and all sorts of other weapons, but they were all gone.

She stopped to consider this for a moment as it seemed almost everything made of metal had disappeared from the house. There was a memory that she felt offered an answer, but it eluded her attempts to bring it to focus. It was an frustrating situation for her as she had many questions and felt several memories that would offer her answers, but they all eluded her attempts to bring the memory forward. Focusing hard on any single memory brought it closer, but it also made her head hurt quite quickly. It was almost as if the time was not yet right for her to know these things. Lorie must have had a reason for making the memories like this. Finally she just shook her head, went back to her room and grabbed a green cape and went downstairs and out the door.

Looking up she figured she still had enough time to begin the grim work she had ahead of her. She took a last bite out of the bread she had found and put the rest in the small pouch hanging from her belt. She then headed for the clearing the orcs had been defeated on.

The crows were fast at work when she arrived. A black swarm of them rose up to the sky, frightened away by her arrival. Nala knew the course of nature and that very little was wasted by the forest. Everything, even the dead, served to keep the cycle running. Still, it pained her to see the community she had been a part of decimated so. The fact that the bodies were still there told her no one else was

left. If someone else had been alive, the bodies would have certainly been moved already. She walked through the field looking for Tydian's body, holding back tears that had been shed too many times already.

The sight of a familiar sword grip pointed her to the right body and she knelt next to her loved one. The crows had been busy and the once so handsome face of Tydian was nothing but a mask from the depths of hell. It broke Nala to see him like this and the tears began to flow again. Wiping her tears away, she stood up. She need to build a stretcher so she could move the bodies back to their homes. There were birches with sufficiently strong branches nearby that seemed suitable for the task so Nala grabbed Tydians sword with the intent to use it to cut the branches off. As soon as she grabbed the sword, she dropped it with a sound of disgust.

The sword had felt cold and lifeless, almost as if she had grabbed a severed arm instead of an sword. It made her spine shiver. She grabbed the sword again, hoping the feeling would be different, but the same coldness shot up her arm. Nala bit her tongue and forced herself to hold onto the sword long enough that she could cut down the branches she needed. As soon as she was done she dropped the sword with a sigh of relief.

“Loriel, what have you made me into?” she cried out in a voice of desperation. “How am I to revenge if I can not even hold a sword in my hands for more than mere moments?” Nala pondered the situations as she tied together the birch branches with her cape and strands of bark.

She knew the previous Guardian Spirits had handled weapons of steel with no problems. From what she had just endured, she knew it would be out of the question for her. Her hand felt numb and getting her fingers to function normally took effort. She shook her head in frustration. One more mystery in her new form of being. Satisfied that the stretcher she had built would be strong enough, she carefully rolled Tydian's body onto it and placed his sword on his chest. She then dragged the stretcher behind her as she began to make her way to Tydian's family tree.

On her way back she visited the clearing they had planned to be the place for their home. The elf tree sapling they had planted there had lost its green and

was quickly withering away. Once a strong symbol of the love Nala and Tydian had felt for each other could now not survive for the bonds had been broken by the death of Tydian. The clearing, once a place of warmth and love for Nala, now seemed lifeless and uninviting so she continued on quickly.

It took Nala four days to move all the bodies. There were families where only one member had been on the field, but when Nala came to their home trees she knew no one had been saved. She found small children slain in the middle of play with the same brutality as the parents. The invisible men had been thorough in their murderous spree.

Every time she had all the members of a family properly placed in the tree, she would seal it with an simple spell that could be opened by any relative of the family. Every time she came back to the clearing the crows had returned to continue their feast. Perhaps they realized it would soon be no more. She slept in the tree branches, not wanting to face the pain that waited at her home tree, but as the amount of bodies went down, she realized she would have to face that place once more. She had had time to think about what to do during the days spent moving the bodies and she really knew only one person who to go to outside the forest. She needed to go to Ramyn to meet Skander. He would likely have at least a direction he could point her to and in any event he would likely want to hear what had happened in the forest and to his old time friend.

Nala stood at the clearing and looked at the tree that had been her home for the past decades. It did not look the same any more. Gone was the warmth she would usually feel while watching the place. She realized much of that had to do with the fact that she knew the delicious smell of her mothers cooking would no longer greet her when she opened the door. No longer would there be the training sessions with her father in the training room. She was alone. All she had was revenge and for that she needed some supplies from the tree. She had survived the past four days with the bread she had taken and with the sunlight and water, but she knew she needed more for the journey to Ramyn. She had found an usable bow and a quiver with some arrows as she moved the bodies, so she was not completely unarmed and could hunt to survive. What she needed were clothes and other supplies a traveller would need.

She opened the door and entered the house. To her surprise the roots and branches that had filled the room were now gone. The room was much like it would normally have been. She half expected to hear the pots cackling in the kitchen as her mother cooked, but it was a sound she would only hear in her memories. What would have usually been a warm feeling of being home now turned into an cold in her stomach that urged her to get out quickly.

Nala climbed the stairs up to her room and started packing. She had a travellers bag in her cabinet and she now filled it with clothes. As she thought about the coming journey she realized she would need something to cover her appearance with. A young lone elf would be gathering attention already, but she had the additional burden of her new hair and skin colour which both would attract too much attention. Remembering the green cloak her father had, she went to her parents room. The cloak had a hood that would hide her face quite well since it was made for a larger person than she was.

It was difficult to ignore the feelings her parents room and the items there brought to surface. The brush on her mothers dressing table brought back the fond memories of her mother brushing her hair while telling her stories and teachings. Nala took the brush in her hand and held it tight. It was made of simple wood and boar bristle, but the carvings on it gave it a classier look. A dark determination filled her and without even realizing it she put the brush in her bag and continued to look for the cloak.

She found the cloak hanging far back in her parents closet. She immediately tried it on and pulled the hood up. She was certain it would cover her entire face. It was a bit long and dragged on the ground, but that she could easily fix with a few thorns from the bushes outside. As she looked through the closet she also found a pair of gloves that would hide the unusual colour of her skin when worn with a long sleeved tunic. She believed that clothes wise she now had everything she needed. There was still a piece of rope she hoped had survived in the training room so she went there.

The last time she had been there all the weapons had been gone. This time there were two weapons she had never seen before on the rack. Nala walked to the weapons and gently touched the finely crafted wooden scabbards. The wood

was a dark ebony in colour and there were elven runes scribed on them. One was a long sword and the other looked to be a short sword. The scabbard and the hilt of the swords were so finely crafted that she could not tell if there really was a sword inside the scabbard.

She took the long sword in her hand and pulled it out of its sheath. Out came a light brown, wooden blade. She swung it around a few times to get a feel for it and found it to be extremely light, but still it seemed sturdy enough to cut like anything made of steel. As she tested the blade she found it to be sharp enough to cause a cut on her finger even with a very slight touch. She pulled the shorter sword out as well and found a blade of similar colour and quality as its bigger brother. Taking both weapons in his hands she made a few moves and found she could fight with them just as well as her old metal blades. She suddenly stopped her testing. She had heard a faint whisper. She honed her hearing and waited.

“Nala!” There it was. Faint as a summer breeze, but still somehow familiar.

“Nala!” The voice grew stronger and tears swelled up in Nalas eyes as she recognized the voice.

“Mother?” she whispered in a voice that broke down.

“Nala!” came another whisper with a different voice. This voice she also recognized.

“Father?” she whispered again. “Where are you? Are you together with mother?”

The two voices seemed to unite in their answer that echoed strongly in Nalas mind, “We are here, beloved daughter.”

“But..how?”

“Loriel told us of the path that has fallen on you, our dear daughter. She offered us the opportunity to walk this path with you. We could not refuse such an opportunity. What you hold in your hands is a link to this tree and our spirits that reside within it. Your father the long sword, your mother the short sword. When you hold them in your hands, we can communicate with you.”

“So..I am not alone,” Nala thought with relief.

Her parents seemed to laugh, but it was a warm laugh that made her feel

better, "Of course not. Did Lorie not tell you you would not be alone? You should not doubt the goddesses word." The reprimand was said in the same tone as her mother always used when she had done something bad, like sneaked a few cookies out of the kitchen before dinner. "Inside this tree we are free to talk to you as much as we want to, but the further away you travel from here the harder it becomes for us to send our thoughts through these swords. We won't be able to talk to you all day nor know everything you do. We will, however, try to help you when ever you need it with our words."

A tear rolled down Nalas cheek as she realized the enormous gift she had been given. She had not completely lost her parents.

"We will have time to talk more, but now you must hurry on," her parents voices echoed in her mind, "Your plan to go meet Skander is the right one. Go to our room and look into the right side drawer of the dressing table. You'll find a small pouch with gold coins in it. You will need those on the journey. Move fast but quietly for there will be dangers ahead."

Nala nodded at sheathed both of the swords. She glanced at the elven runes again and realized what they meant. The long sword had her fathers name carved into the scabbard and the short sword had her mothers name. She carefully fastened the two swords around her waist, realizing they were the most precious things she now had.

Just like the combined voice of her parents had told her, she found a pouch of coins in the drawer. She counted that there was almost one hundred and fifty of Ramyns imperial gold coins in the pouch. It was certainly enough to buy what ever she needed on the journey, though she had to wonder where her parents had gotten such an amount. The forest guardians had little use for money, but even Nala knew that she could buy several good horses with the gold, not to mention the cheaper commodities such as food and lodging. She hid the pouch in one of the pocket of her new cloak and went back to the training room to get the rope she had gone to find in the first place. Adding that to her travelling bag, she swung it over her shoulder and went downstairs.

The sun was still high as she stepped outside so she figured there was still time to move today. She closed the door behind her and took a few steps back.

Concentrating, she gathered the fine threads of magic around her and started to weave them into a spell. She realized something had changed in her magic as well. Before, it would take her a lot of effort to persuade the elements to respond to her appeals. Now, she almost had to fight back the energies that gathered, so anxious they were to help her.

As she began to release the energy, the door before her started to meld into the tree. She looked up and was happy to see the same thing happening to the windows above. Soon, there was nothing left to indicate that there was anything but a normal tree before her. She had sealed the tree much in the same manner as she had done with the tree homes of the fallen elves. To protect them from any unwanted intruders.

Satisfied that the spell had done its work, she adjusted the bow and quiver she had over her shoulder, made sure the swords were tightly fastened and grabbed the traveller's bag from her feet. Then she headed south towards Cerena to leave the forest for the first time in her life.

Chapter 6

The sound of crushing bones drowned under the voice of the crowd exploding to cheers. The large blade of the two-handed sword seemed to cleave its way through the man's shoulder and down to his groin with as much ease as an axe would split a dry piece of wood. Gareth grunted as he kicked the corpse from his sword and rested it against his shoulder with ease – despite the sword being sixty inches long and weighing nearly eight pounds due to its wider than normal blade. The crowd in the arena was still going wild with thunderous roars and chants of his name. He spat on the corpse before him and turned to face the four remaining men.

The men stood there – seemingly stunned – with weapons in their hands. Gareth could see the fear in their eyes as they witnessed what had happened to the first man who had come at him. Being slightly over seven feet tall, Gareth stood there, dwarfing the men before him. The fact that he had muscles in his arms like he had been a blacksmith all of his forty years of life and very little softness in his body, made the size difference seem even bigger. He wore brown leather pants, but his upper body was left bare for the arena fights. His wide chest was covered in unusually thick black hair as were his arms.

Some might have mistaken him for a full blooded troll, but his face was that of a normal man. His nose was well formed and fit his face and the brown eyes confirmed with their shape he was no troll. A thick black beard covered much of his face and his black hair was long enough to reach his neck and cover his slightly pointed ears. As half-human and half-troll, Gareth seemed to have inherited the troll features in moderation. His skin lacked the greenish colour that was common for trolls and his jaw was not the sharp triangle shape. He grinned at the men, exposing his slightly larger than normal lower corner teeth which gave his grin a certain cruelty that any full blooded human would lack.

One of the men dropped his sword as he fell to his knees to vomit out the meagre meal the guards must have given him before sending him out to meet his

death. The crowd of the arena burst out laughing at the man's miserable state. This was justice as it was handed out at the grand arena of Ramyn. The men before Gareth had committed severe enough crimes to warrant a death penalty and were now facing that sentence with him as the executioner. In most places the men would have simply been hanged, but the empire of Ramyn had its own sense of justice and executions were treated as entertainment for the people in the form of fights to the death at the arena. Thousands of spectators arrived from all around the city to see convicts face death at the hands of skilled warriors or wild beasts and monsters captured from all around the world.

The arena could hold nearly sixty thousand people and today it was almost full. It was the first day of the seventh month and that meant a large market day in the city of Ramyn. Many people were at the arena to enjoy the show before heading to buy the imports many merchants had reserved specially for this day. The central arena where Gareth was standing was elliptical in shape and nearly three hundred feet long and two hundred feet wide. A fine sand covered the thick wooden floor, providing an good foundation for the sword fights as well as horse races that were occasionally part of the performance.

There were trap doors that opened ramps to the dungeons below the floor so the wild animals and monsters could be safely released to the arena. A fifteen foot tall wall separated the central arena from the crowd and their seats. There were special seats around the arena for the empress and other notable people of the city. The spectators seats rose row by row until they almost reached the height of the one hundred and eighty foot tall outer wall. Built out of white marble and decorated with pillars so finely crafted even a dwarf would find it hard to find something to criticize, the arena truly was an impressive structure.

Gareth took the sword from his shoulder and – with one hand – held it out and pointed it at the men before him.

“So, which one of you is next?” Gareth's voice was deep – so deep that a god of thunder would envy him – but it had a softness to it that left you surprised that such a voice could come out of someone like him. None of the men made a move, except the man who had vomited before. He vomited again – or at least tried to, but his stomach was already empty so all he managed were dry gags that

made his muscles cramp. "Why don't I make it easy for you. You can stand there and let me kill you one by one.." Gareth paused for a bit to let the words sink into the minds of the men, "or you can all come at me together and hope one of you gets lucky and lands a deadly blow on me. Then you can hope the crowd finds mercy for you and you are shipped off to the mines instead of being fed to the beasts below us. I can assure you that no matter what you choose, my sword will provide a quicker death than the beasts."

The men looked at each other and seemed to reach a wordless consensus. The three who were still standing charged at Gareth, leaving the ill feeling one behind. The men were dressed in rags, they were dirty and all around looked like someone had dragged them behind their horses in pouring rain and muddy roads. It was also clear none of them had much experience in wielding a sword.

Gareth took his sword in both hands and swung it broad side first at the charging men. Ending the fight too quickly would not please the crowd and pleasing the crowd was what he was getting paid for.

He caught one of them in the side, sending him stumbling at the man running next to him and causing both of them to stumble and fall to the ground. The third man continued his charge, sword held like he was charging with a spear in hand, ready to impale the large man before him. Gareth stepped to the side at the last moment, away from the sword and grabbed the wrist of the man as he came close and began to squeeze. He could hear bones grinding against each other and the man screamed in pain and dropped his sword. Using the momentum of the man to his benefit, Gareth continued to hold on to his wrist and began to swing him around, back towards his companions.

It was the swing that saved Gareth as he felt sharp pain on his side. He could feel metal grinding against his rib bone. He continued to swing the man around and clobbered the fourth man with his companion. Apparently he had not been so sick after all and had found the strength to lift his sword and run close enough to land a hit on Gareth. Luckily the angle of the hit had meant the sword had been stopped by Gareth's ribs, earning only a long gash to his side that was not much of a danger for him.

The two men he had knocked down with the swing of his sword were back

up again, ready to face Gareth. He didn't let the wound on his side distract him and took up a stance to face the men. He let them men close and then quickly charged at one of them.

Instinctively, the man raised his sword above his head, just as Gareth had hoped, and left his body exposed. A strong kick to the stomach sent the man stumbling backwards on to his two companions who were trying to get up. His arrival made a further mess of their attempts to join the fight. Gareth quickly raised his sword to parry the attack of the remaining man. It was not an even match and with ease, Gareth forced his opponents sword high up then changed the grip on his sword and lunged the sword tip first through the man's throat. It was an quick death, but a showy one that the crowd appreciated with cheers as blood continued to spew from the gruesome wound.

Deciding it was time to end the show, Gareth turned to face his three remaining opponents. Two of them had gotten up, but one was still on the ground. He made a quick move towards them and swung his sword in a broad arc, forcing back the two men who were on their feet. He then took a step forward and thrust his sword down with both hands. The blade struck through the heart of the man on the ground and ended his life to the crowds cheers. Before the two remaining men could react, Gareth pulled his sword free, took a few steps forward and swung his sword. One of the men managed to raise his sword to block, but it barely slowed the course of the sword. It continued on and lobbed the man's head from his shoulders.

The other man had been quick enough to crouch and avoid the big blade as it continued on its path, but he was not quick enough to react to Gareth changing the swords course. He lifted it up high above his head and swung down. The crowd went wild as the remaining convict was cleaved in half much like the first one. Gareth raised his sword and pointed it at the sky, taking in the customary cheers of approval from the crowd. He then walked away from the arena floor to the gladiators quarters that were located on the west side of the arena.



Gareth sighed as he reached the privacy of the room he had been assigned

for the day. The cheers of the crowd were muffled, but still audible enough that it was clear someone had met his fate at the hands of something or someone. The room was small with only a table and a chair in it. There was a bowl of water and clean cloths on the table.

Gareth set his sword on the table and sat in the chair despite it being a bit too low for him to be comfortable on it. He dipped a piece of cloth in the water and wiped the dried blood from the wound on his side. The wound itself had already almost completely healed. Only a bright red scar indicated there had been a wound and even that would be gone in a day. While he had not inherited the full regeneration abilities that trolls had, small wounds would heal very quickly. A severed arm would pose little problem for a full blooded troll as the arm would fully grow back in a week or so, but Gareths abilities were beyond such feats. He had once almost lost his arm and it had taken months to heal, though any normal human would have certainly lost the arm.

“Fast healing as always, I see.” Gareth recognized the voice and hearing it did not make him happy. He turned around to look at the rat faced man he knew would be standing there. He was of stout build and average height for a human. His brown hair was in tangles and unclean. Judging by the state of his clothes and the dirt on his skin it must have been months since the man had had a proper wash. The smell that lingered to his nose seemed to further support that conclusion.

“Greetings, Dayr,” said Gareth to the man who was responsible for the gladiators of the arena. He was the man who hired the free agents like Gareth and he was also the man who supervised the less willing gladiators and their participation in the arenas activities.

“Fine showing once again. The crowd is always pleased to see you even if your performances are short. Try playing with the convicts a bit more to prolong the entertainment.” The man stopped to scratch his head which led to white flakes falling to his shoulders, “You really should consider my offer of signing up full time as an gladiator. A bit of training in the art of drama and you would be magnificent. Lots of gold to be made for someone like you.” The smile Dayr gave Gareth tried to be encouraging, but to him it looked more like the smile a dragon

would give to the rest of the thieves trying to steal its treasure after eating one of their companions. He half expected to see something dead hanging between the man's yellow teeth, but luck was on his side today.

“You always make the offer and as always my answer is the same.” Gareth didn't really enjoy the arena shows. The only reason he occasionally did them was a desperate need for money. He was a sword for hire and sometimes the arena was the only job available. He needed to eat just like everyone else and the pay for free agents was surprisingly good. He figured that at least he offered some men a quicker death than they would otherwise get.

Dayr shrugged his shoulders, “Can't blame a man for trying, can you?” He threw a pouch on the table with a clink of the coins inside it. “Four gold per man, as promised. Twenty gold in total.”

Gareth nodded, “Thanks.”

If Dayr had a single good quality to him it was that he could be trusted to deliver on his promises. Their business was concluded so Dayr left the room, no doubt to see to it that the less enthusiastic showmen of the arena were shoved to their fate. Gareth finished cleaning the dried blood from his side and then cleaned the blood off his sword. He dug a clean, plain, brown tunic from the bag he had stashed under the table and put it on. He put the sword in its scabbard and fastened it to his back, threw on a cloak from the bag and fastened the coin pouch to his belt. He then threw the bag over his shoulder and headed out of the arena.

He stepped from the dark coolness of the arenas stone rooms into to the bright sunshine of the open market square and looked up at the fake sky. He couldn't really tell the sky was an illusion as it seemed just like the real one, but he knew it was the work of magic.

Ramyn was no ordinary city. It was built in the middle of an large river and it had a northern and southern part of the city on both shores. What was truly magnificent was the middle island, which had two underground levels to it, a level above the ground and two levels that seemingly floated on the sky above it.

In reality there were cleverly concealed stone pillars holding the upper levels a float as well as magic. The bottoms of the floating layers had a fake sky

cast on them to keep the people below from feeling uncomfortable with the floating mass of rock above them. There were tunnels that led under the river to the northern and southern shores cities and those passages were mainly used by caravans and people who couldn't afford the ferries that also transported people and goods to the central island.

In the distance Gareth could see a stone disc rise to the sky with a carriage and horses on it. He looked on as it seemingly disappeared up into the sky. This was how people and goods were transported to the upper levels. A stone disc controlled by air elementalists was lifted through a hole in the rock above.

The middle layer was reserved mostly for nobility and their estates and the upper most layer consisted entirely of the imperial palace and the buildings needed to house the bureaucrats that kept even the smallest of wheels turning in the empires benefit. The layer Gareth was on had the arena, the big marketplace and other shops. It was the place where most of the commerce in the city took place and provided housing for merchants as well as inns for travellers. The layers below were mostly inhabited by the commoners, though as they enjoyed a similar fake sky above them and an intricate system of air conduits it was difficult to tell it was actually underground.

Much of the levels below the nobles and imperial palace had buildings constructed of grey stone. The nobles level had more white marble and other finer stones used in the buildings. The buildings had multiple stories, the highest reaching six or seven stories high.

Looking up from the ground level revealed a maze of side walks, ramps and delicate stone bridges that criss crossed above to connect stories to each other and building clusters to each other. Truly, Ramyn was a city of layers even when it came to buildings and streets.

The buildings were packed into clusters and each cluster had alleys separating buildings from each other. There were larger roads between each cluster and the biggest road was called the Arc as it went around the entire island. Four roads branched from the Arc towards the centre of the city, one from each point of the compass. They met up in the city centre which was a large market area and also the place where the arena was found.

Gareth took a moment to observe the market bustle before him. The noise of hackling and people talking and laughing almost rivalled the cheers of the arenas crowd. There was an air of easiness and light heartedness about this day. There were merchants from all around, selling the most common of things, such as fresh fish, bread and clothes and boots, and then there were those who were selling fine jewellery from Mandor, highest quality silk from beyond the seas and further.

On a day like this there were not many things one could not find on the market and that showed as Gareth could see numerous nobles in their colourful silk clothes perusing through merchants offerings. Usually they would have simply sent their servants to do their bidding, but this was a day to make finds that even a noble could not resist. There were commoners around as well, looking for more mundane purchases. Kids were running around the market laughing and shouting, occasionally stopping to look at a street performer or a stall that sold sweets.

This contrast always amazed Gareth even though he had lived in the city for almost a decade. Not more than a few feet away there were men fighting for their lives and dying in all sorts of horrible ways, the crowd cheering on the carnage, enjoying the sight of blood and guts, but outside the arena walls the people seemed just as open, kind, and worry free as any other people he had seen. It seemed that the people of Ramyn had grown with similar layers to their personalities as their city had. The darkness and cruelty in their ways was obscured by the very real illusion that their normal life cast upon it.

Gareth headed west, towards his favourite tavern that stood at the corner of the marketplace and the northern main road. Despite the gory day, he felt hungry. The people of the market gave him way, some out of respect for recognizing him from the arena fights, some simply persuaded by his imposing stature and the large sword strapped to his back. Sometimes he worried he was losing his sense of morale, much like the citizens of the city, or that he was growing numb to the way the unfortunate got treated in the city.

The arena was far from the only cruelty imposed on them. Slavery was common and the nobility and wealthy merchants had plenty of them. It was not

uncommon for an unsuspecting exotic visitor to the city to end up in servitude to some noble, though the city guard did do its best to prevent such occurrences to preserve the city's image in they eyes of foreigners. After all, the city depended on trade and if too many people vanished to slavery the merchants would start avoiding Ramyn.

The new empress had made great efforts to abolish some of these practices, but she was fighting centuries of tradition and behaviour and that had proven to be a tall task for even an empress to topple for she had to consider the reactions of the nobility and the common people or she risked a rebellion, or even more likely, a poisoned meal.

Being on the ground level gave the inn a clear advantage on market days such as these and Gareth expected the place to be full. The higher levels had such establishments as well, but they were less likely to attract as much customers since they would possibly have to climb several ramps to find them. The sign of the tavern was painted black and was shaped like the head of an bull. The horns were painted white, except for the tips that had a red colour on them. A fitting sign for the place was called *The Bull's Head*.

The owner had been known for his bull fights in the arena until he had retired to the quieter life of an innkeeper after one of the large animals had caught him with its horns and dragged him around the arena. The injuries had left him unable to walk properly.

The smell of freshly baked bread, dried herbs and cooked meat greeted Gareth as he opened the door. *The Bull's Head* was tidy inside, with tables spaced evenly and a large fireplace that had enough room to roast an entire pig in it dominated the left side of the room. A long counter dominated the right wall and behind it were shelves filled with barrels and bottles, containing beer and wine from all over the world. A bard had set up in the small stage in the far right corner, filling the room with the melody of his lute and a baritone voice that sang of the glorious battles Ramyns armies had seen in the troll wars. Most of the tables were taken by workers stopping by for a quick meal before continuing their workday, but there were a few wealthy looking merchants there as well, no doubt taking a break from perusing through the markets offerings.

“Gareth! Survived another day at the arena I see.” The large man behind the counter smiled and raised his hand in greeting. At over six feet and three inches tall the man was one of the few who did not look tiny next to Gareth, though age was beginning to bend his back.

“I did, but no doubt the crowd would have been more entertained by Riligh the Bull taming yet another beast.” Gareth raised his hand in greeting and examined the man. Riligh had grown a comfortable sized stomach on himself since retiring, but Gareth knew the grip of his hand was still strong. Shades of grey were slowly creeping to his beard and brown hair, telling of his growing age. His face had gotten rounder, but his jaw retained its defiant stance and his broken nose stood out from his face like a dwarf in a fine ladies dress. Wrinkles had started to appear around his eyes, but they were as lively as in his young days, although behind them one could see a toughness that only a lifetime of hardship would bring. Riligh was one of the few people Gareth would call a friend in this city of decadence and he shared much of his views on the people who lived there.

“Hah! What they call bulls these days wouldn't have passed for even a calf in my days. Crippled as I am, it would still not be a challenge worth my time.” Gareth smiled at the old timers huffing, though he did not doubt the truth in his words. He leaned against the counter and threw a gold coin on it.

“What are you offering today, my friend?”

“You're in luck. I just took a fresh batch of breads from the oven. There's also cheese, honey and a thick stew available.”

“Any meat in the stew?”

Riligh took on an offended look and sputtered out, “You know better than to ask something like that.” Of course, Gareth knew. The innkeeper took pride in that his foods were always high quality and if there was meat to be put in them, there would be plenty of it.

“Well, give me a portion of everything and a tankard of that beer from Karan.” Riligh limped to a barrel behind him and filled a tankard. He put the foaming mug on the counter and grabbed Gareth's coin.

“You'll be getting a few more beers with this coin. I'll have one of the girls

bring the food to your table.”

Gareth sipped his beer and nodded. “Thank you, friend.”

Finding a table proved no trouble and he was happy to be able to take the sword from his back and set it by the table. The corner table also had the benefit of allowing him to rest his back against the wall. He didn't have to wait long for the waitress to bring the food to him.

The tray had a steaming bowl full of stew, several thick slices of bread from a dark loaf, a small cup of honey and a fair chunk of Wrothian cheese. Taking the wooden spoon, he tasted the brown stew and found it be some of the best Rilight had ever made. He could make out at least onions, carrots, rutabaga and fairly sized chunks of meat that were so tender they seemed to melt away in his mouth. Gareth drizzled some honey on a still warm slice of bread and topped it off with an hefty slice of the cheese. Feeling his spirits go up in the face of such an feast, he bit down on the bread and leaned back to enjoy the bards singing.



Skander sighed as he set down the report from his hands. He rubbed his eyes, trying to lessen the strain the hours of reading had caused. Sunlight lit his study through the large window behind his desk. The walls were covered in bookshelves that had an impressive collection of books burdening them. There were three chairs in front of Skanders desk, giving his occasional quests a comfortable seating as they discussed matters with the master of the tower of Free Magic. Perhaps the most impressive furniture in the room was his desk. Seemingly carved out of a single, large block of polished oak, it had plenty of room for piles upon piles of books and papers, while still leaving room for working. There were several drawers that allowed for the storage of various small items. The side facing any visitor of the room had an intricate carving of two dragons entwined in a deathly embrace.

An ever deeper worry was taking seat in Skander's mind. For the past two years he had kept an close eye on the cult of Deremoth and what he had learned

was concerning. Their recruitment of new members had become more aggressive as of late and their ideas had begun to take seat in smaller villages that already had tense relations with the elves. There was an increasing number of reports about small skirmishes between elves and the cultists, though they tended to be minor and many dismissed them as nothing more than usual disputes on forest usage rights. Also worrying was the increasing number of cultists in the bureaucracy and other positions where they held sway over influential nobles and other figures of power.

So far Skander was confident he had managed to keep the five towers of magic free of the cultists, but how long would that last? While those who studied the arts were generally well educated and cared more about progressing their skills in magic than about conflicts over faith or race, there were many young students who could fall for the cults lures. The danger a skilled elementalist posed was great indeed and Skander was determined not to let any of his current students fall on the dark path the cult would surely take them on.

The only comfort he could find was that at least the Sun Blade was safe in a hidden compartment of his desk. His old friend had entrusted it to him two years ago when he visited their forest to bring the news of increased cult activity. Skander had been reluctant to accept the blade, but he could not deny the wisdom of hiding it in a safer place, a place less prone to the prying eyes of the cultists.

He took another report in hand and read it through. Throughout his years of travelling and hunting for knowledge Skander had managed to put together an impressive network of informants and contacts. If he put all of his resources to work, few things would be able to escape his reach. The report in his hand outlined the cults recent activities in the city of Ramyn, even revealing the identity of some of the local members.

Skander leaned back in his chair and slowly stroked his beard. A plan quickly formed in his mind and he stood up from behind his desk. He looked out the window to determine the time.

The view offered to him was at the same level as the imperial palaces highest towers, but unlike them, his tower rose up all the way from the river

below like a huge, grey stalagmite. The base of the tower was wide and offered much room for lecture halls and for test grounds for spells, but as it grew in height the width began to shrink and at the top the width was just enough to allow for the rooms Skander had there.

He knew the person he was looking for would be enjoying a well deserved meal in a few hours time. Just enough time for Skander to walk there. Going to his bedroom, he changed into less conspicuous clothes than the robe of the tower master. A simple brown tunic and pants made him look like any other old timer off enjoying what the market had to offer. On his way out he grabbed a small pouch of coins from a drawer in his desk.

The top floor of the tower was reserved completely for him so he had the luxury of a large study as well as an extra bedroom and a chamber reserved solely for experiments. Many of the low ranking students had to share rooms with others and the luckier ones would have a single room all for themselves.

The hallway outside Skanders quarters was empty. Instead of stairs there was simply a round hole in the floor, large enough to fit several people through. He waited for some time and a stone disc rose to the hole. The shimmering shape of an air elemental appeared above it. Its large hands were holding the disc while the rest of it floated above it. It had a human face though it was only for show as the elemental could easily take any shape it wanted.

Skander stepped onto the disc, "The entrance hall."

With a slight breeze that made the sleeves of his tunic flutter, the disc began lowering down the round, slightly angled shaft and past the levels below. The tower had several such shafts and discs, but this was the only one that went all the way to the top of the tower. The massive height and width of the tower made stairs inconvenient and, considering the age of some of the towers inhabitants, would certainly cause a few fatalities now and then. The elemental powered discs had proven a convenient and trustworthy system for moving within the towers.

The elemental was tied to the disc and there were wards that would inform it when ever a person was looking to use its services. Because the elemental beings used were young the servitude was not forever and once a year the

elemental beings would be set free and new ones were summoned to take their place. Had they been tied to the service too long, they would grow too powerful to maintain the control needed for operating the discs.

Passing by the floors, Skander could see students and masters going about their business. Some on their way to lectures, some openly debating matters in the halls, some carrying supplies for their next experiment. The past two years had brought a surprisingly large number of new students to the tower of free magic and it showed in the hallways as new students hurried along. There were some elves, even a troll, but mostly the students were human for the other races had their own places where to study the art.

The disc slowed down, eventually coming to a complete stop. Skander stepped off it and almost immediately the elemental began floating it back up to carry others in need.

The entrance hall was a large, open area with five large doors. On the east side were two doors that led to the bridges to the towers of Air and Earth and the west side had doors to the towers of Fire and Water. The stone bridges that led to the other towers were the only way in to them. The towers were placed much like the number five on a dice, the tower of free magic serving as the central point.

On the north wall was the largest of the doors, leading to the central island of the city of Ramyn. The room was not on the ground level so the bridge to the city actually ended at an watchtower on the city walls. This left ample room below for even the largest of ships that traversed the river to pass under.

There were several first and second year students in the hall, ready to give assistance and serve as a guide to anyone needing it. It was part of their responsibilities and helped build some of the basic skills needed to perform their future duties. There were also dozens of people in the hall that were simply waiting for someone to arrive or were already on their way to another tower to meet someone. Some were already leaving having finished their business in the towers. Feats of magic were quite sought after and as such the older students and masters earned a decent income filling their clients requests.

Skander headed for the large door leading to the city of Ramyn, but was halted by a shout from the crowd.

“Master Joligan!”

He sighed. It seemed it was nearly impossible for him to leave the tower without someone always noticing it and stopping him for a chat. Skander turned to look at the young man who had shouted his name and was making his way through the hall to him. The young man was in his early twenties with an clean shaven, well shaped jaw, brown hair and eyes. He wore a plain, worn down brown tunic, but still gave out an impression of a trustworthy and contemplating young man. Skander knew the man quite well. His name was Cheid and he was an accomplished student of the Free magic tower and Skander had to admit that if he kept pace he could go on to accomplish great things, perhaps even become the headmaster of the tower.

“Young master Cheid. I see you are returning from the market,” said Skander.

The young man nodded with an boyish smile and patted the large pouch fastened to his belt, “And many a good find I made. I know I am late for our study session because of it and for that I apologize.”

Skander felt a bit ashamed that he had forgotten all about his promise to personally tutor the youngster in the theory of portal travel, but it seemed there were always ten things he was supposed to be doing at the same time. Though portal travel was still very much on a theoretical level, it seemed to promise the ability to instantly travel to where ever the caster wished, safely. Unlike the personal transport spells in use today, it also seemed to promise the ability of more than one person to travel in such a way, perhaps even entire caravans of wagons and horses. Experiments had been made, but no one had yet achieved a trustworthy result. It was no wonder it fascinated a capable young man like Cheid.

“It is quite all right. It would seem something urgent has come up that I need to tend to immediately, so I will have to tutor you another time. Perhaps tomorrow,” said Skander in an apologetic voice.

There was a look of disappointment on Cheids face, but it was quickly hidden behind an understanding smile, “Of course, master.”

Skander squeezed the youngsters shoulder encouragingly, “Go to the

library and find a book called *Portal Travel – A Theory* by Enah Tiafech. Study it carefully and you'll be more ready for tomorrow's tutoring session than you were today."

Having received something to do, Cheid was not much into delaying Skander further and quickly excused himself so he could go dig through the massive library. Skander continued on towards the city.

The wind blew up the river and the stone bridge that crossed it did not provide much shelter from it. Below, the river continued its calm flow. Much like an old donkey, it was a slow and steady pace, but at times the old stubbornness would pop up and the flow would turn into a raging torrent. To the east, the southern docks were clearly visible, with many boats and ferries dotting the brown surface of the river. Further east the sails of a big ocean faring ship could be seen as it made its way up the river to the docks of Ramyn, the furthest inland any such ship could make it on the river.

Skander hurried across the bridge to the watchtower on the other side. The guards there didn't do any checks on people leaving the towers so he had no problems getting through and over to the nearest walkway. It took him three ramps to get to ground level and to the wider street below. A short walk to the north led him to the southern part of the Arc, which he headed east on. The towers and their entrance was almost at the western most tip of the island so the walk to the central market was long and the crowd that the day had brought to the city further slowed the pace. Reaching the market took Skander longer than he had thought and he hoped it was not too late to find who he was looking for as he headed for the *Bull's Head*.

He was greeted with the buzz only a tavern could produce. It had the unique warmth to it that came about when people had warm food and good drinks to enjoy and the company of friends to top it off. In the background the bards lute harmonized itself with the buzz and created a unique song that would only be heard here and now.

Skander looked around the room and it didn't take long for him to spot the huge man in the corner table. It was no surprise to him the man was alone. Gareth wasn't one to attract strangers to himself in these situations and as

Skander sat down opposite to the man the eyeing he received from Gareth was almost enough to drive even him away.

“What do you want, Skander?” Gareth asked coldly.

“Is that any way to greet a friend?” Skander asked with an innocent smile.

Gareth grunted, “Friends don't send friends to an tunnel filled with giant, poisonous spiders and tell them there's nothing to worry about in there.”

Waving to a waitress to bring him some wine, Skander seemed to ignore what Gareth said, “Hmm..what? Oh, are you still on about the spiders? That was years ago, you're sitting here without a scratch on you and the gold you got from that job was more than ample. What are you complaining about when everything turned out fine?”

“It's not so much the job than it is the fact that you didn't tell me everything there was to know,” Gareth responded with a calm voice, though it was becoming more obvious this was just an ritual the two went through on many a occasion.

Skander shrugged his shoulders, “How was I supposed to know there'd be giant spiders in the escape tunnel of an merchants manor?”

“You'd think the fact the man is known to deal with exotic, poisonous animals would have been some sort of an clue.”

Skander waved his hand dismissively, “You wouldn't have gone in had I told you about the spiders. You went in and came out without a scratch so I don't see what the problem is.”

“I hate spiders,” Gareth said as he gulped down the last of the beer in his tankard. He had a wide grin on his face as he lowered the tankard.

Skander chuckled and said with an resigned voice, “Fine. The next time I'll make sure to inform you if I think there might be spiders involved in the job.”

“That's all I ask for,” Gareth responded solemnly.

“Speaking of jobs, I have one for you,” said Skander in a hushed voice.

Gareth leaned forward, allowing for a more private exchange of words. “How much do you know of Deremoth and his cult?” Skander asked the large man.

“Very little. Only that Deremoth and his followers were killed centuries ago when they tried to start a war between humans and elves,” Gareth looked a bit

puzzled as to why he was asked such a thing.

Skander shook his head, "You can't kill a god, but at the same time they are limited in how they can manifest themselves in our world. Centuries ago Deremoth had found a way to use a black dragon as a vessel for his being. The nature of the dragon allowed him to bring significant amounts of himself to our world and pose a very real threat to the other gods as well as elves, humans and other beings who occupy this world. In the end his followers were defeated and the dragon he used was sealed away, along with a significant portion of Deremoth himself. This led to his power being weakened to the point of being almost non-existent, but.." Skander stopped as the waitress brought him his wine. He gave her a few silver coins and sipped the wine before continuing. "But, there was still power in him. There were still his followers left over. They've been dormant for a long, long time, but now they have begun moving again."

Gareth pondered what he was hearing. The consequences of an evil god like Deremoth rising again painted before him a world he found unpleasant. The prospect of Deremoth returning to finish what he had started spelled certain death for many who would otherwise live out their lives in peace. It would shatter the relative peace that currently existed between the various kingdoms.

"I take it this has something to do with the job you were talking about?" Gareth asked the old man before him.

Skander nodded and looked intently at Gareth, "In recent years the cult of Deremoth has risen in numbers and has begun taking action. They've killed some forest guardians in the smaller forests and they've told lies in the smaller villages to incite hatred towards the elves. This has caused a few incidents between the elves and such villages. Today, I received a report that contained some names of the cultist operating right here in Ramyn. What I would like from you, is that you follow them and see if you can find out what they are planning to do here."

Gareth shook his head and spread his arms, "I'm not exactly the inconspicuous type. How am I to follow men who no doubt take great care not to be revealed?"

"Ah, but you already know one of them," Skander said triumphantly, "I believe Dayr from the arena is known to you?"

Gareth's heart sank as he heard the name and realized what the job would involve, "I know him," he said quietly.

Skander noticed the change in his friend's posture and voice, "I take it it is not a pleasant relationship?"

"I do not like him. He is as lowly a man as one can be," Gareth responded with an voice that left no room to doubt the truthfulness of his words, "Dayr however is interested in me. Every time I take an odd job at the arena he tries to hire me as a regular."

Gareth sighed, "I suppose now I will have to take him up on his offer."

Skander nodded, "I have a suspicion he is using the arena to recruit followers for the cult, men who have no heart and know how to use their weapons. If he has shown interest in you then getting closer to him should prove easier."

Gareth had to agree with Skander's assessment, albeit reluctantly. The two talked about the plan's details for a while longer as well as Gareth's compensation before parting ways. Gareth was left alone at his table again so he ordered some more ale, figuring it might help drown the feeling of disgust that he was starting to feel towards tomorrow and what he had to do.

Chapter 7

Nala made good time in her travel through the forest, but the need to hunt for food forced her to make camp early that day on a small clearing surrounded by birches and alders. Scavenging through the forest she found some berries to tide her through the night and the trap she set caught a rabbit. She slowly roasted the thin slices of rabbit over a small fire, essentially drying the meat so it would stay edible for a few days. She knew the faster she got to Ramyn to meet Skander the better.

During the day she had been busy keeping up the fast pace, but as the sun began to set and darkness crept to the small clearing like a cat ambushing its prey, she found herself needing answers that had earlier been put aside. Cross legged, she sat before the small fire, enjoying its warmth, and laid her two swords on her lap. She grabbed both by the hilt and concentrated to call her parents spirits. It did not take long for her parents presence to flow to the swords and their thoughts to reach out to meet hers, but even after only a short walk away from the tree she could tell it was more difficult for her parents to come to her call.

“You said there would be time to talk later. Now seems like a good time,” said Nala in her thoughts with a feeling that such explanations should have come to her along time ago.

“What is it you wish to know?” the voice of her mother echoed in her mind. Hearing her voice gave Nala a warm feeling even now. She knew there would be times when she'd find consolation in her voice as well as her fathers.

“What is the Sun Blade? Why is it so important?” the questions shot from Nala's mind like an arrow from a bow. She sensed the hesitation in her parents minds, but she waited patiently, realizing this was an issue of great consequence.

“You know the story of Deremoth being sealed away,” the voice of Nala's mother explained, “What is often not told in detail is how it was done. Deremoth had taken over a black dragon. Finally, after many battles and many deaths, he

and his followers were driven to an valley in the mountain range surrounding the troll kingdom. It took ten of the most powerful priests of the realm to complete the seal. As a key, they used the Sun Blade.”

“Why is it not properly guarded? Why was it here, in fathers possession?” asked Nala, feeling it absurd that such an important item was laying around at the house of a meagre forest guardian instead of being sealed in the vaults of the elven kingdom.

“The sword was lost when the seal was completed” answered her father. “The forces involved in the sealing were so immense that the ground split and released molten rock. That valley, that volcano, is now known as Moroth's Tooth.” Her fathers voice grew almost sombre, “Few survived from that valley, even fewer who recalled what had happened to the sword. Inside that volcano lays the dragon, sealed away with what Deremoth had infused of himself into it and the sword is what can release him and that beast.”

“But why was it here?” Nala persisted.

“The power of the eruption threw the sword far away and it travelled even further in the hands of those who did not know what it was,” continued Nala's father, “It was pure chance that I, your mother and the group we were travelling with, happened upon it on one of our adventures.”

“Why did you not take it to the elven kingdom for safe keeping?” Nala inquired.

“We did!” the frustration in her father's voice was clear as day, “It was the decision of the High Council that it was safer to let the sword remain lost and in the hands of someone who would not draw too much attention, than to store it in a vault under heavy guard.”

Nala could see the logic behind the decision. Vaults attracted attention no matter what and even a heavily guarded one could fall victim to a skilled thief. That would have left the sword truly lost again, instead of being hidden in a place where few thieves would even give it a second look.

“So it was entrusted upon us by the council and we kept it hidden,” Nala's father continued the story, “Until two years ago when Skander brought the news of the attacks. It was then that I entrusted the sword to him so he might look

after it. No doubt the High Council gave him their blessing to hold the sword when he visited the elven kingdom to deliver our message.”

Nala looked into the crackling fire as she pondered the situation. Very few would have known that her father had the sword. How, then, did the cult find out about it? Surely it was not written in any books they might have access to. The only conclusion she could come to was that a member of the High Council had revealed the information to someone they should not have, be it intentionally or inadvertently. The thought of it being on purpose was an unsettling one. She could sense the same feeling of doubt from her parents.

Nala sighed and reached to throw a piece of wood on the fire. It was an matter that was well out of her hands and she certainly had more immediate concerns. Grabbing the hilt of both swords once more, she posed another question for her parents, “How do I get to Ramyn the fastest?”

“Go to Cerena. An old companion of ours is there and he will help you,” her mother answered, “His name is Rilus Mailhunter and he is quite a well known merchant in the city. You should have no trouble finding him.”

“Is he human? How do you know him?” Nala had to ask for she was finding it difficult to accept that her parents had such extensive a network of convenient friends. Her parents sensed that she needed better answers to satisfy her curious mind.

“When we were younger we used to explore the world in a group that had ten members in it,” Nala's father explained with a voice full of longing for the happier days, “We explored caves, ruins of old cities, we dispatched groups of monsters that bothered the smaller villages. Five – no, I suppose with me and your mother gone it is now three – survive to this day.” Her father had to stop for a moment, his voice revealing the emotions that would have no doubt forced tears had he been more than a thought.

Nala's mother stepped in to continue the tale, “You already know Skander. Rilus was but a young dwarf when he joined us. No doubt he is still in good health and he will do what ever he can to assist you once he finds out you are our daughter.”

“What of the other two?”, asked Nala, wanting to know more.

“Perhaps those are tales for another time,” came a response from her mother with an tired voice.

To Nalas surprise she was also starting to feel very tired and she could feel a headache slowly creeping upon her. She had not realized that communicating with her parents in this manner would take a toll on herself as well. She could sense that the same was starting to be true for her parents as well.

“Thank you for the answers,” she said to her parents, “I think we are all in need of rest now.”

“Call us again if you need more,” her mother said before her spirit slipped away.

Nala set her swords aside and threw a few more pieces of wood in the fire. She ate some of the cooked rabbit meat and left the rest near the fire for the night so they would be properly dried in the morning.

She felt lonely as she rolled out her blanket on the ground by the fire and propped her bag as an pillow. She set the two swords close to her so she could rest her arm over them as she slept. It seemed to bring her a measure of comfort and security that she sorely needed as she laid down to sleep, though the simple spell she had cast around the camp would keep away the more dangerous animals and warn her of other, more sinister beings that might approach.



Nala woke up early in the morning. Her sleep had been restless that night, tormented by nightmares of what had happened. Her mood was glum as she broke camp and started her journey towards the edge of the forest.

It took her half a day to reach the edge of the forest, but the sight of the green rolling hills and open sky lifted her spirit. She pulled back the hood of her cape and took off the gloves so she could enjoy as much of the sunshine as possible. The feeling was less intense than the first time she had bathed in sunlight, but it still made her feel better all around. A slight breeze fluttered her hair and made the long grass of the hills bend in waves, making it look like a sea of green.

She took her heading to the south knowing that she would eventually come

across the river that separated her from the city of Cerena. While the hills offered little to slow down her pace, they did still slow her down enough for it to be dark long before she could see the river.

As she walked, she held one hand on the hilt of one of the swords to converse with her parents. She found that talking to one at a time was much more manageable than talking to both at the same time. It was something she could easily do while walking and did not strain her that much.

She learnt of the two remaining members of the group her parents had adventured with in their youth. One was now a member of the elven high council, a renowned priest of Loriel. The other had made the curious choice of venturing to the seas. An elf sailing the seas of the world was a rare sight indeed.

Nala set up camp in between the hills and enjoyed some dried rabbit meat and berries for supper before taking a well earned rest from the walking. The life of a forest guardian had prepared her well, but even so, walking an entire day with little rest took a toll on her, especially among the hills that were unfamiliar terrain for her. She was more used to trekking on flat ground rather than constant hills of up and down.

It took her half a day to reach the river the following day. She could see the outlines of the city across it and it made her feel better knowing that one stage of her journey was close to complete. With the help of her parents, she found a shallow place to cross the river. There were flat stones there that made walking easy. Clearly it was a man made crossing point. While the river was quite small in width, it was deep and crossing it without such an spot would have proved difficult for her.

It was early afternoon when the city of Cerena came into clear view.



As Nala approached the gates of Cerena she could not help but admire the sight. The tall stone wall that surrounded the city offered ample protection against the less welcome visitors and the mighty wooden doors at the gate would stand up to even the mightiest of battering rams. Having not been to the city before she had no idea where to start looking for Rilus, so she gathered her

courage and approach one of the guards that were standing at the gate.

“Excuse me, where might I find a merchant called Rilus Mailhunter?” asked Nala.

The young guard looked at the small, cloak covered figure before him. He could not see her face nor much of anything else of her, but the sound of her voice clearly identified her as an elf. An unusual visitor to be sure, but not one to raise suspicion, “Walk straight down this street until you reach the market square. His shop has a very distinct sign, a two bladed battle axe. You can not miss it.”

Nala thanked the guard and walked through the gates. Nothing could have prepared her for the city. There were so many people! Never had she seen such a crowd bustling about their daily chores. The rows of wood and stone buildings seemed imposing to someone who had lived her entire life in the open wilderness. Despite all the people around her, she could not help the feeling that the city felt much less alive than the forest she had grown up in.

No one seemed to notice her as she walked down the beaten dirt street towards the market square. All the while she looked around herself, trying to absorb as much of the city to her memory as she could. It was intriguing to her to see how the humans lived in such large communities and while at first everything looked to be chaotic, there was order in what the people were doing, going from shop to shop, crafting goods to sell and other looking to buy them.

The market square left her breathless. Even though Cerena was far from the wonders of many other cities, the market still offered an impressive range of goods and exotic items. Though for Nala even many of the mundane items were exotic. As she walked around the market she had to remind herself what she was here for and focused on looking for the battle axe sign.

The guard had been right. The sign was quite prominent on the side of a building. The ground floor of the building was built from solid stone, but the floor above it was made of wood that was stained a dark brown. There were intricate decorations on the eaves that gave the building a very homely and welcoming look. Nala opened the heavy wooden door and stepped inside.

The room she stepped into seemed to cover most of the first floor and was

filled with racks of weapons. Even after a quick glance Nala saw several weapons she had never seen before or even heard of and those that she knew seemed to be of high quality. There were fine armours on display as well, chain mails, even a full plate armour. She walked further into the store, admiring the collection. She noticed many of the blades had distinct patterns in them, much like grains in wooden planks or ripples in water.

“Wootz steel that is. Ain't no finer steel. Can I help ye pick one out?” came a question in an accent Nala had to push herself to understand. The dwarf had appeared behind her unnoticed and the voice made Nala spun around quickly to regard the speaker. He was a foot shorter than her, with a long, red beard that disappeared under a belt that was struggling to keep back the well fed gut of the dwarf. His hair was of similar red, his nose much like a potato and green eyes that eyed Nala with an intensity that made her feel uncomfortable.

“I am looking for Rilus Mailhunter,” said Nala. The sound of her voice made the dwarfs eyes widen in surprise. Clearly he had not been expecting an elf.

The dwarf nodded, “Ye've found me. What can I do fer ye?”

Nala pulled back the hood of her cape, revealing the green tint of her hair and the darkened skin. If the dwarf was more surprised than at hearing her voice, he did not show it. “I am Nala Temera, the daughter of Ameter and Kyla. I need your help.”

The dwarf examined her closely for a moment before a wide smile appeared on his face, “Aye, ye've got yer parents in ye. How are mah old friends?”

Nala had expected the question, but still the expression on her face grew sorrowful, “They are dead,” she said quietly. “Everyone in the forest is dead.”

The dwarf looked as if a wild boar had ploughed over him. The expression soon turned into one of sorrow. Nala could swear she even saw a tear in the corner of the dwarfs eye. “Best ye come to the back an' tell me all 'bout it, young one,” said the dwarf in a glum voice.

The back room Rilus led Nala into was a kitchen with a small table with room enough for four people. On the left there was a stove with pots and kettles neatly strung to the wall above it. Dried herbs hung low from the ceiling, creating a smell that brought Nala right back to her mothers kitchen. A pot of hot water

sat on the edge of the stove. To the right there was a staircase that led to the floor above and the wall opposite from the door had the back door, a small cupboard and a window that let in enough light to illuminate the room adequately.

Nala sat down beside the table while the dwarf hurried around, sprinkling some herbs into the pot of hot water and putting a cup in front of Nala. They were both silent until the dwarf poured some herb tea into both of their cups and sat down himself. Nala then told the story of what had happened to his family and to the other elves of the forest. She told how the goddess Lorie had touched her and how her parents had come back to her.

Rilus listened to the story with an expression that might as well have been carved out of stone. Dwarves were not the kind to show emotion easily, but hearing the fate of his long time friends truly put his ability to maintain that façade to test. When the young elf presented the swords that had their spirit tied to them, he could not help but marvel how fine the blades were. Even he could feel a tingle at his fingertips as he caressed the wooden blades. Realizing he was being drawn towards emotions he did not wish to show at the moment, he coughed to hide it.

“By the hammer,” was all the dwarf could say for a while. The two sat in silence for a good time, neither really wanting to break the others thoughts.

“Well, me thinks this calls fer something stronger 'an tea,” said Rilus as both of their cups were empty of the tea. He stood up and went to the cupboard and dug out a bottle of clear liquid. He poured an ample amount of it for himself, but gave Nala only enough for one gulp.

“Can't have ye being drunk fer the rest o' the day,” he winked at her. He raised his cup in salute, “Fer yer parents. Ain't no finer couple ever been, no finer friends!”

The dwarf gulped down the liquid in one go and wiped his mouth with an satisfied sigh. Nala drank her own portion in a similar manner, though as the foul tasting liquid burned its way down her throat, she could only cough and try to wipe the tears from her eyes.

Rilus chuckled, “Dwarwen moonshine. Ain't nothing like it elsewhere!”

Nala struggled to subdue the coughing, but managed to say under her

breath, “The world be thankful for that.”

“Ye said ye needed me help. What can I do fer ye?” the dwarf asked in a serious tone.

Having regained control of herself, Nala responded, “I need to get to Ramyn to see Skander. My parents told me you would be able to help.”

“Skander?” Rilus asked, raising an eyebrow, “Aye, he'll look after ye.” He ran his fingers through his long beard before continuing, “I've got a caravan leaving fer Ramyn tomorrow. Finest weapons from this side of the world. I'll have ye join 'em. Ye'll get to Ramyn fast and safely.”

Nala nodded, “Thank you. There are some small things I need as well. I have money..just..don't know the places in this city.”

The dwarf stroked his beard, “Ye'll find Brandon to be a fair man. His shop be right down the street towards the harbour. He'll be able to sell ye most anything ye need.”

Nala hesitated, not really knowing how much she could ask of the dwarf who had already promised her so much. This did not escape the dwarfs keen eye.

“Ye'll be welcome to spend the night here. Me quest room has been empty fer too long.”

“Thank you,” said Nala with a smile on her face. It was a genuine smile, the kind she had not been able to enjoy for what seemed like an eternity. She rushed to give the dwarf a long hug. How could she ever repay the kindness she was being shown by the gruff dwarf?

Rilus felt a slight blush sneak on his cheeks. He gently broke the hug and turned away, “Off ye go! Get yer supplies an' see the city. Ye better get used to it lest Ramyn over whelm ye.”

Despite the surly tone of his voice, Nala smiled again at the dwarf. She had already figured out the dwarfs true nature and would not be fooled by his attempts to cover it. She left her travellers pack in the dwarfs kitchen and made sure she had the pouch of coins with her. She then happily went to explore the city, anxious to quench her thirst for learning more of how life was there.



Nala sat down at the corner table and observed the room. There were few free tables and the waitresses were busy filling orders and avoiding the roaming hands of the more enthusiastic – and intoxicated – clientèle. She found such behaviour quite odd. Any elf would have made it crystal clear that such touches were unwelcome, but the human waitresses seemed to put up with it with the patience of a mother cat. Some even seemed to encourage it.

It had been easy to find the shop Rilus had directed her to and she had indeed found everything she needed there. She now had rations that would stay edible for months. She had even picked up a few new pieces of clothing just in case. In the end she had bought so much that she could not carry it all herself while exploring the city so she had arranged to have the items delivered to Riluses house. She had then spent the rest of the day wandering the city, trying to get used to the environment that was so radically different.

Now, she had found her way to a small tavern to rest her feet and to have something to drink. She felt relatively safe there because all weapons were left in the care of the large bouncer who guarded the entrance. Though her wooden weapons had passed since the bouncer did not consider them any more dangerous than a fist. He really should inspect some things more closely, Nala thought.

Even after a day spent wandering the streets she was still wary of the crowded places. Growing up she barely saw other elves much less beings of other races, so seeing the variety of humans, dwarves and halflings was an elating experience for her. Nothing, however, made her forget to keep the hood of her cape deep over her face, even though even that seemed to gather a few curious looks from the people around her.

In silence, she sipped the wine she had bought before taking a seat and observed the bustle of the large room. She heard fragments of conversations with her sensitive ears, mostly mundane stuff about someone dying, rumours from further away lands and gossip about the noteworthy people of the city. Some of the more juicier gossip was enough to make her blush.

She withdrew deeper into the corner as a couple of men sat down to the table next to her. Then she heard the voice of one of them. She carefully peered

from under her hood to confirm her suspicion. She saw the beard, the broken nose, the wide forehead. It took every bit of her self control not to jump up and thrust her sword in the throat of the man. He had been there! He was one of the Blades.

“Too bad you joined a few days too late. You missed quite a delightful expedition to the forest up north,” the man said to his companion in a hushed voice, but still loud enough for Nala to hear.

His companion chuckled, “I heard. From what I’ve been told you did quite a number on those elves.”

“They got what they deserved. You should have seen our leader deal with two of the elves.” The man had a measure of reverence in his voice that one might find in a devout priest’s sermon, “He took his time with those two. By the time we were ready to behead them, they were nothing more than a whimpering pile of flesh.” The man grinned, “Then we got to show their severed heads to their daughter!”

Both men burst out in a loud laugh while Nala struggled not to rush to the table and cut down both men. They were talking about her parents! How dare they! But she knew that starting a fight inside the tavern would get her into trouble she might not be able to get out of. This was not the place for settling such matters.

She had no stomach to listen to any more of their boasting so she stood up and walked out, doing her best not to attract the attention of the two men, though it seemed unnecessary as they were engrossed by the tales of their deeds. She found a shadowy place across the tavern to keep an eye on the door. They would come out eventually. They would be alone. Then they would die.

Nala had to wait hours for the two to come out. When they did, they were clearly somewhat drunk, but she could not miss the fact both had weapons on them. The one with the broken nose had a sword and his companion a nasty looking axe.

She stalked after the two as they wobbled along the street. They were quite noisy so Nala did not worry that they would hear her following them, especially since her movements were as silent as a cat’s. There were no dry twigs to step on

in the beaten dirt of the city streets.

The streets grew narrower and darker as the two made their way to where ever they were going. In her rage Nala did not really care where they were headed. What she needed was an opportunity to conduct her business with the two men in peace.

As the men turned to an dark alley, she figured now was her chance. She drew her swords and rushed to the alley. The men were about halfway down the alley when they heard Nala call out to them. There was room for two people to stand next to each other in the alley so it offered plenty of room to fight, but did not allow for easy surround of any one person.

The men turned around, their smiles widening when they saw the small figure standing before them. The smiles grew even wider as she pulled back the hood of her cape, revealing her slightly green hair and elven face.

“Well, well..what do we have here?” asked the man with the broken nose as he went for his sword. His companion reached for his axe.

“A little fun to end the evening?” the companion pondered.

“The fun will be all mine,” said Nala in a cold voice. She could feel her parents spirits tugging at her to stop and run away, but the rage she felt swept away their attempts to reason with her. “You killed my parents. You killed my kin. You'll have no mercy from me.”

The men looked at each other, slightly baffled at her outburst, but then burst out laughing, “What are you going to do with your wooden swords? Hope we die of splinters?”

Nala ignored their mocking laughter. She felt the men needed to know why they were going to die or else there would be little purpose for what she was doing. She explained in a calm voice, “You tied me to the wall and put a sword in my gut. You paraded the heads of my parents before me. For that, I am here to exact revenge on you and all your companions.”

This cut the laughter of the two men, and the broken nosed one peered at Nala more closely. “It can't be..” he mumbled. “You should be dead!”

Now it was her turn to laugh, though it was a joyless and cold laugh, “I should, but here I am.” She started towards the two men, “Come then, let us

dance.”

The men hesitated. They had not expected to meet an elf on the streets of the city, let alone one that was supposed to be dead. But they were members of the Blades, they had received training and the hatred they felt for elves well rivalled the rage Nala felt towards them. They were both ready when the first blows came from Nala. They were surprised the wooden swords sent out a similar ring a metal blade would and they realized this would be a serious fight. The elf was skilled for even against the two working together, her blades were always there to block the attacks and even managed to push on the offensive at times.

The fight continued on quite evenly for a time, but the two on one advantage began to play its part as time went on. Holes began to appear in Nala's defences and the men were quick to exploit them. She had to use both her sword to block the overhead swing of the axe which allowed the swordsman to make a quick swing at her side. She could not stop it. She expected to feel the pain of the sword cutting into her flesh, but much to everyone's surprise the sword let out a thud – much like if it had hit a tree trunk – when it hit her side.

A memory was tugged inside Nala. In her mind she saw the other Guardian Spirits take similar blows and push on. She knew what had happened. The bonding with the Elf Tree had given her skin the same properties as the bark of an Elf Tree would have, albeit to a lesser degree. It would take more than a sloppy swing of a sword to cause her serious harm.

The pain from the hit was negligible and Nala was the quicker to recover. She rolled her swords, deflecting the axe to the side. This caught the sword wielding man by surprise for he had expected the hit he had scored to end the fight. His surprise was even more complete when Nala lunged forward and sank the longer blade into his gut.

“How does it feel?” asked Nala as she pulled the blade free. The man staggered backwards. His sword dropped from his hand as he moved to press the gaping wound.

His companion roared and pressed on with a mighty swing of his axe. Nala stepped back, hoping to avoid the swing for she knew she was not in a position to put up a strong enough stance to block it. The blade tore through her tunic and

scraped her stomach, leaving behind a red stripe. She realized that her skin would offer little protection against a weapon that was designed to fell trees, yet she knew that she would now be busy keeping her insides from falling out had her skin not been as tough as it was.

Nala grinned as she blocked the latest attack towards her. She found herself enjoying the situation, despite everything that had happened and that the outcome of the fight still looked uncertain. There was a certain amount of joy and freedom to be found in simply being lost in the heat of the moment; not having to care for anything else but the fluid of ones motion and the dance of the swords.

She could see that swinging the heavy axe was starting to take a toll on the man. Beads of sweat ran down his face and judging by how furiously the man blinked his eyes, they were starting to hamper his vision. On the other hand, Nala found herself feeling as fresh as before the fight had began. Keeping her light swords in motion did not require much effort from her well trained body.

The axe swings began to lose their power and speed, allowing Nala to press on. It was not long before she had the opportunity to step forward, under the mans arms, and embed her long sword in his gut and slit his throat with her shorter sword. The man slumped to the ground, blood flowing profusely from his throat. He tried to utter his last words, but all that was produced were a few bloody bubbles.

Nala cleaned her swords in her victims tunic, slipped the longer one into its scabbard and turned to the other man. He was still alive, resting against the side of a building. He watched in horror as Nala walked to him. He began to say something, but Nala knelt down and pressed a finger against his lips, the slight green glow of her eyes making it clear no words from him were welcome.

“The mistake you made was not to stay and finish your job. You simply assumed you had succeeded.” Her voice was cold and emotionless as she continued, “I will not make the same mistake with any of you.”

Slowly, she cut his throat with her short sword and watched as the last signs of life left his body.

She quickly cleaned the sword and slipped it in its scabbard. Examining her wounds revealed them to be minor since even the bleeding had already

stopped. She lifted her hood back up and hurried away from the alley, back to Riluses shop.

She could only hope no one had seen her murder the two men. The city guard would not be so understanding about such matters. Nala knew her actions to be questionable even if justified, but was this not why Lorie had come to her? To exact revenge and put a stop to the rise of the cult. Though upon further thinking she had to admit it might have been wiser to simply follow the men to see if they would have led her to more of the cultists. She shrugged her shoulders as she walked through the dimly lit streets. Too late to change what had happened.

Rilus was still awake, sharpening an axe, when Nala entered the kitchen through the back door. Had he stayed up late to ensure she returned safely? Nala could not help but feel appreciations for the care the dwarf was showing towards her.

Rilus eyed her tattered clothes and the blood splatters, "Got yerself in a spot of trouble?"

"Just a couple of drunks who got too friendly," said Nala dismissively.

Rilus nodded. He knew her parents would have taught her enough to handle most troubles that would come her way, and after being touched by Lorie in such a way he was even more certain she would be safe within the city. Still, he had found he could not fall asleep before seeing her return safely.

"The supplies ye bought were delivered. I put them in the quest room I prepared for ye."

Nala gave the dwarf a smile of thanks, "I think it is time I got some sleep."

"Good night," said Rilus and continued sharpening the axe.

Nala climbed upstairs to the room she had been given. She found the supplies neatly laid out on the human sized bed. She took a moment to pack them for tomorrow before stripping away the tattered clothes she wore. She again inspected the wounds from the fight and found there was no need to clean or dress them. There would be a nasty red stripe where the hits had landed for a few days, but other than that, she looked to have survived without much damage.

With a sigh of relief, she climbed under the blanket and laid her head on

the soft pillow. Tomorrow would bring an early awakening and she found no trouble in falling asleep after such an eventful day.



Rilus watched after the caravan as it departed with the young elf as its newest member. He shook his head. He had heard of the two bodies that were found in an alley. He had little doubt who was responsible, but at the same time he could understand her actions quite well. He knew the men had been a part of the cult and figured Nala must have found that out somehow. What worried him was that she would act as rashly in Ramyn and elsewhere. It was a path that would lead her to more trouble than she or anyone else could handle alone.

The dwarf hurried back to his shop and climbed all the way up to the attic. There were a few caged pigeons there and a small table with a quill and some ink and small pieces of paper. He sat down and wrote a quick message.

He rolled the message and took one of the pigeon from its cage. It had a small container strapped to its leg and Rilus stuffed the message to it.

“Fly fast, me friend,” he said to the pigeon. “Skander must know what is headed his way.”

He opened the small window that let in the morning light and let loose the bird. It should reach Ramyn a day before the caravan would.

Chapter 8

“Shit on you and your taste in women!” roared the bald, brute looking man. He had enough iron ring piercings on his face to make a large dagger out of them. “I've seen pigs that are more attractive!”

“That's because you are a pig,” came a reply that made the entire table burst out in laughter, save for Gareth who was clutching his cards so hard his knuckles had turned white

“Even a pig knows not to fuck a scrawny little elf. They've got higher standards than you!” replied the bald man.

The gladiators in the arena were not known for their subtlety, but even Gareth was surprised at their language use. They put even the most hardened sailors to shame. He frowned at the three men at the table and drank from his mug of ale. Three of Dayr's finest. Just the sort of people he needed to get close to and he had spent the past week doing just that.

People knew the bald man as Monster Dunn and he did indeed have the features that made him look like something out of a tale meant to scare children. Despite days spent training under the sun, his skin was as white as a bakers. The piercings gave him an even more fierce look that was not diminished by his size. Not as tall as Gareth by any means, but still large for any human and in muscles he did not lose to any. He was a powerful man known for ending the fights by ripping his opponents to shreds with bare hands. That was the true source of his nickname.

Then there was Obsidian. He was a striking contrast to Monster Dunn. His skin was as dark as night and he was more of a slender build than the Monster. A man of average height, but his well toned muscles made him look as nimble as a panther. His long, black, curly hair framed his stern looking face. The dance of his curved blade was a crowd favourite. It had sliced many people into suitable pieces for the lions to eat.

Last but not least was Bloody Carrigan. He seemed out of place among the muscular hulks at the table. He was tall with a boyish face, but thin as a slice of

butter. He seemed to be as comfortable with his body as a young man in the midst of a growth spurt. All in all one would not expect to see such a man among the most feared men of the arena, but there he was and he had well deserved that spot. The speed of his blades more than made up his lack of strength and his style left his victims full of small wounds that slowly but surely mounted up to their demise.

It was all very dramatic right up to the names of the gladiators, but that was the way of the arena. It was not about enacting punishment to criminals. No, it was about drama. Entertainment for the people.

“What about you, new guy?” Gareth looked up from his cards to meet the gaze of the Monster. “Would you have liked to wrestle a bit with that elf between the blankets?”

He knew who they were talking about. An exotic and pretty looking one, clothed in the finest of silks. She had visited the arena today in the company of one of the nobles who was looking to hire men for a private showing. Gareth had to admit he wouldn't have minded sharing his bed with such a fine looking woman, but he needed to play his part among these men.

“I think you run your mouth too much about something that everyone knows the answer to,” Gareth frowned at the Monster. “We'll all need the long age of the elves if you keep talking instead of playing the cards. It's your turn.”

The Monster blinked in surprise and then smiled in his wicked style, “Not much of a talker, is he?” he asked the men around the table.

“Sure ain't, but you'd better play your turn before he cleaves you in half with that big knife if his!” replied Carrigan, clearly sharing Gareth's wish for the game to move on.

“All right, all right!” the Monster snapped, examined his cards again and threw in a few more coins. “I'm in.”

Silence fell over the table, save for the occasional shuffling of cards and coins being thrown on the table. Gareth sighed in relief. The less they talked the better in his mind. Though the success of his mission needed these men to blather as much as possible. It was clear to Gareth now that Dayr and the three of his finest were a part of the cult. Since his arrival they had not done anything

nefarious, but he had caught fragment of conversations here and there that confirmed a lot of his suspicions. They were laying low, clearly interested in simply growing their numbers for now.

They had looked on Gareth with suspicion at first, but he had managed to work past that, even convincing them that he was no friend of the elves. That he did no care much who he killed and why. As long as there was money in it.

The card game continued and it did not seem to be Gareth's lucky day. He was losing quite a bit of coins, but the more he lost the more the other players seemed to like him. Everyone likes a loser when it comes to card games. The three continued to chat away in their less than flattering manner about elves and other things while Gareth remained silent, simply listening to what was being said.

The chatter stopped as Dayr stepped into the room, as dirty and disgusting as ever. He seemed anxious and a bit annoyed to see Gareth sitting at the table. Clearly, something was up, something he could not share while Gareth was there.

“How's the game, lads?” asked Dayr.

“I'm losing my shirt,” grunted Gareth and threw his cards on the table. “Best to give up before I lose my pants as well.”

He stood up and strapped his sword to his back.

“Don't forget tomorrow,” reminded Dayr.

“How could I forget?” asked Gareth as he walked out. He knew the part he'd been planned for in the upcoming event. Playing the part of the troll king in the show that depicted the utter slaughter their first attack against the humans caused. A fitting role for him, Dayr had figured.

The cool evening air hit him as he walked out of the arena. He did not head home, but rather found a concealed spot with a good view of the nearest exit from the room he had come from. It was a long wait, but his instinct had been right. Three familiar figures stepped out on the street and headed on towards the north dock with a purpose. Gareth followed them, but kept a safe distance to keep from being noticed.

Even as the evening darkness crept to the streets, Ramyn was buzzing with life, though it was a different kind of life from the daylight. Gone was the façade

of the civilized city of the day. The craftsmen and merchants were replaced with shadier types; whores, throat cutters, thieves and drunkards. There were groups of friends going from tavern to tavern, laughing and shouting. They provided Gareth with much needed noise to cover the fact he was shadowing the men before him.

The gladiators slipped to a quieter alley. They stopped entirely, apparently to have a final conversation among the darkness of the towering buildings. Their voices echoed audibly from the narrow alley so Gareth hid behind a corner and listened in.

“You got the money?” asked Monster.

“I've got it,” came the reply from Carrigan, “but I don't see why we have to do this turd of a job.”

“We do it because Dayr told us to and Dayr got told to do it by Derian,” came the stern reply from Obsidian.

Gareth made note of the name mentioned. Not one to be thrown around over light matters. Something serious was about to take place.

“A lot of risk for one elf,” said Carrigan. His voice revealed the doubt he was having.

“Ain't no ordinary elf this one. Very high among the elves power structure. Kill her and we'll send a firm message.” Monster's voice was calm, but a certain degree of excitement could be heard in it.

“And think what it will do for our reputation within the Blades,” added Obsidian, sounding eager to take on what dark work they had ahead of them.

“Still, going to the nobles level this time of the night. Tricky business. Lots of patrols there.” Carrigan seemed bent on not going forward and tried to find every excuse not to. Gareth did not believe it was because he had some moral issues about what they were doing, but more a worry whether they would be caught and punished for it.

“You worry too much.” Monster's voice was beginning to show irritation. “Some of the guards at the transport disc are members of the Blades. The rest can be bribed with the gold we have. We go in, gut that elf and her guards like the pigs they are and come back.”

Elf? Gareth had to wonder whether they were talking about the one that had visited the arena today. She certainly had looked to be above the ordinary class, but how were they going to get to her? She was the guest of a noble and would certainly have guards of her own. They must know something, information from someone on the inside.

"You make it sound so easy," the sarcasm dripping from Carrigan's voice could have drowned an entire village.

"What's the matter, oh Bloody one? The elves stolen your balls?" Obsidian's mocking voice echoed from the alley.

"Go fuck a chicken!" shouted Carrigan, perhaps louder than he intended, but no one on the street took note of it.

"Shut it!" hissed Monster. "We're doing this and if you want to keep your head on your shoulders you'll stop your whining."

There was a long silence that no doubt involved lots of glaring and fondling of weapons. Gareth began to worry they had left, but then the talk started again.

"Alright," conceded Carrigan. "But how do we find her? Dayr kicked me and Obsidian out of the room so I assume he told you the plan?"

"Her host has a servant that is a member of the Blades. We got information from him that she would be out tonight and return late. We have the route she'll take so a simple ambush will do the job," explained Monster.

"Where will we ambush her? How many guards will she have?" asked Obsidian.

"Four guards. Should pose no problem for us," there was a certain air of arrogance in Monster's voice, though Gareth had to admit the three men could easily handle even eight guards if need be. "We'll ambush her at the corner of Galdory street and Pomillion park."

Gareth knew the place they were talking about. It was a good place for an ambush. There were lots of trees and bushes in the park to hide in and it was an area of the level where patrols were infrequent.

"Well, what are we waiting for then?" asked Obsidian. "Let's get this over with and go back to playing cards."

Gareth heard footsteps as the men walked away. He quickly followed,

minding his distance. He had little trouble following them to the transport disc.

The transport disc station was a small fortress in its own right. A stone wall of fifteen feet in height surrounded the area with watch towers that climbed even higher than that and a gate that seemed to be built to withstand the wrath of gods themselves. It was no surprise that the place was heavily guarded as it provided one of the few ways to the upper levels. Should anyone manage to invade the city, holding the transport point would be of vital importance.

On top of that, access to the upper levels was strictly regulated, especially during the night. To get to the level where the imperial palace was one needed an signed pass that the guards would always check for. Some industrious people had tried to forge the pass, but so far all they had accomplished was a last, free visit to the arena. While access to the nobles levels was less strictly regulated, especially during the day when a constant stream of workers, servants and visitors travelled between the levels, at night a pass was needed to gain access.

Gareth looked on as the three gladiators talked with the guards. He saw the gleam of gold coins in the torch light as they exchanged hands. Soon the three men stepped inside the small fortress and Gareth could only watch as they rose to the sky on the floating disc. Their torch light soon disappeared as the disc rose higher and entered the tunnel leading to the upper level.

“Dammit,” mumbled Gareth. With a resigned sight he dug out an silver pendant from his pocket and put it around his neck. It carried the symbol of the master of the tower of Free Magic. Skander had given it to him to ensure free mobility for him throughout the city, but he hesitated to use it, especially so soon after three men had bribed their way through the gate.

On a personal level he did not want to get associated with Skander too openly as that would limit his usefulness. There was such a thing as being too well known. In this situation he could however not find any other way to follow the three men.

Having seen the disc descent back down Gareth walked up to the gate. He tried to look as casual as possible, like he was there on normal business and not after three men who were about to commit murder.

“Halt!” shouted the guard. “What is your business here at this hour?”

Gareth showed the guard the pendant, "I am here on the business of the tower master."

The guard eyed the pendant, clearly recognizing it for what it was, but seeming reluctant to let him pass. This was a member of the Blades. Gareth made note of his face so he could later be identified.

Finally the guard nodded, "You may pass. Open the gate!"

The mighty gate swung open with a creak and Gareth walked through. The disc took up most of the space inside the fortress, but there was a small barracks building there as well with ample room for the forty or so soldiers that usually guarded the place. Another, smaller building, was reserved for the elementalists that operated the disc. One of them stepped out of the building and grabbed a lit torch as Gareth approached the disc.

"Busy night, isn't it?" the elementalist asked Gareth. He was a man in his fifties and dressed in a decent quality blue tunic. An unusual colour.

"Never a moment of rest in the service of a tower master," grunted Gareth in response.

The elementalist chuckled, "Those bastards know how to squeeze the juices out of a man."

They stepped onto the disc. Gareth never much liked travelling on the discs. There was something in the knowledge that there was nothing but empty air between you and the hard ground below. The elementalist handed the torch to Gareth.

"Keep away from the edges," he advised Gareth with a wry smile. "Wouldn't want you falling down."

"I'll keep that in mind." Gareth shuffled to the middle of the disc.

The elementalist took on a look of concentration and soon the disc rose up to the sky. It was a gentle rise and Gareth could barely feel anything to indicate he was climbing towards the sky. Only indication were the lights of the city below that slowly but steadily grew smaller. Gareth looked up to see the starry sky come closer and closer. He knew it was an illusion and only because of that did the stars seem to come closer. He knew the real sky was still far, far above him. He saw the black hole in the sky. He tensed as the disc entered it. The lights of

the city disappeared and all that was left was darkness, save for the meagre light the torch he was holding provided. He could see the dark stone walls all around him. It was an oppressing feeling to go through the mass of stone in such a way and he breathed out a sigh of relief when the disc slowly hovered to a stop under the fake sky of the imperial layer.

There was a similar fortress surrounding the disc area at the nobles layer of the city, but it had two walls to it. One to hold in those who arrived on the disc and one to hold out people from outside. Ramyn was well prepared for an invasion, though no one could remember the last time anyone had tried such a mad idea.

Gareth bid farewell to the elementalist and hurried through the gates without paying much attention to the guards there. He hid the pendant in his pocket once more. No reason to keep it out in the open now. He feared the three gladiators had gained too much of an lead so he hurried to where they said they would arrange their ambush.

The nobles layer was remarkably different from the levels below. Instead of tall, huddled up buildings, there were large walled estates that reached barely two or three stories high. There were no streets beyond the ground level which offered an unobstructed view of the fake sky above. Trees and other plants could be seen beyond the walls of the estates, indicating the presence of lush gardens. Even the streets were occasionally lined with trees and bushes and for the most part there was ample lighting that left few if any dark corners for anyone to hide in. There were no shouting drunkards or whores on the streets. It was calm and quiet apart from a few parties that could be heard from some of the walled estates.

Gareth paid little attention to the wonders around him. He was more focused on avoiding any patrols that he might stumble upon. He hurried along as best he could, hoping to make it in time. As he got close to where the ambush had been planned he knew he was too late. A scream echoed on the street, a scream of a female. Gareth reached the street corner and peaked around it. The sight made him freeze.

Three guards lay dead on the ground. Carrigan was toying with the last one

in his usual style. The guard had several bloody cuts on him and it was clear his demise was near. Monster had a hold on the struggling female elf while Obsidian was busy throwing a rope over a tree branch that hung over the street. There was a noose on the end of the rope and Monster was quick to grab it and slip it around the neck of the elf. Obsidian pulled the rope, raising the female from the ground. She struggled to loosen the rope to be able to breathe. Monster reached for something in his pocket.

“Deremoth curse you,” Gareth heard him say as he pressed the object on the elf’s forehead. Whisks of smoke rose from it and she tried to cry out, but the rope around her neck muffled the sound.

Obsidian had safely fastened the rope and came up next to Monster. The two exchanged words and then Monster ripped off the silk clothes of the elf, revealing her milky white skin and slender figure. In any other circumstances Gareth might have found the sight of her body exciting, but now all it did was cause the knot in his stomach to tighten. Obsidian drew out his curved blade and slowly carved a path from her chest down to her stomach. She writhed and shivered as the blade cut through her flesh and let out the blood inside. Finally Monster sunk his hand inside her and pulled out her insides. The only mercy was that the elf had lost consciousness by then and was probably dead already.

Even Gareth found it hard to watch. His hands were clenched in fists and his finger nails dug into his palms. He turned away from the sight and leaned back against the wall. Not unlike a butcher killing pigs, he thought. What could he do now? It was too late to help the elves, and even if he did intervene he doubted he could best all three of the men by himself. Best he could do was get away with the information he had. He heard the three men laugh and their footsteps as they moved away from the scene. The fourth guard must have finally fallen.

Gareth peeked around the corner. The street was empty save for the five bodies. He walked over to examine the scene more closely. He noted the burn mark on the females forehead. The sign of Deremoth and the Blades. There would be no doubt on who was behind this attack. They were done hiding it seemed. This was the announcement of their return. Shivers ran down his spine. If this

was the beginning, how bad would things get in the end?

The sound of running footsteps woke Gareth from his thoughts.

“Dammit!”

A patrol had heard the screams and was headed straight for it. They rounded the corner just as Gareth began to run away.

“After him!” came a shout after a moment of stunned silence as the men of the patrol took in the scene of pure massacre in front of them. The chase was on.

Gareth had begun running on pure reflex, but he soon realized the chances for escape were low, almost non-existent. They would close the gates at the transfer points as soon as possible and then he would be trapped on this layer. The patrols would sweep the streets, search every nook and cranny until he was found. They had him dead and he knew it. His only consolation was that there was a possibility that they would find the three gladiators as well.

He caressed the pendant in his pocket. That was his only chance. He took it out and slipped it around his neck and stopped running. The men of the patrol soon caught up to him and surrounded him. Their faces were grim, some pale from the sight they had witnessed.

“I am in the service of Skander Joligan, master of the Tower of Free Magic. I demand you take me to him.” Gareth tried to sound convincing and calm, give the impression he had done nothing wrong. It seemed the patrol men were not in the mood to listen to him. They approached with caution, wooden clubs in hand.

At least they haven't drawn their swords, Gareth thought.

“Now, now..there's no need for violence here. I surrender willingly,” he tried to assure the men. They did not listen.

Though Gareth was a big man, even he could be overwhelmed, especially since he did not fight back. The club hits kept on landing him well after vision had escaped his eyes.



“It's simply not possible!” complained Cheid as he flipped through the pages of the thick book. The room was brightly lit for the dwindling sunlight offered little in the way of illumination and deciphering the complex formulas

scribbled on the books pages could certainly not be done in poor lighting.

“Why do you say that?” inquired Skander from behind his desk. He eyed the young man with interest. Few knew the truth about him, few knew his real family name. Most simply knew him as Cheid and he was happy to keep things that way. His family name was not exactly in high regard. The old emperor had made certain of that after their failure.

“There is no way anyone can gather enough energy to accomplish a large enough build-up to cause a rift of sufficient size,” replied the young man and rubbed his eyes. It had been a long day so far with a lot of thinking required. He was running low on energy and enthusiasm after an entire day of nothing but failed idea after another.

Skander leaned back in his chair, “The world does not stay still. It evolves, new ideas bring forth progress. There was a time when there was no such thing as magic. It was the efforts of bright men that brought about the discovery of how to make use of the elemental forces. There was a time when no free magic was known, but the passion for discovery led us to it. Who is to say there is not yet something left to discover in the world of magic?” The old man leaned forward on his desk and directed an intent gaze at the young man sitting in front of him, “Young, bright men like you are the ones who will lead us forward.”

Hearing such an compliment from the master made Cheid beam with pride and joy, but it did nothing to disperse the doubt in his mind over whether it could be accomplished or not. The key to portal travel seemed as elusive as the key to a princesses chamber door.

“Certainly there is still progress to be made,” the young man admitted, “but the energy that is required to open a sufficiently large portal is far beyond what any single person could ever hope to muster.”

“So you will need more than one person,” offered Skander. “It would not be the first feat to require that.”

“Even then, the co-ordination needed would be next to impossible to achieve.” Cheid shook his head, “No. What is needed is some sort of mechanism that can store the energy, or gather it on its own. But building such a thing..” his voice trailed off as he pondered a further problem that had popped up in his

mind. "Even if one was able to gather the needed energy, there would still be the problem of how you determine where the portal leads to. You can't use the same mechanism you use in the personal transportation spell. The connection to the destination is not strong enough to anchor the portal long enough."

"If it was an easy problem to solve we would not be pondering it now," consoled Skander. "And certainly we are not expected to solve it tonight."

"You are right, of course," conceded Cheid.

There was a knock on the door. Skander frowned. Who dared disturb him this late? "Yes! Enter!"

The door opened and one of the younger apprentices entered. The man looked somewhat scared to be entering the room at this hour and his eyes darted around nervously.

"What is it?" demanded Skander.

"Master, there is..er.." mumbled the apprentice.

"Out with it before it's morning."

"Well..the city guard is here to see you. They brought a man with them who was carrying a pendant with your mark on it. They say he demanded to see you."

Skander raised an eyebrow. Few had such a pendant and he had a feeling he knew who it was this time. "Show them in then."

"Yes, right away master." The apprentice bowed and left the room.

Cheid stood up with his book with the intent to follow the apprentice to give the tower master privacy to handle the matter, but Skander waved him to sit back down.

"Stay," said Skander. "I think you will find this interesting and I believe it is time you were brought in on some matters."

Cheid could only nod in response and wonder what he was being pulled into, though he figured the trust his master was showing him was well worth anything that would come.

The apprentice returned with a captain of the guard, three guards and the biggest man Cheid had ever seen. The room seemed much smaller as he straightened up from having had to bend down to step through the doorway. He noted the two guards flanking the man were eyeing their prisoner nervously

despite the strong chains around his wrists. He also noted some bruises on the big mans face that were on the mend. The third guard struggled along with the largest sword the young man had seen. The guard was happy to set the sword leaning against the wall by the door. This should prove interesting indeed, thought Cheid.

“Master Joligan,” greeted the captain. “This man claims to be in your service. Is this correct?”

“It is,” replied Skander.

“Are you aware that he was seen fleeing from a scene of a crime?”

“Was he now?” The master raised an eyebrow.

“A most gruesome sight,” continued the captain, “Five murdered. Elves no less, one of great importance and a guest of a most prominent noble.”

The frown on Skander's face made Cheid swallow. Never during the years of studying under him had he seen the old man with such an expression. Those elves must have been important indeed.

“That is grave news indeed,” replied Skander in a steady voice. “However, I can assure you that my associate had nothing to do with it. You may release him into my custody.”

The captain blinked, as if the thought of releasing the man had never crossed his mind, “But..sir, we have yet to fully question him..”

Skander waved his hand dismissively, “I will provide you with a full report in the morning.”

“Er..that would be problemat..”

“Come now, captain.” Skander cut off his objection. His voice was slowly reaching the tone that implied further arguments would be a bad idea. “Am I not trustworthy enough?”

“Er..”

“I would hate to wake the Magistrate over something like this. You know how grumpy he can be, don't you?”

“Er..well, no.”

“Oh? Well, I can tell you, you wouldn't want to meet him like that. Better off not bothering him, right?”

“Er..right?”

“Good! It's settled then.” Skander smiled widely while the captain looked uncertain whether he had agreed to anything. “If you'll let my friend over there free the apprentice will show you out.”

For a moment the captain stood there looking baffled, but then he motioned for the guards to open the shackles and free the big man. The captain saluted and left, the three guards and the apprentice in tow.

The big man rubbed his wrists. They'd put the shackles on extra tight. He poked the loose tooth in his mouth with his tongue. Still wobbled a bit, but he figured it would be firmly rooted by morning. Lucky he hadn't spat out the thing. Growing a new one would have taken significant time.

“Thanks,” he grunted to Skander.

“Don't thank me yet, Gareth,” replied Skander and motioned for the big man to take a seat. “You haven't met my apprentice yet, have you? His name is Cheid.”

“Huh? Apprentice? Didn't know you had one.” Gareth looked at the man sitting in the chair next to him. He nodded and received in reply a grin mixed with nervousness and fear.

“It is not a widely known arrangement,” said Skander.

“Bit jumpy, isn't he?” asked Gareth as he eyed the nervous young man.

“You'd scare the wits out of the brightest of men at first glimpse,” said Skander in a dry voice. “Now tell me what happened.”

“With him here?”

“Yes. It's time he was brought in on this.”

Gareth shrugged his shoulders and began to recount the events of the gruesome night. As the story progressed Cheid began to realize what he was being pulled into. He did not like what he was being told and could see the problems and dangers that would be headed his way.

“Damn them,” muttered Skander as Gareth finished his story. “The elf they killed was a member of their ruling council. They certainly accomplished their goal of announcing their return to the world by killing her.”

“We could tell the city guard what we know and let them handle the

situation,” suggested Cheid. He was still uncertain why Skander had chosen to bring him in on this.

“No, not yet.” Skander eyed the two men before him. “Those blundering fools would just drive them back underground. We need to continue keeping an eye on them. We need to find the one they called Derian. He is the head that needs to be chopped off.”

“Right then,” Gareth rose to his feet. “I’ve got somewhere I need to be in the morning. Maybe I can still catch some sleep.”

Skander nodded. “I’ll handle the city guard. You continue your work at the arena.”

The big man strapped the sword to his back and left the room. Cheid sighed in relief. There was something about that man that just unnerved him.

“Don’t worry about Gareth. He may look like a brute, but he is one of the better men I know,” said Skander in an effort to calm his apprentice.

“Why?” asked Cheid.

“Why what?”

“Why did you bring me in on this?”

Skander scratched his beard, “I suppose I’m finding myself in need of good men. You heard his story. What they did tonight is only the beginning. I know you to be a man who would not just sit by and watch them lay waste to everything that has been built so far.”

Am I really that kind of a man, Cheid asked himself. As he thought about it he knew the masters words to be true. He could not sit by and watch.

“I will do what I can to help.”

“Good!” Skander smiled. “It is getting late. You should try to get some sleep and we’ll talk more tomorrow.”

Cheid nodded. He was tired indeed, though he doubted whether he could get any sleep after what had been revealed to him. He closed the door behind him as he left Skander's rooms. The old man was still sitting behind his desk and had began to shift through a pile of papers on his desk. Did he ever sleep, wondered Cheid as he stepped on to the transport disc.

Chapter 9

The rain made everything seem a dull grey. It created a veil that limited vision so you could barely see from one end of the caravan to the other.

Nala sighed.

It wasn't so much the rain, or the sore muscles from riding for the first time, that had her feeling glum, though the wet clothes that chafed at her skin did not help. Even through her tightly wrapped cloak the water had seeped in and trenched her all over.

No, it was the lack of sunlight that was getting to her. Since entering Cerena she had not had time or the opportunity to be in the sunlight for any extended period of time, let alone without having had to cover herself in clothes. Even after only two days she could feel her strength waning, her mood swinging towards melancholy. She could only hope tomorrow would provide her with an opportunity to bathe in the sunlight.

Her first day with the caravan was nearing an end. She had been largely left alone, though she did receive some curious looks from the men in the caravan. To them, there was an air of mystery around her and save for a few glimpses, none of them had seen her without the heavy cloak, deep hood and gloves. They did not bother her though, most probably because of Rilus. These were his hired men and they knew there would be hell to pay if she did not arrive safely in Ramyn.

They set up camp by the muddy road as darkness fell. It came earlier than usual due to the thick clouds and the slight drizzle of rain that still poured from the sky. She watched as the members of the caravan were busy with their chores. Tents were being erected, fires made, food prepared, guard shifts handed out.

Nala stretched herself, trying to loosen muscles she did not know she had.

“First time riding?”

She turned around to see the leader of the caravan. He was a gentle looking man with grey hair and a beard, only a palms width taller than Nala and built

like a rickety fence.

“Is it that obvious?” asked Nala.

The man chuckled. “Don't you worry. You'll get used to it soon enough.”

“I hope so,” muttered Nala under the cover of her hood. She had no wish to spend more days torturing herself on the back of the horse, though she had to admit the journey seemed to progress faster with the beast.

“I've told them to set up your tent some way from the others.” The man pointed to a place under a few trees, just at the root of a small hill. It was barely outside the light of the nearest camp fire. “I doubt there will be any problems during the night. This is a very safe road.”

“I just hope this rain stops,” said Nala as she looked to the grey sky. A bit of sunlight was exactly what she needed.

The man peered at the sky, “I reckon we'll have clear skies tomorrow.”

“You say it with such confidence.”

“Of course. My mother could tell rain coming two days beforehand. I ain't claiming to be as good as her, but I know what the weather will be tomorrow, that much I can tell you.”

“I hope you're right,” said Nala. She dragged her belongings from the back of the horse and made her way to the tent that had been set up for her. She tossed her belongings inside and walked on to the top of the small hill.

The view did not reveal anything new to her. The same grass plain as far as she could see in the growing darkness, with an occasional small hill or a small copse. She turned around to look down the road. It slithered through the green grass like a long, brown snake. In the rain and darkness it all seemed so depressing. Her hands went to her swords for comfort.

Ever since the incident in Cerena her parents had left her alone. She could sense their disapproval at her actions and did not wish to confront them about it just yet. She did believe her actions were justified, if not perhaps the wisest. Even so, just setting her hands at the hilts of the swords dispelled some of the darkness that was taking over her mind.

She found herself wondering what she would do once she reached Ramyn. Finding Skander should not prove too difficult a task, after all, he was a well

known figure and from what she had heard, the towers of magic were not hard to miss. But would he help her? Of that she was not so certain, despite what Rilus had said. He would not turn her away completely, of that she had no doubts, but would he help her in finding those responsible for what had happened in her home forest? Could she even ask such a thing of him? Ask him to take on the dangers involved?

A shout woke her from the thoughts. The rain had stopped. She looked to the camp fires and saw a man waving to her. Food was ready.

She made her way down to the fires and found a bowl full of steaming vegetables and pieces of meat. A slice of bread and some cheese was waiting for her as well. Compared to the dried rabbit meat she had eaten on her way to Cerena, the offering seemed luxurious and she was more than happy to eat it. The warm food made her feel better. It drove away the worst of the cold of the rain and the wet clothes.

As the food was consumed, the caravan leader brought out a lute. Soon the twang of its strings filled the air with an melody full of warmth and joy. One of the younger men in the caravan began to sing in a clear alto voice. Nala leaned back against the wheel of one of the wagons and let herself relax and enjoy the performance. It seemed like forever since she last had the opportunity to just sit and enjoy something so fully.

To her mind the moment passed too soon. The members of the caravan began to put out their bedrolls and settle down for the night. Nala made her way to her tent and peeled off the wet clothes. She tried to arrange them so they'd dry at least a bit for the next day, but more than likely she'd be left with damp clothes in any case. At least the tent was dry as was her bedroll. She soon found herself fast asleep wrapped in the warm blanket.



Nala woke early in the morning. She peeked out of her tent and found no one else awake. The first rays of sunlight were making their way over the small hill behind her. Sunlight!

She hurried to put on a dry set of clothes from her backpack and wrapped

the still damp cloak around herself. Ensuring she did not wake anyone else, she made her way on top of the hill. The other side of it was already bathed in bright light. She looked behind her to ensure no one was following her and made her way beyond the hill top, well out of sight for anyone in the camp.

She stripped down to nothing and shivered with pleasure as the rays of sunlight caressed her bare skin. The feeling was less intense than when she had first crawled out into sunlight, but still enough to make her lie down in the damp grass and bite down on her lower lip. Time lost all meaning to her, her mind went blank and was then filled with simple joy and pleasure, wiping out all the dark feelings that had been swelling up inside her.

A small gasp brought her back to reality. She jumped up and turned around. She was greeted by the young man who had sang so well last night. His jaw was hanging open in surprise, his eyes staring at her nakedness. Nala put her hands on her hips and raised an eyebrow as she eyed the youngster. He blushed and turned away.

"I'm sorry..I didn't mean to..I was told to..that is..I.." His stammering increased and began to make ever less sense. Nala took the opportunity to put on some clothes. She was in no hurry to let the youngster off the hook.

"How much did you see?" she asked while pulling up her brown pants.

"I..er..well..saw your..hair..getting greener.."

"And nothing else?" She pulled the tunic down over her head.

"Well..yes..er..you..naked.."

"Hmm..that must have been enjoyable." Gloves and boots on. Belt and swords fastened around her waist.

"Yes..er..I mean..no! I would never.."

"You know spying on people is not very good behaviour." Cloak wrapped around her, hood down.

"I know. I didn't meant to!"

"So what did you come here for?" She put her hand on the youngsters shoulder and spun him around so he had to stare into her green-blue eyes. He was not that much taller than her.

"I was sent to find you. Breakfast..caravan getting ready to leave.." He

blushed again as her gaze drilled into him.

“I suppose you will be wanting to tell everyone about what you saw?”

“No! No! I would never..”

Nala pondered the situation. Despite believing the youngsters claims she was certain he'd slip at some point and talk. On the other hand, what was the harm in letting members of the caravan see her? She needed the sunlight and Ramyn did not seem to be a place where she'd get a lot of that.

“Well then, they must be waiting for us already.” Nala tightened her grip on the young man's shoulder. “If I hear any wild claims from you, you will have a less than pleasant visit from me. I will also make certain Rilus hears of you and that you'll never work at a caravan again.”

He nodded silently.

Nala smiled and patted his cheek, “That's a good boy.”

She strode down the hill, the accidental spy in tow. She received many curious glances as she enjoyed her breakfast and put together her things for travel. She figured it was something she would have to get used to. She could not always hide her features and the glances she was getting now would be the same she would get even among her own people.

She had just climbed on her horse as the caravan leader rode up next to her.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

Nala nodded.

“Good, good,” he eyed her with some curiosity. “I figured that hood of yours was to hide something grotesque. I am relieved to see it was to protect something exotic and beautiful.”

He rode off, shouting orders to move out, before Nala could answer.



The pigeon tilted its head and eyed the seeds on the table. Skander held his breath and sneaked behind the bird. He had spent quite a bit of his afternoon coaxing the bird; first to get it inside his room and then to try and grab the

message strapped to its leg. The bird seemed to think it a game and had hopped and flown away from everything he had tried.

The bird pecked at the seeds. The wizard closed in and tried to clasp the bird. It flew away right before his hands reached it. Skander noticed yet another white stain on his table.

“More shit,” he muttered to himself. There was a knock on the door. Skander looked to find where the bird was. He found it up on the perches, looking down on him, head tilted. He was certain it would have laughed at him if only birds knew how.

“Yes, come in, but close the door quickly!” he shouted.

Cheid entered the room and closed the door admirably fast. The young man looked around. The room seemed to be in more disorder than usual and his master had rose red cheeks, as if he had been running the whole morning. He was startled when a pigeon flew down from the perches and landed on his shoulder. It cooed.

Skanders eyes widened. “Grab that little bastard!”

Cheid closed his hands gently around the bird. “It's just a pigeon.”

“Just a pigeon, eh? That little bastard has evaded me for hours! It shat on my carpet, on my desk and it shat on my damn lunch!” The enraged old timer pointed to a piece of bread and cheese. There was a sizeable black and white stain on them. “Spawn of the lower planes is what it is!”

The corner of Cheid's mouth twitched as he tried to keep a solemn face. Luckily Skander was too busy taking off the message from the birds leg to notice.

“There's an empty cage in my experimentation chamber. You can put it there for now,” instructed Skander as he made his way to his desk with message in hand. “It'll make a fine specimen for an experiment,” he muttered under his breath so that the young man could not hear him.

Cheid took the bird with him. He allowed himself to smile and chuckle as he entered the chamber. He looked around for the cage. There were bottles, books, vials, candles and instruments most people would never see filling the room. A large table at the centre of the room, many smaller ones lining the walls. What wonders the room must have seen, he thought.

He found the cage under a small table and placed the bird in it. It cooed again, as if to say goodbye. Cheid found his master slumped in his chair, unravelled message in front of him on the desk. He looked shocked and his eyes were watery, as if ready to cry.

“Everything all right?” asked Cheid, feeling concerned.

Skander looked up. “No. Everything is not all right.” He had pain in his voice like which Cheid had never heard before. He motioned Cheid to read the message.

“All of them?” asked Cheid weakly before he finished reading the message. He had to sit down on the chair behind him. “How many were there?”

“Maybe fifty, could be less, could be more. Hard to tell with forest guardians.”

“All killed.” Cheid shook his head in disbelief.

“Save for one,” replied Skander sorrowfully. “I knew some of the families there. It was only a few years ago that I visited them last. My dearest friends from years past. Their daughter survived and she's coming here.”

Cheid looked up. “We must help her then!”

Skander understood where the young man's eagerness was coming from. Her fate was not that dissimilar from his. The young man understood what it meant to lose family, to be left alone with no one to help or rely on.

“She is the daughter of one of my closest friends. I will help her how I can,” said Skander in a determined voice. “She should arrive with a caravan at the northern gates by tomorrow or the day after. I need you to go there and keep an eye out for her. Make sure she arrives here at the towers safely.”

“Which caravan will she be with?”

“Look for the mark of Rilus. According to him she will be one of the smaller figures in the caravan, most likely wrapped in a green cloak.”

Cheid nodded. The master weapon smiths mark was known to almost everyone. “I will ensure her safety.”



The remaining days of riding went by without much hassle. The weather

favoured them as no more rain came down. Nala began to feel more comfortable not hiding herself since the caravan members did not show much interest in her beyond the initial glances at her oddly coloured hair and skin.

The third day of travel was well past midday when the city of Ramyn came to view. It was difficult to grasp how vast the city was from the ground level, but with her keen eyes Nala could see that even the part on the northern shore of the river left Cerena looking like a small village. Beyond the walls she could see buildings rising up several stories high. She could see walkways between them and beyond them, the floating layers of the middle island.

She shook her head. The men of the caravan had told her stories of the city, but they seemed to pale in comparison to reality.

“Quite a sight, isn't it?” The caravan leader had ridden up next to her.

“It is.” She had to admit that much, but there was no doubt in her mind that she preferred the comfort of a forest over the city carved out of stone. She said as much to the man next to him.

He chuckled. “The open road is my home so I can understand your sentiment.” He took on a more serious expression, “We'll take you as far as the central island. From there you will have to make do on your own. Unfortunately, I can't afford to send anyone with you.”

Nala nodded. “You have already done more than I could have expected.”

The man waved his hand dismissively, “Think nothing of it. Fact is, Rilus owes me one now and that is worth a lot in my books.”

“So I was just another piece of cargo?”

“If you want to think of it that way,” the man admitted. “I'll make no excuses. I run a business and charity won't take you far in this line of work. But certainly you have been one of the best cargo we have ever transported.”

Nala smiled. The people of the caravan had not done anything to deserve anything but thanks from her. Even the youngster that had spied on her had managed to keep his mouth shut.

“I suggest you pull up that hood of yours. The people in the city have a certain fascination for all things exotic and you certainly fall into that category. They're not as well mannered as the men in my caravan.”

“Should I be prepared for trouble?” asked Nala.

“In Ramyn? Always.” There was no humour in the man's voice.

She nodded and ensured her swords were tightly fastened and close at hand. She pulled her hood up and gave a last glance at the floating layers of rock. She lowered her head as the caravan rode through the gates of the northern section of the city.

Part One

End