

Guardian Spirit

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Chapter 1

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 with their nest building and the air was filled with bird singing and chirping. The grass covering the clearing was thick and long and the occasional patches of hay 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 fathers advices 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 noise. The young elf nodded to herself and slowly and silently started sneaking from the bushes towards the roe.

The path she had chosen offered her cover and the soft moss silenced 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 for 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 other edge of the clearing an older elf let out a small laugh. 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 her 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 shoulders. "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'll succeed", said Nala, pulled up the hood of her cape and ran off. Even when running she made so little noise that Ameter could barely hear it. 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 warriors 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, so they took care of 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 say the elves were there just 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 made an attack 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.

Nalas 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 a way of life, even though it was very different from the normal life of an elf.

Cerenas 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 undergrowth. In many places, a thick layer of moss covered the ground and in other places large ferns and forest flowers 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 carpet. 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 Nalas 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, Nala 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 grown shut 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. Nala 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. Amongst the bird singing she could hear something that didn't belong in the forest's 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 forest's 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 live human before so she took her time in observing 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 tangled. 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 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.

"Hahaal!" 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 she had been hiding in. Before the old man had could react, Nala's sword was pointing at his throat.

Not looking too surprised, the man observed the elf that 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 thought 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 Nala thought possible, the old man grabbed the staff from the ground and swiped Nala off her feet. Nala was fast and was 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 Nalas side. Nala blocked another strike with her sword, but it was clear she was at a disadvantage. The two continued to exchange blows and being constantly on the defence was eating at Nalas patience. As the man swung his staff again, Nala 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. Nala 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.” Nala let her dagger fall from the man throat and put in back on her belt. She took a step back, away from the man.

“He’s an old friend”, Nalas 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 you service, my lady. It is a pleasure to meet you, Nala Temera.”

Ameter laughed a bit as he saw Nalas confused expression. “Come. We will soon be in hot water for being this late for dinner.”

Nalas 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 right behind her father and Skander. 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's 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 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 an 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 Nala had entered the room from, there was another door. A flickering light shone from there and a sound of kettles clattering could be heard. Nalas 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. Kylas eyes were green-blue and she was a bit taller than Nala. Her body build was different from Nalas. 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. I've been busy, you see." Skanders smiled warmly.

"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."

Kyla broke the hug and took a good 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.

"Come. Sit down. The food is ready." Kyla 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. Nalas 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 Nalas parents. Nala listened to the stories of her parents past with fascination. She was hearing many of them for the first time in her life, such as the story of her father and an unfortunate encounter with a bear that resulted in a lost salmon and several scars for her father.

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 was more than happy to help 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 and 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 asking 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’s 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 as it was clear she wasn't 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's 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 around 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 suggests, there are five towers, one for each kind of magic. Earth, fire, air, water and free magic. The aforementioned 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 element. A skilled Free magician can command all four elements and do things no one of the elemental magician can do. As I said, Free magicians are rare, but they are very powerful. 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. 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, "Anyway, The Tower of Free magic only has a small number of student 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. Doesn't that mean there are six forms of magic?"

Skander smiled, "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 don't 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, wind 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. 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 ignorant. 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. Even her knowledge of her own kind was still very limited.

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. 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, “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’s out there? I know that Cerena is a couple of days journey to the south of here, but what comes beyond that?”

Skander spent a moment thinking and poured some more wine into his cup, “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 Vorothe. 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 Vorothe. Centuries ago, the areas of Wroth and Vorothe belonged to the Ramyn empire. The break up was far from peaceful, but it was a long time ago and 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're a minority. South of Vorothe lies the kingdoms of Garachi, Seren, Das and Geshe. Though all of them are human kingdoms, the inhabitants differ from each other vastly. The inhabitants of the Ramyn empire are mainly peaceful and highly educated. The people of Geshe are mainly miners working in their own mines. Seren is famous for its fast and durable ships and skilled seamen. The inhabitants of each kingdom have over time 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." Skander stopped for a moment to take a sip of his wine.

"The centre of the continent, that is east of Wroth, is covered by the Great Forest. That is where the Elven kingdom is located at. North of there are the lands of the Northern Barbarians. They're a savage lot and doing looting raids to the southern nations is a favourite pass time for them. To the south of the Elven kingdom, is the kingdom of Mandor. Even though Mandor is a human kingdom, the Halfling Hills, the home of the halflings, are situated there. They're quite happy with the arrangement. The knights of Mandor protect them and their homes and all they have to do is pay a reasonable tax to the king. A beneficial deal for both sides.

In the east, Mandor is limited to the Balarian mountain range. In a valley, 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. They’re a rare sight outside their own kingdom. Trolls 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, a large pointy nose and some might have large corner teeth that are clearly visible. Despite their appearance, they’re 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. Don’t let the appearance fool you.”

Nala nodded with gleaming eyes. She was excited over all that she was hearing. There was so much more to the world than the forest she had lived her whole life in. She could barely wait for a chance to explore and see it all for herself.

“To east of the trolls kingdom, between the ocean and the mountains, is Marago and to the north from there, is the Five Cities Alliance. South of Marago is the island kingdom of Terenon. If only I had a map I could better explain all the locations to you.” Skander paused for a moment to enjoy the taste of the wine.

“Alongside all the kingdoms, there are two areas no one has laid claim on. The other one is east from here, the swamps of Gereth, while the other one is a mountain called Moroth’s Tooth. It’s situated in the mountain range of Balaria. Both areas are infested with evil beings, so much so that no kingdom has seen it worth the trouble to try and lay claim to them.” The expression on Skanders face grew darker and he emptied his wine cup with a single gulp. It was already dark outside and the moon was starting its climb towards the sky. “That sort of reminds me why I came here. I came 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 and seemed to think whether to continue or not.

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

Skander sighed, “Alright. 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. “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 Loriel, but when Loriel chose to give the seed of the Mother Tree to the elves, Deremoth grew jealous and ultimately became vengeful. Where Loriel 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 Loriel.

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't kill a god.” Skander said, “You can kill his followers, but you can not kill the memory of him, so he will still be alive somewhere, waiting for his opportunity.”

“So someone has stumbled upon what ever was remaining of him in this world and is now gathering the cult back together? Loriel 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.

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 an 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's late. I'll 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?"

Ameter 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 Nalas parents room. The second door on the left lead to a training room. Nala and her father often trained their sword fighting skills there during the winter. The second door on the right lead to Nalas 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 Nalas room.

Nala opened the door to her room and stepped in. The moonlight shone in from the window on the right and illuminated Nalas desk and the bookshelf on the left side of the door. Nalas 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'd get to go to a council meeting. She'd 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.

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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.” Nala 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 and some of the bread. There were also some 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 a few 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 stump. 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 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 herself too, looking for Tydian. 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 Nalas, 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 together 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 head lengths 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 Nalas father, “Your fathers message was a bit cryptic. Why was this meeting called? Why is there a human here?”

“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?” Tydian said 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 sun

shine that hit the clearing kept the water in the pond enjoyably 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. Nala 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 quick 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. 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 Tydians 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 silently and made Tydian laugh.

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

“Ah, there you are”, Ameter said, “We were starting to wonder where you two had gone.”

Nala blushed a bit and both Ameter and Tydians father laughed.

“What has the council decided?”, Tydian asked. He looked around a bit, “And where's that human who was here?” Nala looked around too, but couldn't 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 somewhat.

“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.

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

“I fear dark times are ahead of us”, Tydians 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's an excellent idea, Ameter”, Tydians father responded and the four

started to make their way back towards Nalas family's elf tree.

Chapter 4

*T*wo years had gone by since Skander arrived bearing the grave news. He 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. Skander had then returned to his duties in the Five Towers of Magic. Since then, no further incidents had been reported.

For Nala, life had continued as before. Her mother continued to train her in the arts of nature magic and her father continued training her combat and woodsman skills. Her relationship with Tydian continued to grow deeper and they met each other almost daily. Their promise to marry each other was made official and the given date was but a few months away. As her skills grew, more responsibility was handed out to her. Scouting missions, patrolling the forest and tending to some of the older trees were among her new duties. In the past she had always been with her father or mother on these mission, but now she was trusted to go alone.

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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 as usual 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 the 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 have 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 start a fire to roast

the wild boar. He looked around intently, looking 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 Loriels 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 his sword unsheathed.

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 to 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 a 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 some times, it is a 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. Eleria lost that long hair she so likes. A misfortuned

orc chopped it off with its sword.”

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 Tydians mouth as he started to fall down. The scream that escaped Nalas 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.

Nala had kneeled 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 Tydians 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.

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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 the man's face and her 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!” The man's 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 he 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 motioned and one new hooded figure stepped in the room from the kitchen, carrying a plate with the severed heads of Nala's father and mother. 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."

"Worry not, we will, but before that I will need to visit her mind."

"Who are you? Why are you doing this?", Nala shouted 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.

"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 some training in nature magic, Nala 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 moment she had had with Tydian brought tears back into her eyes, as did the many memories she had of her father and mother.

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 over took 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 Ameters possession during his adventurous youth, but Ameter 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 and 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.

“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 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!”

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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 her 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. Though such a summoning was considered only in the greatest of needs as disturbing the spirits was considered a great offence

towards the spirits. But Nala found herself not ready for a life of peaceful existence with her relatives. She wanted revenge.

Suddenly Nala felt an 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." Nala recognized the voice immediately even though it was the first time she was hearing it. The goddess Loriel 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 lover 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. 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. Deremoths 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? How am I supposed to find the sword single handedly when they can't find it with all of Deremoths followers?"

"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

Deremoths followers.”

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

“Yes, new life. 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. 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 Tydians deaths outweighed Nalas doubts.

“Goddess Loriel, I've already served you my whole life. I would be happy to do so for another life time.”

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.

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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 saw the plate that her parents heads had been on, but their heads were not there. As she looked around the room she saw 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 and gone were her clothes.

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 way possible. It was like the most intimate moments she had experienced in Tydians 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 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?

As she pondered the situation, she 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 elf 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 sort 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 an 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 bag 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 Tydians 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 kneeled next to her loved one. The crows had been busy and the once so handsome face of Tydian was nothing but an 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 Nalas 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? 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 Tydians 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 Tydians family tree.

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.

She 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 her clothes. 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 couldn't 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. 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 a sheathed both of the swords. She glanced at the elven runes again and realized what they meant. The long sword had her father name carved into the scabbard and the short sword had her mothers name. She fastened the two swords around her waist, realizing they were the most precious thing 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. 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 shoulder, made sure the swords were tightly fastened and grabbed the travellers bag from her feet. Then she headed south towards Cerena to leave the forest for the first time in her life.