

Guardian Spirit

by Mikko Tirkkonen

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Part Two

Ramyn

Chapter 10

Cheid had spent an uneventful first day observing the northern gate. The flow of people in and out of the city had been fairly constant, but there had been no sign of the caravan he was waiting for. There was only one gate they could come through so he was certain they had not gotten past him unnoticed.

He spent the day loitering around until he found a tavern that had a few tables placed outside for more room. It offered a clear view to the gate so he sat down there and enjoyed the offerings of the tavern. He stayed there until darkness fell and the gates were closed. No caravan would enter the city until first light.

The following morning Cheid was the first customer to arrive at the tavern. The owner greeted him with a smile as he ordered a pint of beer and some bread and cheese for breakfast. He figured it would be a long day of sitting around doing nothing, even though this was the day the caravan was most likely to arrive. While enjoying his breakfast he watched the people walk by; workers hurrying with tools in hand, servants running early errands for their masters, children swarming around their mothers as they made their way to the nearest marketplace.

The sight made Cheid remember all that he had lost those years ago. He could barely remember how his mother had looked. He remembered smells and touches, feelings, but not much else.

He sighed and drank from his pint.

It was his fourth pint by midday. It was then that he saw the caravan enter through the gates; several wagons, several riders on horses. It was hard to miss the small figure wrapped in a green cloak. Among the men surrounding her, she stuck out like a nail from a piece of wood.

Cheid stood up and followed the caravan as it made its way towards the harbour. He had no trouble keeping up. The street to the dock was always crowded and walking was in most situations faster than going by horse.



Nala eyed the crowded street from under her hood. It seemed the mass of people went on forever. She eyed the towering stone buildings and the walkways up above that seemed to create a foliage of pure stone.

She did not like this city any more than Cerena.

The wagons cleared way for the caravan and the outriders to make their way towards the harbour. Nala had to wonder whether she would have a chance to get on a boat for the first time in her life. She rode closer to the caravan leader and asked how they'd get to the central island that loomed ahead of them.

"Caravans like ours make use of a tunnel that goes under the river and comes up at the northern harbour of the central island," responded the man.

"A tunnel?" asked Nala weakly. She had not expected that. Going underground seemed an uncomfortable prospect to her.

The caravan leader nodded. "Don't you worry. It's perfectly safe. It's well lit, there's room enough to put five wagons side to side and stack ten on top of each other to reach the ceiling." The man winked at Nala. "Room enough that people with anxiety about tight places won't feel too uncomfortable."

"It's not the tightness of space I worry, but the mass of land above," muttered Nala.

The caravan leader chuckled, but did not say anything more.

Nala returned to observing the city around her. She noted the people did not seem that different from those of Cerena. She could see the same sort of errands being run, though she did notice there seemed to be more people who were serving others and running their errands for them.

The caravan reached the harbour gates. The guards stopped them and began to ask questions; where they were from, what was their cargo and destination. They wanted to search the wagons.

"What's this all about?" demanded the caravan leader from the guards. "We've always passed without such hassle before."

"I'm sorry if this inconveniences you, but orders are orders," responded one of the guards. "Security on the central island has been tightened after an attack

on a high ranking member of the elves High Council. She was their ambassador to Ramyn as well.”

Nala moved closer.

“An attack? Surely such a thing does not warrant all this,” protested the caravan leader.

“She did not survive the attack and there are other..circumstances..that cause concern.”

“What circumstances?” asked Nala.

The guard squinted as he looked at her. He seemed to recognize her accent to be elvish. “The word is it was the cult of Deremoth that made the attack.”

The caravan leader looked at Nala, seemingly surprised by her curiosity towards the matter.

Nala clenched her reigns as hard as she could. “How long ago did the attack happen?”

“Three nights ago,” responded the guard. He seemed the talkative kind and was ready to share more than he should have. “Rumour has it one of the masters of the Towers is somehow involved, or at least the servant of one.”

The caravan leader whistled, “Quite a mess you've got on your hands.”

Nala did not know the politics of the city, but she trusted the caravan leaders assessment of the situation. The simple fact that the cult was active in Ramyn was enough to create a mess. She was certain she would find herself an opportunity to stick her spoon in it. “It would seem I have arrived in the right place.”

Her cold voice drew the looks of the guard as well as the caravan leader. Both seemed surprised and there was a hint of concern on the guards face. Nala ignored both and rode to the back of the caravan. The guards did not hold them up for much longer and they slowly passed through the gate to the harbour.

Nala could see the shore of the central island in the distance now. It looked impenetrable. Save for the low ground of the harbour, the island was nothing but sheer rock faced cliffs that went up forty feet at places. Where the cliff ended, the walls surrounding the city began and went up what seemed like another forty feet. Even Nala found the sight impressive and though anyone trying to attack the

city would be mad and doomed to failure.

On the left she could see the ramp leading to the tunnel. It was indeed wide and she could see evenly placed light sources that lit it up like daylight. The caravan slowly moved into the tunnel. The ramp slowly spiralled down, deep underground. The walls were pure rock, no dirt or gravel.

Finally the ramp settled to an even, straight line. They were under the river now. Nala shuffled uneasily in her saddle. She could feel the weight of the ground above her pressing down and hear the sound of water flowing above her. For someone who had lived under the open skies the feeling was unsettling at best, a prelude to pure terror at worst.

She tried to distract herself by examining the tunnel. There was not much of interest to keep her mind occupied. Just grey stone walls, support beams and the occasional cart or wagon that was returning from the central island. Most of the traffic was still headed for the island though there were two clearly marked lanes to ensure traffic would flow smoothly to both directions.

The caravan came to a ramp that climbed upwards in a similar spiral as the one they descended on, and soon they could see sunlight. Nala sighed in relief as she rode out the tunnel. It was as if a large weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

The guards did not bother them this time as they made their way through the gates and into the main city on the island. As they exited the harbour Nala noticed a disc rising to the sky on her left. She stopped and followed it until it disappeared into a hole in the sky.

Sky!

Where there should have been grey rock there was a sky no different from the one that had been above her all her life. She gaped up in wonderment, not noticing her hood had slipped off and that many passing by stopped to look at her.

“Quite the illusion they have there,” said the caravan leader as he rode next to Nala. “Makes living underneath a bit more bearable.”

“Illusion?” Of course. She could feel it now. The sunlight that hit her did not feel as it should have. It was weaker, it did not give her the same feeling of

pleasure.

“That disc they use to travel from layer to layer. There are a few such transport points around the city,” explained the caravan leader.

Nala did not respond. She peered past the walkways above her to see the disc descend back down. She could make out people standing on the disc.

“You should cover yourself up. You're attracting attention,” the man pointed out.

Nala realized her hood had fallen. She looked around and saw the faces staring at her. Quickly, she pulled the hood up and hoped she had not attracted the attention of unwanted eyes. She did not notice the several pairs of eyes that kept following her.

“We'll take you up to the big marketplace. From there on, you'll have to make it on your own,” said the caravan leader.

Nala thanked the man and they rode on southwards together with the caravan.

The marketplace seemed overwhelming to Nala. As far as she could see there were stands selling food, assorted goods and clothes. To her the marketplace seemed large enough to hold in the entire city of Cerena.

The caravan stopped by a building that looked to be a weapons shop. A pudgy looking man came out and exchanged a few words with the caravan leader. Seeming satisfied the men of the caravan began to unload the wagons.

Nala dismounted and gathered her belongings.

“Do you know where to go?” asked the caravan leader as Nala came by to say her farewells. She shook her head uncertainly.

“You see those towers to the south?” asked the man and pointed. Of course she saw them. They loomed high above everything else like giants. “Just head straight for them. You'll need to climb to the third level to reach the bridge leading to the towers.”

Nala thanked the man. It seemed inadequate to her, but it was all she could offer him. She made sure all her belonging were with her and then started off towards the towers.



Cheid looked on as the cloaked figure started away from the caravan, right towards the towers. He was pleased she seemed to know the way, but never the less felt compelled to follow her. She seemed overly interested in the markets offerings. She seemed to need to stop at every other stand she came across.

“Maybe an elf, but still a typical woman,” Cheid muttered to himself as Nala stopped at the tenth stand and left once more without buying anything.

What worried Cheid was that he was not the only one interested in her. Two men were following her, albeit a bit less covertly than he was. They looked to be ordinary street thugs, but there was a nagging suspicion in his mind.

Had they seen her when her hood slipped down?

If they had..

Cheid made his way through the crowded market and inched closer to the two thugs. He noted the clubs they had under their belts, the needlessly many loops said belts made around their waists and various other little hints.

Clubbers.

They were the sort that looked for exotic visitors, abducted them and sold them to the highest bidder. Cheid had to admit few would be more exotic than the young elf maiden. The good thing was there were only two of them and people in their line of work preferred solitary targets.

Cheid ventured past the thugs and headed straight for the latest stand that had caught the attention of his target.

“Ah, there you are! Off perusing the market again, eh?” said Cheid in a loud voice as he came up next to Nala and wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

She turned to look at the youngster. Her green eyes drilled into the man, trying to decide what to do about such sudden friendliness. Cheid quickly realized he needed to convince her or he would find himself without an arm.

He noticed the necklace Nala had in her hands. “Jewelry? Again? Didn't I buy you enough on your last visit?” he continued in a loud voice. In a much lower voice, he whispered, “I work for Skander. There are two thugs looking to clog you on the head and sell your pretty face to the highest bidder. Follow my lead and we

will make it to the towers with no problems.”

“How do I know you are what you say you are?” asked Nala. Even in whisper the melody of her voice sounded mesmerizing to Cheid.

Cheid doubted she would recognize the pendant Skander gave to a select few of his associates. “You are Nala Temera. You came here with the help of Rilus. The Blades killed your parents.” He saw the information was starting to convince her. “And if you don't come with me, you'll have to deal with those thugs that are behind us.”

She glanced behind her inconspicuously to verify the presence of the threat she was being informed of. The young man knew things few people should. At the very least he seemed the better option. “Lead the way then,” whispered Nala.

“Take my hand,” said Cheid in a hushed tone. Louder, he said, “Come on, you silly thing. We're late and you certainly don't need any more jewellery.”

Nala hooked the man's arm and allowed him to lead herself through the market. She occasionally glanced back to see if the thugs were still following. She saw glimpses of them, but it seemed they soon realized she was no longer the easy lonely target they had started out with. The two of them continued to walk towards the towers without further incident.

“Who are you?” Nala finally asked when it was clear they had been abandoned as potential targets.

“Oh..right. I'm Cheid. Skander's apprentice,” replied the young man.

“I didn't know he had an apprentice.”

“Not a widely known fact, that. Even he sometimes forgets about it,” said Cheid with a wry smile.

Nala examined the young man. He seemed sincere. He did seem to be leading her the right way. She decided it was worth seeing where it would lead. She was confident she could kill the man any time should the need arise.

Cheid filled the silence by giving her a tour of the various places they passed by. Nala noted the youngster held an impressive knowledge of the many taverns of the city and said nothing of places that looked to be of much higher importance.

What intrigued Nala the most was how the city held several layers to it. The

staircases and ramps offered a convenient way to go up and down and the walkways had ample room for people to traverse. There were railings of sorts to keep anyone from falling down and the towering stone buildings had clearly been built with all of it in mind.

Cheid led her with confidence and chose the quickest route to the towers. It took a lot less time to reach the towers than Nala had anticipated. She found herself almost snapping her own neck as she looked up to marvel at the towers than loomed high above her and seemed to touch the sky itself. The single bridge leading to the towers had little traffic on it; a few wizardly types heading away, a few clients going which ever direction.

The guards at the bridge recognized Cheid and offered no trouble. Nala followed the young man, eager to bring this leg of her journey to an end.



Carefully, Skander grabbed the flask with a pair of metal pliers. He wore thick gloves to further protect himself from the bubbling liquid inside. You could never be too careful around potions.

He removed the flask from the slow flame and inched it over the cage on the next table. He let the liquid cool for a bit. The pigeon inside the cage cooed.

“Told you you'd come in handy,” said Skander and poured a bit of the liquid over the pigeon. He set the flask down on the table to observe the effects.

At first nothing happened, but then bird began to change. Its feathers fell off, its beak turned into the nose of a rat, its cooing turned into panicked squeaking and hair began to sprout around its body. Then the transformation stopped. What had once been a pigeon was now a mass of miserable flesh with parts of a rat and pigeon sticking out of it.

Skander sighed.

“Another failure,” he muttered to himself. The mass of flesh squeaked. It would be hours until the effect would wear off. A wicked smile crossed the old wizards face.

“Maybe not a complete failure,” he said to himself. He gathered several

small bottles and carefully poured the liquid from the flask into them. He sealed them tightly, labelled them and set them on a shelf in a cupboard.

The many shelves were filled with similar bottles. Some were successes, some were failures; like his attempt today. Though even in failure he found uses for many of the potions. Turning your enemy into a useless mass of flesh seemed close to as good as turning a friend into a rat.

A knock on his door brought him to his study. Cheid had returned and he had Nala with him. Skander eyed the young elf with keen interest. She was not the same young elf he had seen on his visit. Her whole being seemed to have a grimness about it – a stark contrast to the carefree and innocent aura that had been about her during his visit. When she pulled back her hood he was hard pressed to hide his amazement. He knew what her altered appearance meant. Rilus had left this little bit of information from his message.

“Nala..I'm deeply sorry about your parents,” said Skander tentatively. The situation seemed awkward to him. There was a flash of emotion on the young elf's face, a pain in her green eyes. She hid it quickly.

“I've come to terms with it.” She averted her eyes and stepped deeper into the room, exploring it with a look of curiosity. She made her way towards Skander's desk. “And they are not completely gone,” said Nala as she unfastened the two swords from her waist and put them on Skanders desk. She took a seat in one of the chairs in front of the desk.

Skander motioned Cheid to sit and made his way behind his desk. “Rilus sent me a message about your arrival. He was not overly specific about what happened. If you're up to it, I would like to hear the story from you.”

So, once more, she told her story. It was becoming easier.

Skander looked focused on the story, but took the time to observe his apprentice. Hearing the details of it all clearly bothered the young man. He struggled with his emotions. Bad memories haunted him.

Nala finished her story of what had happened in her home woods. Skander reached to touch the wooden sword laid out on his desk. The tips of his fingers tingled as they touched the wood and a torrent of emotions tugged at him. He frowned.

"Your parents seem unhappy with you," he said.

Nala shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "In Cerena, I ran into one of the men who killed my parents."

"Ah.." Skander could see where this would go, but asked anyway. "What did you do?"

"I killed him and his companion." Her voice was calm with nary a hint of regret.

"I can see how that would upset your parents. They were not ones to accept needless violence."

"The goddess brought me back for revenge," replied Nala in a calm voice. "That is what I will do."

"So your plan is to go around killing people?"

"Yes."

Skander sighed. What was it with young people? They never stopped to consider the consequences of their actions.

"Going around, recklessly killing people isn't going to make things better," said Cheid. Skander looked at the youngster a bit surprised. Well, well, perhaps he had been too quick to judge the younger generation.

The young man continued, "All it will accomplish is changing you into a hollow shell of your former self."

Nala bit her lower lip. She had not expected to be confronted on her actions.

"You need to understand, Nala, that we are dealing with an organization that is vast and secretive," explained Skander. "You going on alone, killing who ever you run into, is a certain invitation for them to do the same to you. It will make it harder to find the leaders and put an end to their actions. You are not alone in wanting these people stopped."

"What do you suggest then?" asked Nala. She sounded frustrated.

"Work with us. Me, Cheid, a few others. We have our problems in Ramyn, but that is not our only focus."

"I heard," said Nala dryly.

"I have a man working on that group. Tomorrow I will meet a delegation

from the elven kingdom to discuss the matter. I would be happy if you were to join us.” Skander made the offer sincerely and with warmth in his voice.

The young elf seemed to think about it. She could see the points the two men had made. It did not take long for her to make a decision.

“I’ll work with you,” she agreed.

“Good. Good,” mused Skander. “I’ll arrange for a room for you at the inn across the bridge. Our guests use it regularly.”

“I do have one question before that,” said Nala. Skander motioned her to ask away. “Where’s the Sun Blade?”

Skander looked uncomfortable. “It is safe.”

Nala raised an eyebrow. “It was the reason everyone in my life was killed. I need to see it.”

Skander sighed. He leaned down and activated the mechanism to open one of the many secret drawers of his desk. He pulled out a long, leather wrapped package and laid it on the desk. He unwrapped it, revealing a long sword with a sun shaped pommel.

Nala stood up to get a better look at it. She reached out to touch it, but quickly pulled back her hand after brief connection. She shuddered visibly. A memory had been triggered. She had seen the gaping maw of the enormous black dragon. She had seen the man, on his knees, with the Sun Blade sticking out of the ground in front of him. She had seen the magic unleashed, heard the roars of pain from the dragon like she was standing right there. The memory of a past Guardian Spirit.

“Satisfied?” asked Skander. Nala nodded absently and grabbed her wooden swords. She fastened them around her waist.

Heed their words.

Barely a whisper, but she heard it. She recognized her mothers voice. She decided this time listening to her parents might be the wiser thing to do.

“I take it we can leave the rest of the talking for tomorrow?” asked Nala.

“Yes, of course. You must be tired from the trip,” Skander voiced an muffled response from under his desk. He put the sword in a different secret drawer. “Cheid will arrange the room for you. You’re in good hands with him.”

Nala left the room, with Cheid in tow.

“Cheid,” Skander called out just as the young man was about to close the door behind him.

“Yes?” He popped his head into the room.

“See if you can entice her to have supper with you. Slip some more information to her. About Gareth and so on.”

Cheid nodded and closed the door.



“You spoke from experience,” said Nala as she and Cheid stepped onto the transport disc. It was not a question, but more a statement of fact as she saw it.

“Hm?” Cheid was deep in his own thoughts.

“About the whole revenge thing,” said Nala and peered at the man next to her from under her hood. The transport disc began its long journey down the tower. The spirit moving it grinned down at Nala with the face of a young man. She scowled back at it. On the way up it had shown an unusual amount of interest in her. It bothered her.

“Ah. That. Yes,” said Cheid absently. After a moment of silence he continued. He had decided telling Nala most of the story might be of help to her. She was not likely to repeat it to anyone. “When I was but a child the old emperor of Ramyn had entrusted my family with the duty of guarding something that was of immeasurable value to the empire. We failed in that duty. Much of my family was killed in the effort to fill our duty. Those that survived were made an example of by the emperor. The name of my family was erased from all books, survivors were sent to the arena, some were publicly executed; flayed, boiled alive, sawed..you name it, it was done. Only reason I am alive is because Skander took me under his wings and hid me from the madness of the old emperor. The tragic thing is that what was lost was found again only a few years later.”

Cheid glanced at Nala, but could not tell whether the story was having any effect on her. He continued. “These towers raised me, gave me power. I used that power. I sought revenge and I found it. The blood of tens of men stains my hands.”

“You killed the emperor?” asked Nala quietly.

Baffled, Cheid looked at her. He laughed. “No. Others did that. Those men I did kill. They were the ones who caused the demise of my family.”

Cheid took a moment. The disc was going past a few highly populated stories. He continued as more quiet halls were going past them. “It nearly cost me my life to enact my revenge. It did not heal any wounds inside me. I was not better off after what I had done. New wounds had been added on top of old ones. I had no purpose left. Skander saved me once again. He gave me a direction.”

He looked intently at Nala, “Find more in your life than revenge. If you don't, you will end up lost like I was.”

He could see the young woman ponder what she had heard. What her conclusions were, he could only hope were ones of sensibility.

“What is it that they stole?” came a question from Nala.

“What they stole?” repeated Cheid. “Why, a child of about my age. The current empress.”

It took Nala the rest of the way down to digest what she had learned. She could not deny feeling the similarity between what Cheid had gone through and what had happened to her, though she was almost inclined to concede Cheid having gotten an even worse hand dealt to him.

As they departed the transport disc the elemental spirit moving it bid them farewell with an sorrowful face.

“Curious,” noted Cheid.

“What?” asked Nala.

“The spirits rarely express themselves in such ways. Seems this one is intrigued by you.”

Nala scowled at the spirit as it rose up with the disc. “I'd rather it didn't.”

Cheid led her across the bridge again and into the inn Skander had mentioned. The inn was much higher class than Nala had expected, but given the sort of people that came to visit the towers, it was no wonder there was an inn near by that would satisfy the needs of someone of means. There was a lot of gold in the business of magic.

Cheid approached the innkeeper to arrange for the room. Nala grabbed his

arm, stopping him. “If you can, get a room with a window that lets in a lot of sunlight.”

Cheid raised an eyebrow, but did not seek to satisfy his curiosity. She no doubt had her reasons. The innkeeper was more than happy to accommodate the master of one of the towers though he did make curious glances at the hooded figure that was to occupy the inn for days to come. Still, Nala had herself a room with two large windows before she could finish examining the common room.

“How about some supper?” asked Cheid as Nala came back to the common room from depositing her belonging in her room. “The cook here makes some of the best meat pies in the city.”

Nala took a moment to finish looking through the common room. There were some quests sitting at tables; most of them looked to be wealthy merchants and visiting practitioners of the arts the Towers were so known for. There were a few booths lining the walls with closable curtains for maximum privacy. The inn was a place where a significant amount of deals were made, some of which bore the more fruit the less sunlight shone on them.

“Why not?” responded Nala. She found Cheid pleasant enough company and the fact he had so willingly shared such dark and sensitive things of his past only raised his worth in her eyes.

The two retired into one of the private booths. Nala found it relieving to be able to lower the hood of her cape and freely be herself in the company of someone else. They talked of a lot of things. She listened intently as Cheid told her of Gareth and his current mission. She had trouble believing there was a man swinging a sword of her size. It was well into the night as they finished the last remnants of a meat pie that was just as good as Cheid had promised.

Chapter 11

Derian had had a rough time as of late. The new troops he had so proudly ordered into action had proved to be more trouble than he had expected. Full control of them had not been gained. They had not been ready.

The devastation the out of control horrors wrecked before they could be subdued had been significant. Ten of the most powerful priests and wizards of the Blades had died or suffered serious injuries. The loss of all but four of the new troops was even more significant. The event had set back his plans by weeks.

Now, it was time to attempt to gain control of the remaining troops. He was there personally, standing in his black robe in the middle of an large oval room. Before him floated four beings that could only be described as monsters.

Tattered clothes hung from their skeleton bodies. A cold fire burned in the otherwise empty eye sockets of their skulls. Their skeletons were cut off at the legs, leaving only the torso, head and hands. Even in the glory days of Deremoth, the effort put into conjuring these monstrosities would have been considerable. With the highly weakened state of their patron god, the effort had been almost too much for the Blades. Losing the remaining four would not be tolerable.

Derian gathered his strength. He nodded to the others in the room. They all knew what to do.

The spell that had held the horrors in place was removed.

Their reaction was immediate. They let out a bone chilling scream and rushed forward. They bounced back from the protective barrier that had been placed around Derian and the priests and wizards behind him.

Seeing their physical attacks thwarted, they began to pound the barrier with spells of their own. Blue flashes of light painted shadows on the walls and deafening booms echoed throughout the building. The barrier held. Barely.

Derian threw his arms wide and began to chant the incantation. He could feel the power of his god rush through. Oh, how he longed to be free. How Derian lusted after the power he would have once his master was free and complete once more.

He slammed his hands together. A visible pulse of power rushed out and slammed into the monsters attacking the barrier. Like leaves of the fall, they faltered and flew back.

“Heel,” said Derian in a voice filled with power. The monstrosities cried in protest and prepared to attack again.

Derian slapped his hands together again. Another pulse rippled forward. The beings cowed and shrieked in agony.

“Heel!” shouted Derian.

Three of the monstrosities floated forward cautiously. They bowed down before Derian, their skulls touching the floor. The fourth let out a cry of defiance. Derian slapped his hands together for a third time.

The pulse travelled past the three monstrosities that had been subjugated, but the fourth one wailed in agony as the pulse hit it. Cracks appeared in its bones and soon it crumbled down leaving behind nothing but pieces of bones.

“Rise,” commanded Derian the three remaining monstrosities. They did so and Derian walked to each one of them and drew the mark of Deremoth on their foreheads. Smoke rose as his finger burned the mark straight into the bone.

“Hide, but be ready,” instructed Derian his new servants. They shimmered out of sight, but he knew they would be following him as long as he so commanded. The connection had been made and it was strong.

The priests and wizards behind him relaxed visibly. It had taken all their efforts just to bring four of them under control. Derian turned to them.

“Brothers and sisters, we have accomplished much today. Rest. Your strength will be needed again.”

There were sighs of relief and a calm chatter began to fill the chamber. Derian did not linger, but walked right out. He had places to be. The spy was still in place in the Towers of Magic. The Blades operating in the city of Ramyn had made their presence known in a most spectacular manner. It was time Derian visited the city and delivered on the promise of taking the Sun Blade.



Gareth raised his sword and shouted out the command to attack. Ten

gladiators, each dressed up to look like trolls with glued on hair and masks that gave them a fierce appearance, rushed forward towards the prisoners that had huddled together with their shield and spears. It was an massacre much like the real battle the scene was based on.

During the Troll Wars a company of five thousand men had ran into a group of two thousand trolls led by their king. It was one of the first battles of the war and the humans had been wholly unprepared for the ferocity of the trolls. All five thousand men had been massacred. No one had been able to find out how many trolls had perished in the battle, but the general consensus indicated the number was zero.

For this re-enactment Gareth had been chosen to play the part of the king. He fit the role perfectly as far as outwards appearance went, but inside he loathed the situation he had been put into.

The crowd cheered and jeered as Gareth moved forward, his huge sword cutting him a clear path right to the centre of the prisoners. The prisoners scattered. They were doomed as they lost the little protection their shabby formation had offered. The gladiators picked out individuals, toyed with them and finally killed them.

Gareth avoided the bloodshed as much as possible. Dayr would harp at him afterwards about how he had ignored things they had gone over in practising for the event. He'd repeat his usual lines about the need for drama.

It took more time to finish all the prisoners than Gareth had anticipated. His comrades seemed to have a streak of unusual patience for toying today. Gareth stalked from the arena to the cheers of the crowd. As he walked through the corridor he bumped into Monster Dunn, who gave him a friendly slap on the shoulder and commended his performance.

Skander had worked his magic and managed to completely suppress any information that hinted that it might have been Gareth that was captured in relation to the assassination of the elven ambassador. All seemed to be as good as before with Gareth and his relationship to the core group of the Blades.

“We playing cards tonight?” asked Gareth from Dunn.

“Sure,” responded the big man with a grin on his face. He was looking

forward to squeezing a few more coins out of Gareth. “Stop by a little after supper. Dayr has a bug up his ass about something and wants to talk it over with me and the rest of the boys, so we’ll deal with that first. Then we’ll deal some cards.”

“Anything I should worry about?” asked Gareth. He tried to play it like he was concerned Dayr had something in mind that was directed at him.

“Maybe, maybe..” Dunn rubbed his chin. Then he grinned. “We’ll find out tonight.”

“Thanks a lot,” replied Gareth sarcastically.

The Monster slapped his back again and walked away, chuckling.

Gareth felt uneasy all the way to his quarters. Something was up. Had they found out about his involvement in the case of the ambassador after all? But why would Dunn let so much information slip so easily? He was a big man, but no fool. He knew the need for secrecy better than most men. All Gareth could do was wait for the evening.



Nala spent her morning laying on the floor, naked and enjoying the sunlight. She had pulled the blankets from her bed to make a soft little nest for herself. The large windows let in a lot of light, real sunlight, not the filtered kind that trickled on down from the layers above. The inn was close enough to the edge of the island to get real sunlight.

She spent time pondering the situation she had arrived at. This Gareth person Cheid had talked about in the evening seemed to be onto something. Following a core group of Blades was certain to bare fruit at some point and open paths to people involved even more deeply in the matter. The question was, would those paths open in any usable time?

Nala also found herself nervous about meeting the elven delegation. She had little notion of how they would react to her. Would they recognize her for what she was? How could they not? Even Skander had managed that, though he was a crafty old timer.

More over, Nala had never met an elf that wasn't a Forest Guardian. She

knew that she had been raised differently than a great many other elves. Those living in the Great Forest and the city of elves led easier lives and focused more on arts, politics and other such things that Nala's mother had referred to as 'nonsense'. No doubt they would have different notions of her position among the elves and of what she should be doing. Would they try to use her for their own gain or otherwise try and involve her in the politics of the elven kingdom?

She reminded herself that there was no room for doubt on what her mission was. The goddess herself had pointed it to her. She would not allow others to interfere with that.

A dry smile went across her face. How she had changed. Here she was, thinking about her own people, wondering how they could turn against her. Before all this she would have rushed on with gleaming eyes at the opportunity to meet elves from the Kingdom. No care in the world. Having everything right.

She found herself pondering whether the latent memories of the past Guardian Spirits had changed her. How could they not? Experiences from such a vast amount of time, most of them bitter and dark. Even if she was not fully aware of them, they were still there in her mind, perhaps pushing on her subconsciousness.

She wondered about the memory flash she had received when touching the Sun Blade. She knew it was the scene of Deremoth and his dragon brood being sealed away. Was it that the memories she had were triggered by objects that held a significance in them? She had tried to access them consciously, but it always ended up with a splitting headache. If that was the case, she had to admit that the goddess worked in inconvenient ways.

The day was advancing faster than Nala realized. It seemed to her the first rays of sunlight had only just slipped in through the windows. A knock on her door pulled her back to reality.

"Who is it?" she asked in a loud voice as she got up and started to dress.

"It's Cheid. Skander sent me. The elven delegation will arrive shortly."

"I'll be right there," responded Nala and rushed to make herself presentable.

Cheid turned from the door and stomped down to the common room,

muttering something about women never being ready on time. He did not need to wait for as long as he had feared before Nala came down the stairs, dressed in her usual green cape and her swords fastened around her slender waist.

“Shall we go?” she asked.

“We shall,” replied Cheid and bowed slightly and gave her way towards the door. Nala snorted and walked past him.

They made their way to Skander's chambers. There were a lot more people on the move than there were the day before. An unusual amount of students were hurrying around and a great many clients had gathered at the reception area waiting for their guides. They had to wait for a transport disc a bit longer than usual, but that was the only inconvenience that faced them.

They found Skander sitting behind his desk, shuffling through papers. The old wizard seemed to always have papers to go through. He looked up as the two entered the room. “I hope the inn was to your liking?”

Nala sat into a chair. “It's not home, but it will do.”

“Nothing ever is,” replied Skander.

“This delegation. Who belongs to it?” asked Nala.

Skander shuffled away a few papers before leaning back for a response. “There's Nisoen Dawnvine. He is probably someone you have heard of?”

Nala nodded. “He is the captain of the guards of the High Council. It is a bit surprising to hear he has come all this way.”

“Not when the ambassador killed was a member of the High Council,” reminded Cheid from his seat next to Nala.

“Ahnir Moonfar is the second member,” continued Skander. Nala did not look like she recognized the name. “She is a high ranking priestess of Loriel. She has come mainly to ensure the remains of the ambassador are properly looked after.”

Nala shuffled uneasily in her seat. The priestess would certainly immediately realize what she was. She tried to convince herself that it would be a good thing. She would understand her purpose.

“And third, there is Nerduin Stardancer.” Another name Nala did not recognize, though the name Stardancer did seem vaguely familiar to her. Skander

explained. "He is the youngest member of the High Council and a member of an influential family of nobility."

Nala smirked. "So he is the errand boy of the High Council? Sent here to keep an eye on things."

"Could be," conceded Skander without any humour. "What I have heard of him tells me he is not one to take lightly, though. There is a reason why he is a member of the High Council."

Before Skander could elaborate, there was a knock on the door. An apprentice entered and informed the room that the envoys had arrive. A moment later he showed them in.

The first to enter was a young male elf. He was a head lengths taller than Nala with blonde hair and was dressed in a brown cape made of fine cloth and underneath it he wore an emerald coloured shirt and pants. A slender sword was strapped around his waist. He eyed the room lazily and with an air of contempt. His gaze stopped at Nala and he took on an expression of deep thought.

The man following him was clearly a soldier to the bone. Slightly taller than the man who entered before him, he wore a finely crafted piece of elven plate mail with intricate decorations. His brown hair was tied back in a ponytail and his face showed marks of countless encounters with sharpened steel. Even though he was an elf, there were signs of old age apparent on him, some wrinkles here and there. His waist had a much more practical looking sword fastened to it than what the young male elf had.

Closely following him was a woman of equal tallness to the man before her. She wore a green robe with golden decorations sown into it, depicting symbols of Lorient. Her brown hair reached her shoulders and framed her delicate face. Out of the three she looked to be the friendliest. Her eyes widened as she saw Nala. She quickly made the symbol of Lorient and whispered, "*Mala'd Jal.*"

The older elf looked stunned. The younger man, who Nala figured to be Nerduin Stardancer, made an puzzled look and said, "What?"

"Do you know nothing?" demanded Nisoen Dawnvine while making the symbol of Lorient. He said it in a voice that seemed to indicate he had had to make similar questions a number of times.

“Know your place!” snapped Nerduin at the older elf. He clearly had a problem with how he was treated by someone who was supposed to serve him. “What am I missing then?” the cocky young noble asked in a voice of indifference.

“She is *Mala'd Jal*,” responded Ahnilr Moonfar. Her voice quivered with excitement. “A Guardian Spirit. Someone the goddess herself has touched and blessed and sent back to fight the evils that might threaten the elven race.”

“Fight?” asked Nerduin mockingly. “Look at her. She's tiny. What could she possibly have done to deserve the blessings of Loriel?”

There was an aura of disapproval in the room that the arrogant young noble missed – or chose to ignore. Skander and Cheid were both scowling at him while the two more sensible elves looked almost shocked to hear what he was saying.

“What proof do you have that she has even been blessed?” demanded Nerduin as he made his way towards Nala. “I'll grant you she looks exotic, even pretty, but that's hardly proof enough.” He patted Nala on the shoulder as he walked past her. “Maybe I'll take you back to the Kingdom as a play toy,” he whispered barely loud enough for only Nala to hear.

Nala's fingernails were digging into her palms. It seemed to be as she had feared. The elves in the kingdom were different. But such disrespect? What did he know? Nothing! He had no idea what she had been through. The rage boiled inside her.

Cheid was the first to notice what was happening. He slowly inched away from Nala.

“I say she's nothing more than one of those weird Forest Guardian types,” continued Nerduin with his back turned towards Nala. “They always do odd things. Rubbing dirt on themselves and dying their hair green doesn't seem past them..”

“Enough!” It was Nala's voice, but at the same time there was more to it. There was power in it.

Startled, Nerduin turned around. The air around Nala shimmered as if on a hot summer day and looked to be alive. There was a glow to her green eyes and her hair fluttered as if in a slight breeze. Her expression was that of cold rage.

Cheid gave Skander a worried glance. He saw concern on his mentors face. He felt it too. There was power in the room. Not the usual kind involved with magic, but something more raw and wild.

“What do you know of me? Of what I have been through?” Nala demanded from the noble and stepped towards him. He took a step back. “Were you there to see my loved one die? Were you there to see my parents get killed before my eyes?”

Nerduin tried to stammer an answer as he backed into a wall.

“Were you there to feel the pain of the sword entering my gut? Were you there to bury all the families and friends I grew up with?” Nala closed the distance between him and the arrogant noble. She grabbed a hold of his shirt.

“You dare question my choice for my tool? You dare to question *me*?” The voice was no longer Nala's. Still female, but it sounded alien and lacked the melody of Nala's voice. Everyone in the room felt the oppressing power that had invaded the space. It made breathing difficult and made you want to crawl under a rock to hide.

Skander, despite his vast experience, had trouble believing what he was seeing. The goddess Lorieel was manifesting herself through Nala. He could only hope the goddess knew the limits and did not force too much of herself into this plane. If she did, they would all die.

“You wanted proof. I have provided it,” said the voice. “Learn from this experience.”

The power was gone. The skin of everyone in the room tingled. There was an audible sigh of relief from around the room. Nerduin quickly inched away from Nala as she fell to her knees and sought support from the floor with her hands. She was breathing heavily and blood dripped from her nose onto the floor.

The first to reach Nala was the priestess. She knelt beside her. With shaking hands she took hold of her shoulders and helped her up. Together they hobbled across the room and the priestess carefully slipped Nala onto a seat. There was an expression of wonderment and excitement on the priestesses face. It was likely the first time she experienced the presence of her goddess in such a way.

“Well, I believe that settles the matter,” said Skander and coughed nervously. “Let us hope we don't need to experience a visit from her in a similar mood another time.” The old wizard gave the arrogant High Council member a stern look. He turned his attention to Nala.

Sprawled in the chair she seemed barely conscious. Her skin had turned pale and the priestess was having trouble containing her nosebleed. She was fussing over Nala like any mother would over their hurt child. To Skander it seemed a wonder she was even alive after that.

“Why don't we move her over to my bed? She'll need some rest,” he suggested.

Cheid helped the priestess move Nala while Skander took a seat behind his desk.

“Esteemed tower master, if you do not mind me asking, who is she?” asked Nisoen as he took a seat in front of Skander's desk. He looked rattled over the whole experience, though not as rattled as the arrogant youngster who was still trying to collect himself together by the door.

“She is Nala Temera, from the forest of Cerena,” responded Skander. There didn't seem to be any point in withholding information about her. Not after what had happened.

“Temera?” the old elf tasted the name. It seemed like he was trying to recollect something. “Not the daughter of Ameter Temera?” he finally asked.

Skander just nodded.

“I know him. A fine man. Did I hear right? She said her family was dead? Then he is..?”

“Dead,” said Skander. Nisoen looked genuinely sorrowful at hearing the news.

Cheid and the priestess emerged from Skander's sleeping chamber.

“She's asleep,” said the priestess as she and the apprentice wizard took their seats. Nerduin had finally managed to collect himself enough to take the final seat. He looked distraught and at the same time a bit embarrassed.

“As excited as I am this also worries me,” continued the priestess. “Her kind appear only in times of great need for our people. Are matters truly that

bad?”

“I'm not inclined to think so, but certainly there are things afoot that are cause for concern,” responded Skander and began explaining what he meant. He told them Nala's story and what happened in the forest of Cerena. The news hit the priestess and Nisoen hard. Nerduin was the only one who seemed indifferent to the story.

“What of the assassination of the ambassador?” demanded the young noble as Skander finished telling of Nala. “What of the involvement of your man in it?”

His two companions seemed ashamed of his behaviour.

“I assure you, my man was involved only in the capacity of having followed the culprits,” said Skander in a calm voice.

“Then you know who killed her?” asked Nisoen.

“Yes, but..”

“Why have they not been arrested then?” demanded Nerduin. “They can't be allowed to roam free after what they have done.”

“Because they are being watched in the hopes that they will lead us to their master, who is the real threat here,” explained Skander.

“And it is your man who is watching them?” asked Ahnilr.

Skander nodded.

“I assume you have some sort of plan?” asked Nisoen.

“I do, but I need your help for that. I need the help of Nala. We all need to work together if we are to succeed.” In his mind Skander had already decided Nerduin would play as small a part as possible. He did not seem the kind who could be trusted to do much of anything without turning it into a drama.

He laid out the rough idea he had in mind. Despite having arrived with only the purpose of gathering some more information and transporting the body of the ambassador back to their homeland, the elven delegation seemed eager to help. The talks went on well into the night, but despite that, Nala remained asleep in Skander's bed. The visit from the goddess had drained her of all energy.



Gareth walked through the dark corridor with uneasy thoughts. What

Dunn had said to him earlier in the day was still nagging him. The usual card evening could turn into a full out brawl if his fears came true and that he was walking straight into a trap set up just to catch him. The weight of his sword on his back brought a measure of confidence to him, but he knew that in such close quarters and against the men he was going to meet it would offer little protection.

He heard laughter echo down the corridor. It seemed they were in good spirits at least. He was not sure whether that was a good or a bad thing. They could well be laughing about what to do with his corpse afterwards.

Gareth stopped behind the door, hoping to eavesdrop on their conversation. They spoke in low tones so all he could hear was some muffled voices and a word here and there. What he did hear seemed to indicate nothing unusual. He shrugged his shoulders. Might as well jump off the cliff.

Gareth pushed open the door and entered the room. Everyone was there. Monster, Obsidian, Dayr and Carrigan. They greeted him with the usual enthusiasm.

“Ready to play some cards?” asked Gareth as he unstrapped his sword from his back and took his seat. He ensured the sword was handy in case of trouble.

“We've got something else in mind tonight, Gareth,” said Dayr.

“Really? Here I was feeling it was my lucky night today,” responded Gareth casually.

“It might be,” said Dayr. The others in the room had their focus on Gareth. “What do you know of this incident with the elven ambassador?”

Gareth sharpened up. The conversation seemed to be headed for dangerous waters. “Not much. They found her hung and gutted like a pig,” he tried to sound like he didn't care one way or the other. “They found some markings on her. What was it? Some cult of Deremoth?”

Dayr nodded. “What do you think about that?”

Gareth shrugged his shoulders. “One less elf in the world isn't going to ruin my day.”

“See? I told you. He's one cold bastard,” said Monster. “Just what we need.”

Gareth was surprised to hear the big man speak in his favour. He did not

think he had managed to worm his way that close to him. At least it seemed tonight was not about getting rid of him.

Dayr did not look convinced. "What we need is people we can trust. Can we trust you, Gareth?"

"As far as you can toss a gold coin," responded Gareth with a grin that seemed to tell that as long as there was gold involved, he did not care what was to be done.

Dayr glanced at Monster Dunn and the others.

"In most cases I'd trust a man who's after gold more than a man who's after his religion," said Obsidian. "At least you know his god won't tell him to stab you in the back."

Dayr considered the situation for a moment before continuing, "Gareth, you feel up to working with us?"

"Towards what end?" asked Gareth.

"Resurrecting Deremoth. Killing a few elves. Good gold in it for you," offered Dayr. He tossed a pouch of coins to Gareth. He weighed it in his hand. There was more gold there than he'd earn in three months at the arena. Good gold indeed.

Gareth gave the men in the room the most wicked grin he could muster, "Who needs killing?"

Chapter 12

*I*t was early morning when Nala began to rouse from her unconscious state. It took her a moment to realize where she was after carefully inching her eyes open. She was laying in a bed in a room she had not seen before. Her head felt like someone had been swinging around inside it with a sledgehammer. She felt weak and groggy. She noted the curtains that had been drawn before the window, allowing only a small sliver of light into the room.

She cranked herself up from the bed and wobbled to the curtains. It took considerable effort from her not to fall flat on her face on the stone floor. She ripped open the curtains and shivered as the full force of the sunlight hit her. A small voice escaped her lips. She tried to expose as much of her skin as possible without stripping naked, though the temptation to do so was considerable. She figured the place was not right for that.

She could see the palace ground through the window. It seemed extravagant compared to the city she had walked through yesterday. There were large gardens and even small lakes. The buildings themselves were full of intricate details and decorations and instead of being made from grey stone, they were made a white marble and other much finer stones. She could see small figures running in formation on the large parade grounds.

There was a knock on the door. "Are you awake, Nala? May I come in?" came a question. It was Skander.

Of course. This was his bed chamber, realized Nala. "Yes, come on in." Her voice quivered, but carried on strong enough for the old wizard to hear.

There was a concerned look on his face as he entered the room, though it lightened up as he saw Nala standing by the window. She still looked pale, but at least she was conscious and out of bed under her own power. "Oh, you're up. Good. We feared the experience might have taken more out of you."

Nala smiled weakly, "I'm up, but no thanks to you. Closing me in a dark room. What were you thinking?"

Skander looked uncertain what he was being accused of, but soon

remembered the details of her story. “Oh, right. You need sunlight.” He actually managed to look embarrassed at overlooking such an important piece of information about her.

He took the single chair in the room and moved it into the sunspot so Nala could sit down and recover. “How do you feel?” he asked as Nala settled in the chair.

“Like someone probed my brain through my nose with the handle of an dagger,” replied Nala in a sour voice.

“Do you remember what happened?” asked Skander as he sat down on the edge of his bed.

Nala closed her eyes and leaned back in the chair, “She got angry.”

“That much is clear,” said Skander dryly. “The question is why? And why did she manifest herself through you so violently?”

“Proof was demanded, proof was given.” It was all Nala could muster as an answer. Her memory was hazy at best over the details of what had happened during the event. She had been gently pushed aside into a small corner of her mind while the goddess took control. The cold rage of the goddess had not touched her in full force, but it had been enough to make her seal tighter the little corner that was still hers. She knew the goddess had tried to be as gentle as she could with her body, but it was impossible to be used in such a way by a power like her and come out of it unscathed. She counted herself lucky a monster headache and a momentary weakness was all that had happened to her.

“Could it happen again?” pondered Skander.

Nala shrugged her shoulders weakly. “Loriel does what she wants, though personally I hope she has the patience to stay out of things.”

“She did seem less benign than I had thought,” Skander pointed out.

“I've felt the warmth of her love,” said Nala. She did not take offence at Skanders observation about her goddess. “I've felt her rage. She really does love us. It is that love that brings out her rage against those who would see us hurt.”

Skander assumed she was talking about Loriel's love for the elves. “Then why did she direct her rage towards Nerduin?”

“Because he was being an ass? Because sometimes the open palm of a

parent brings the point across better than mere words?”

“Mm..perhaps,” Skander seemed reluctant to admit that a goddess might not be as different than any other being.

“What happened to the delegation?” asked Nala. “How did Nerduin seem after what..happened?”

“The delegations has left. I've arranged matters so that they will help us. As for Nerduin..” Skander paused for a moment and hesitated. “He did not seem to learn anything. You might want to keep away from him as much as you can.”

Nala snorted. “As if I'd want to spend time with that arrogant donkey.”

“Ahnir was quite reluctant to leave you here. To her you are perhaps the holiest thing she has ever faced,” noted Skander.

“I'm not a thing,” snapped Nala.

“No, of course not,” said Skander in an apologetic voice. “Poor choice of words. What I mean is, you should know that there are those of your kind who believe in what you are and will help you.”

“I know,” replied Nala quietly. Her mood seemed to grow gloomier.

“Do you feel up to eating something?” asked Skander. A change in topic seemed to be in order.

“A bit of bread and cheese would be nice.” She had not realized how hungry she felt. Her stomach let out a growl, as if awakened by the thought of food.

A small smile crossed Skander's face. He stood up and patted the young elf on her shoulder as he passed by. “Rest up. There doesn't seem to be much happening today, but knowing our situation, tomorrow might well be very different.”

He closed the door behind him, leaving Nala to soak in the sunlight.



Gareth had quite a headache himself, though his was self induced by too much drinking. He did not want to get up, but knew there were things that needed doing. He cursed to himself. His new found companions had taken his joining as an excuse to go out on a binge. Even Dayr had joined in. No doubt all of them were trying to decide whether getting out of bed was a reasonable venture

today.

He had learned a lot as the evening had progressed and the strong drinks had loosened tongues. They had spoken freely, after all, Gareth was one of them now. There was a lot that Skander needed to know. Most prominently that Derian was coming to Ramyn.

Gareth grunted as he pulled himself up from the bed. The hangover imp was hammering away at his temples. The single window of his room let in a meagre amount of light through its dirty, misty glass. Just enough for Gareth to fumble around, wash himself in a vat of stale water from yesterday and find a clean set of clothes.

“At least I’m not throwing up,” he muttered to himself as he strapped his sword to his back. He opened the door and stepped out to the shadowy street.

Gareth lived on the first layer below ground. The part he lived in was the more grimy swath of the city, but he still considered it good enough for himself. Despite the fake sky above and the ventilation ducts, the air in the lower layer was stale and filled with pungent odours and it seemed shadier than the layer above.

He made his way towards the nearest spiralling ramp that led up. There were beggars to avoid and keeping an eye on your coin pouch was a good idea. Never knew when someone might bump into you and cut it loose. He was used to being on alert, even while hungover.

He needed to get word to Skander. He wasn't supposed to meet him until tomorrow and he was certain this was information the old wizard would want immediately in his hands.

Gareth sighed. What a pain in the ass the whole job was becoming. Of course, that was how all of the work Skander threw his way worked out. He wondered why he never managed to say no to him, despite all the past experiences. He knew the answer without much thinking. Skander always offered a fair pay and his jobs had actual meaning to them. They shaped and changed the empire of Ramyn in small, but often significant ways. Usually the change was for the better as well, though a few disasters had blemished the path sometimes.

Gareth navigated the narrow streets. There were few shops on this layer

and those that he passed were barely more than stands embedded into the building walls with ragged canvas acting as a roof. They offered basic food stuff, but nothing fancy. All the good stuff was sold on the layer above.

People gave Gareth way as he stepped onto the spiralling ramp that led to the layer above. He moved fast, even if it meant more sweat from his hungover body. He figured a little sweating was the best cure for what ailed him. That, and a pint of ale. He made quick progress and soon popped out of the tunnel and into the much fresher air of the commercial layer.

He took a deep breath and headed for *The Bull's Head*. On his way he stopped by an alley between a bakery store and a butchers shop. He was greeted by a young boy who might well have been the dirtiest one in the whole world. You couldn't really determine anything about him, other than that he had blue eyes, a nose and a mouth. Everything else was buried under ragged clothes, dirt and long hair.

Gareth slipped the boy a silver coin. "Tell Skander I need to see him. Today. I'll be at the *Bull's Head*."

The boy grinned. "Will do, Gareth, sir." And off he ran.

He was a good boy. Reliable. Of course, few people that worked for Skander were anything but. He was a convenient messenger that few people would pay attention to. Another street urchin blended to the crowd in Ramyn like a turd in a dung heap.

Satisfied that word would reach Skander, Gareth made his way to his favourite inn. The arena did not call him today. He doubted Dayr and his buddies would be out of bed until night fall and even then they'd think he was still passed out in his own bed. There was no practice scheduled for today so all he'd have to do to pass the time would be playing cards.

He wondered if he'd even return to the arena. With the news he had there might not be any need for it. One could always hope.

The Bull's Head was emptier than Gareth had anticipated, but less noise suited him just fine today.

"Hey, Gareth," Riligh greeted him as he made his way to the counter. The innkeeper eyed the large man. "You look like shit."

"Thanks," muttered Gareth. "I feel like it, too. Got anything good for a hangover?"

Riligh chuckled, "So that's what it is? I've got just the thing for you." The big man turned to the line of bottles behind him and seemed to mix several of them together in a large pint. "Here you go. Bottoms up."

Gareth eyed the brownish liquid with suspicion, but raised the pint in salute and gulped it down in one go. He spluttered and coughed as he finished. "What the hell was that stuff?" he demanded. A shiver ran down his spine.

"Best you don't know. You'll feel much better in a bit," replied Riligh with a wide grin.

"Given what that swill tasted like I'd be surprised if I don't feel worse," muttered Gareth.

"It ain't medicine unless it tastes bad," said Riligh.

"An excuse lazy healers who can't be bothered to do a spot of good throw around to shut complainers mouths."

"You get real cynical when you're hungover, you know that?" said Riligh as he wiped clean a mug with a white rag.

"Yeah, I know," replied Gareth with a glint in his eyes. "But I'm a happy drunk so it balances out."

Riligh chuckled. "Only if you spend your hangover with the same people."

Gareth shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe I'll feel more positive after eating something."

"Just leave a coin and I'll bring you something," said Riligh and shooed Gareth from the counter, though not before putting a tankard of beer in his hands. Seemed he also believed in curing a hangover with what it had been gotten with.

Gareth found himself a calm corner table and settled down to nurse his beer as well as the throbbing headache. A waitress brought him some fresh bread, a chunk of cheese and a bowl of soup. Gareth took his time in enjoying the food. He was in no hurry and the food didn't seem too eager to make friends with his stomach. In any case it would be hours before Skander received his message and arrived.

He began feeling better. It was questionable whether it was the mixture Riligh had made him drink or the food and the beer he had enjoyed. He began to think Riligh might have pulled his leg with that one.

Not having anything better to do, Gareth leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. A bit of rest seemed the best he could do for himself now. There weren't many people in the common room so it was unlikely anyone would bother him even if he nodded off for a bit.

He woke up to a huffing Skander pinching his ear.

"Ow! Alright! I'm awake," yelled Gareth. He had to blink a few times to get the water out of his eyes and focus them. The old wizard took a seat opposite to him.

"So, what's so important?" demanded Skander. "I've got a woman in my bedroom that needs my attention."

Gareth raised an eyebrow and grinned.

"Not that sort of woman," snapped Skander. "She's the daughter of some dear friends. I'll tell you more about it later. She's a part of this whole affair so you'll meet her sooner or later."

Gareth sighed in his mind. More people involved. Seemed matters were getting more and more complicated.

"So, what news do you have?" demanded Skander for a second time. He looked impatient. Must be some woman, thought Gareth.

"Last night they accepted me as a part of their group," said Gareth. "I'm a fully paid member of the Blades now."

The expression on Skander's face diluted into one of approval. "Finally. Anything else?"

"Yeah. Derian is coming to Ramyn."

That caught the old wizard's attention. He leaned forward. "When?" There was a mixture of concern and excitement in his voice.

"Even Dayr didn't know the exact day yet. Could be tomorrow, could be three days from now."

The look of disappointment was evident on Skander's face. "Any chance you'll find out the date before he arrives?"

“Maybe. I'm not certain how much Dayr shares with his own people. Could be Derian hasn't even told Dayr,” said Gareth.

“Try. Meanwhile, we have our own plan we'll start putting forward.”

“What plan?” asked Gareth. He had not been told of any plan beyond spying on the Blades working from the arena.

“I'll tell you tomorrow. Come to the tower. You'll meet the other members you'll be working with.”

“I'll come if I can. I may have this day off, but tomorrow is a whole other deal,” replied Gareth.

“Hmm..indeed. We can't afford to have you leave the group just yet. Staying on the inside takes priority.” Skander paused to think. “If you can't make it, I'll meet you here in the evening and fill you in.”

Gareth felt his hopes of the job being over crushed. Stuck sucking up to those brutes for who knows how long. He cursed in his mind. Last time I'll take a job from Skander, he promised himself, knowing it to be untrue the moment he thought of it.

“Very well,” said Gareth.

“Was there anything else?” asked Skander. He seemed anxious to leave.

“Not really. You go ahead and go look after that woman of yours.” The voice of Gareth implied he did not fully buy the explanation Skander had offered.

Skander scowled at him, but said nothing more as he rose and left the table. Gareth ordered some more beer.



Nala was starting to feel better. The sunlight worked wonders even in small doses and the food had helped regain some of her strength as well. She had progressed from the bedroom into Skander's study under her own power. Maybe she'd make it to the inn for the night.

Skander had left to attend to a mystery message he had received. He had not said much about, but Nala had not expected him to. She had already learned the old wizard would talk when he deemed it suitable and not a moment before. She thought it a sensible approach to things given what they were involved with.

Cheid was engrossed in reading some book about portals. He had spent some time trying to explain it to Nala, but it went well beyond what she was ready to comprehend. She had thought herself knowledgeable in the arts, but she had been taught in practice. The theories those who made research in the area were complex and something she had not been exposed to that much. She was fine with it. What was the use of knowing how to scribble down complex formulas when you could just do what you needed to be done?

She had spent some time trying to find an interesting book from the shelves that lined the walls, but had found many to be written in languages she did not know or the subject matter to be equally complex as the portal business that had Cheid's head in the clouds. So she had taken a nap.

The dream she saw had been a distressing one. Lorie had been taking over her body again, but this time she was swept away into her instead of being gently pushed into a safe corner. She was lost. Nothing of her was left.

She woke to Cheid shaking her by the shoulder. She had been mumbling out loud something incomprehensible in a distressed voice. There was genuine concern on the young man's face.

"Are you alright?" he asked Nala.

"Just a dream," mumbled Nala as a response. Perhaps it had been only a dream, but it had shaken her up none the less. She knew well enough that it could have just as easily have been reality.

"Skander back yet?" she asked just to get something else on her mind.

"No," replied Cheid. "Could be he won't return until the evening."

"I need a bath," pondered Nala out loud to herself. The dried sweat of last night had her feeling dirty all over.

"Skander has his own bath.." started Cheid, but went silent before finishing the sentence as he saw the look Nala was giving him. He quickly shifted his suggestion. "The inn you're staying at has quite a nice bathtub I hear. Do you need any help getting back there?"

"I think I can manage on my own," said Nala. She was feeling much better and she felt like a bit of time on her own would do her good. There were thoughts she needed to sort out.

“Alright. Just remember the meeting tomorrow.” Cheid turned his attention back to his book.

“How could I forget?” asked Nala dryly as she left Skander's quarters and stepped onto the transport disc. That arrogant noble would be there along with the rest of the elven envoy. The big man Cheid had told her about would probably be there too. Skander had something big planned.

“The entrance hall,” said Nala to get the disc moving down.

The face of a young elf shimmered into view. It had a concerned expression. The disc started to slowly descent. Nala glared at the face. The fascination of the elemental spirit seemed to continue.

“What?” she finally demanded from it. The face had not taken its eyes off her.

We felt it. It worries us.

It was like a whisper carried to her by the wind. She could barely make it out.

“You felt what?”

Her. In you. We worry for you.

So the elemental had felt Lorieel seeping into her. Why would it worry them?

“I'm fine. There's no need to worry,” said Nala out loud. The shimmering face seemed to frown.

“Why do you even care?” she asked.

You are not unlike us. Sister..

What was that supposed to mean? Nala rubbed her temples. She was not in the mood for cryptic messages from a creature that was not even of the same plane as she was.

“I'm not your sister,” she snapped at the face. “Now just get me where I want to go.”

The expression on the face turned almost sorrowful.

You do not understand.

“Damn right I don't,” muttered Nala. The rest of the way down went without any more cryptic messages from the elemental. As she was stepping off the disc a warm breeze enveloped her, almost like a hug.

We are here. Call us if you need to. We will come.

She turned to look back and saw the shimmering face smile at her before disappearing up to the floor above. She tried to make sense of it, but could not make heads or tails of what had been said. As far as she knew, the elemental spirits operating the transport discs could not leave them for anything so how could she call one even if she wanted to? And why was one even talking to her? Did they talk to others or was this just another manifestation of their interest in her?

Nala shook her head. There was too much happening too fast. She wished she could talk with her parents, but doing so would sap more strength from her and she needed everything she could muster just to get back to the inn right now. Maybe she'd have enough rest tonight to be able to do it tomorrow.

By the time she reached the inn she was thanking the goddess that it was so close. She doubted she could have made it much farther without embarrassing herself by collapsing on the street.

The innkeeper arranged for the bath. Servants carried the tub straight to her room and hot water was brought up by the buckets to fill it up. A girl wanted to stay and wash her back, but she shooed her away. She wasn't *that* helpless yet.

After removing her clothing, she slipped into the bath and sighed out of pleasure. She rested her head on the edge of the bathtub and closed her eyes. After soaking for a while she soaped herself and took great care to scrub herself clean. There was barely any heat left in the water when she got out, dried herself and put on some clothes. She called the servants who emptied the tub and carried it away.

She had had time to work through some things that had been bothering her. It was clear to her there would be further problems from that arrogant young High Council member. It seemed best to try and stay away from him. She could only hope Skander had not paired them up in his plans.

From what she had heard the two other members of the envoy seemed much more sensible. The priestess might even be worth the time to get to know better. She could probably offer her some insight into her current state of being.

There was still quite a bit of confusion in her about it.

As for what ever Skander had planned, she could not really form an opinion since she did not know what the plan was. That would become evident tomorrow. No doubt she had a part to play in it, why would he otherwise have asked her to join in the briefing about it?

Nala brushed her hair. It was starting to regain a deeper shade of green once more. She took it as a good sign. Perhaps tomorrow would be a more productive day that this one had been.

Chapter 13

The chambers of Skander seemed small for the crowd that had been gathered in it, especially due to the strained relations between some of the people there. The three elves were there along with Cheid. Nala had taken over a corner of the room for herself and tried to stay out of the way of Nerduin. The young noble seemed to have the same desire, though he did make some contempt filled glances at Nala. Clearly what had happened the previous day had not phased him.

Nisoen did not seem overly concerned with what had happened nor did he show any signs of increased interest towards Nala. He remained cool and distant to her.

Ahnir on the other hand fussed over to Nala the moment she saw her. She was anxious to hear how Nala was doing and, after hearing that she was doing well, a flood of questions was launched that left Nala feeling like a caged animal. The priestess wanted to know everything; how it had felt, what she had heard, learned, was there some divine wisdom she could offer her. The answers Nala tried to provide were not very convincing.

Skander waited, hoping Gareth would make it to the meeting, but as time went on it became obvious he would not. So he started the meeting and fully exposed his plan. It was a simple plan that would hopefully draw out Derian, but it involved a degree of risk for Nala that Skander was reluctant to shove on her shoulders, but he saw no other choice.

Nala seemed unconcerned when she heard what was expected of her. She knew the danger it would put her in, but it seemed like the best course of action. What did bother her was the fact she'd need to put on some fancier clothes and parade around in public while wearing them. She was most used to her plain tunic and trousers.

Nerduin did not take kindly to the plan, mostly because he was sidelined into playing practically no part in it. That seemed to suit everyone else just fine

and his objections were over ruled despite his high position. He fell into a silent sulk while the others honed the details of the plan.

By mid day all had been settled and the elven delegation departed shortly after Ahnilr had taken a few measurements from Nala so proper clothing could be arranged for her. Only Cheid, Skander and Nala remained in the wizard's quarters.

“Well, that could have gone worse,” said Skander. He was clearly happy with himself.

“Maybe for some,” muttered Nala.

“Come now, surely wearing a dress can not be that bad?” inquired Cheid.

“It's not the dress. It's that I have to wear it in public,” said Nala. She felt uncomfortable enough just taking down the hood of her cloak. Now she'd have to walk the streets in a dress that would expose much more of her than just the colour of her hair.

“Well, you did agree to it,” reminded Cheid. Nala glared at him.

“Alright you two. Save the complaining for another time,” said Skander. “Nala, I believe most will find you a delightful sight in a proper dress.”

“That's what I'm afraid of,” muttered the young elf under her breath.

“You need to attract attention,” continued Skander without acknowledging her little words of rebellion. “The whole plan rests on that.”

“I know,” said Nala in a resigned voice.

Skander nodded in approval. “Now then, do you want to come with me this evening so you can meet Gareth?” The question was directed at Nala.

“Better I meet him now than when I need to be killing people,” came a reply from her.

“Indeed,” said Skander dryly.

The rest of the day went by quickly. Skander had his usual pile of papers to go through and Cheid was delving deeper into the book he had spent the entire yesterday on.

Nala found herself a quiet nook and settled down. She took out her swords, closed her eyes and tried to make contact with her parents. It took much longer than when she had been closer to home, but they came none the less.

"I'm sorry," said Nala in her mind to her parents. "I've disappointed you."

"There is nothing to apologize for," came the voice of her mother. The disapproval she had sensed before was gone. "You did what you thought right. You seem to have learned from it. In the end that is all anyone can do."

Nala smiled a bit. Her mother was as always; easily forgiving, always supporting.

"What do you think of this plan Skander has come up with?" asked Nala of her parents spirits.

"It is risky," came a reply in her fathers voice. "Yet it has a good chance of working."

"Your part is important," came her mothers voice. "Take care in how you do things."

Satisfied that her parents approved of the plan Nala ventured on to other matters. "Is Nerduin an exception or are the elves from the Great Forest all like him?"

There was a moment of silence before her mother spoke. "Nerduin is a noble and a member of the High Council. He is young. His success at such an age has developed himself a personality that leaves much to be desired. Certainly there are those who look down upon us Forest Guardians, but most will show us proper respect and be courteous."

"Do not let people like that get you down," came the voice of her father. It was a strained voice. The time for communication was running out. "The work we did at the forest was important. It still is important and needed. Take pride in the fact you were a part of it."

"I will," whispered Nala. She felt the throbbing headache closing in. "I wish we could talk more," she thought to her parents.

"Take care. Be careful," came the last words from her parents.

Nala let go of her swords and breathed in deeply. She rubbed her temples, hoping to alleviate the headache that was coming over her. How she wished there was more time to talk. She promised herself that if she ever returned home again she would spend a lot more time conversing with her parents. There was still a lot she could learn from them.

The thought of home struck her. It seemed a long time ago that she had last thought about it. What would she do after matters had been settled with the Blades? Would she return to the forest by herself? The thought seemed a distant one to her. In honesty, she felt it more likely her life would end before she had to worry about returning home. Perhaps not in this matter with the Blades, but she was certain the goddess would have further plans for her. No rest for the chosen ones of a god.

She sighed and leaned back against the wall. Before realizing it, she had dozed off. Using the swords strained her and a bit of sleep helped her recover that much quicker.

She woke to Skander shaking her by the shoulder.

"It's time we go," said the old wizard.

Nala nodded. She stood up and stretched herself with almost a cat like intensity. She fastened the swords around her waist and followed Skander out of his quarters.

An elven face shimmered into view as soon as Nala stepped onto the transport disc next to Skander. It had its gaze fixed on her with an expression of adornment.

"The reception floor," instructed Skander and the disc began to lower with the usual small gust of wind.

You are better?

"Did you hear that?" asked Skander, looking around.

"Yes," came a reply from Nala directed equally at both questions. She sounded annoyed. "It's these elementals. They seem to have a thing about me. They talk to me every time get onto one of these discs."

Skander raised an eyebrow, "The elemental spirits talk to you?"

"Not by my own choice," said Nala.

"What do they say?"

"It's mostly nonsense. I haven't been able to figure out much of anything of their meaning." Nala sounded somewhat frustrated.

You'll understand in time.

Skander frowned.

“See what I mean?” said Nala.

“Most curious.” Skander seemed genuinely intrigued by the whole thing. “They sometimes manifest a face to a select few, but talking?” He shook his head. “That's something I haven't heard of.”

“What do you think it means?” asked Nala.

“I don't know,” admitted Skander. “We'll have to talk about it in more detail once matters settle down.”



Nala found *The Bull's Head* to be a notch below the inn she was staying at, but still a very respectable place. She could see the appeal of the place. There was ample room to sit, places were kept clean and, judging by the smell, the food wasn't that bad. There seemed to be a variety of drinks available as well.

Skander led her to a corner table and motioned for her to take a seat. He sat opposite of her.

“Seems Gareth isn't here yet. We should get some drinks while we wait. My treat.” The old wizard winked and called a waitress. He ordered a beer for himself and some wine for Nala. As the order arrived and Nala took the first sip of the wine, she found it to be of higher quality than she had expected. Maybe there was more to the place than appearances let on.

The door opening caught her attention. In walked the largest man she had ever seen. He looked to be nearly two feet taller than her and the sword strapped to his back was close to her in length. Despite his size, the man looked friendly and walked straight to the pair sitting at the table.

“About time,” said Skander as the large man sat at the head of the table.

Nala studied the sword the big man set resting against the wall next to her. It was beyond her how anyone could lift the thing, let alone swing it around with any sort of efficiency, but then she glimpsed at the man and realized that if there was someone like that, she was looking at him right now.

“Dayr had a bug up his ass all day. Kept all of us training without breaks. Guess he wanted to make up for the lost day,” replied the big man. His voice reminded Nala of a distant thunder. The gaze of his brown eyes happened upon

her.

“This the woman you were talking about yesterday?” asked Gareth of Skander and tried to peer under Nala's hood. All he got glimpse of was a lock of greenish hair. He could tell she was small. So small he found himself almost afraid that if he touched her, he'd break something.

Skander glared at the big man, “Yes. She's here so she doesn't accidentally stab you when the time comes.”

Gareth grinned, exposing his corner teeth. “I don't allow that until the third time I meet a woman.”

“Who said you'd have any say in it?” The melody of her voice was all Gareth needed to hear to know she was an elf. There was something very alluring in how she pronounced the words of the common trade language.

Skander stepped in before Gareth could respond. “Lets talk about the plan before you two start a fight.”

Gareth grunted and settled comfortably in his chair. Skander explained the plan. Nala spent the time sipping her wine and observing the man who would quite likely have her life in his hands over the next few days. Skander had absolute trust in him and Nala did trust his judgement, but she could not help but be slightly worried.

Gareth had few questions after the plan had been explained to him. He though it was mad and he said as much, but Skander held firm that it would work and the life he was putting in greatest risk would not be extinguished.

“I still think you're being a right old bastard putting her at risk like that, but I'll do my best to keep her alive,” said Gareth firmly. He directed the hint of anger in his words towards Skander. “Now if you'll only tell me how I'll tell her apart from the other elves?”

Nala snorted and pulled out a lock of her hair from under her hood and showed it to Gareth. “I'm not exactly inconspicuous. You'll know who's who.”

“I see your point,” conceded the big man.

“Is there anything else?” asked Skander.

“Don't think so. We'll see how things go tomorrow,” said Gareth.

Skander nodded.

“How about some beer?” suggested the big man. “Maybe more wine for the lady?” He smiled at Nala.

Skander looked to Nala to see what she thought. There was a slight nod.

“Why not?” he replied.

Gareth called for a waitress and the group moved on to talk of lighter matters.



The dress Nala wore was more modest than she had feared, but it still made her feel uncomfortable. It did not help that she was gathering a lot of looks from the people she and her entourage passed by.

The dress was made of a fine green and white cloth. It felt smooth against her skin, sliding along it with little effort, unlike the coarse tunic she usually wore. It left her left shoulder exposed and wrapped around her chest almost like a strangling snake. It continued on into a long skirt that left her ample room to move. Despite not being used to wearing such clothes she found her movement wasn't impeded that much by the hem of the skirt. Her two swords were still with her, hanging from a thin belt that was prodded up only by the curve of her hips.

Ahnir had spent the morning combing her hair. A few locks had been braided so they lined her face while most of her thick, greenish hair flowed freely down her back.

The whole attire was set up to highlight the best of her features.

Nerduin had certainly noticed her, but Nala was convinced the attention he wished he was giving her was the kind she would, much to the young nobles disappointment, meet with sword in hand. It was fortunate the young noble had been left behind with Skander.

Nisoen seemed as indifferent as ever. He seemed more concerned with playing out his part as Nala's personal guard than anything else. Ahnir was playing the part of her lady companion.

They were headed for the arena. That was where the ambassador of the elves had visited and it was no doubt the place where she had unwittingly become a target. It was the perfect place to make Nala's appearance as visible as

possible for the Blades operating in the city. The plan was for her to go in and feint interest in hiring a few gladiators for a private showing.

The arena was an impressive building even in Nala's eyes, though it was diminished greatly by what went on inside. She had been told stories by Gareth and she found the practice utterly barbaric.

She gathered herself and strutted in, trying to project an aura of confidence before herself. The two elves followed her, doing their best to fit their roles.

A few questions to passers by and several dark corridors later they found themselves faced with perhaps the most disgusting looking man they would ever see. It was hard to believe he was the one responsible for all the gladiators and renting them out. It was harder still to believe he was the leader of the Blades in Ramyn. At least if Gareth was to be believed.

He squinted as he saw Nala. She could swear a momentary look of shock passed his face, but it was gone too quickly for her to be certain.

“Greetings, fine lady,” said the man and bowed. Small bits of something fell from his hair. Nala shuddered. She did not want to know what. “My name is Dayr. I hear you're looking to hire a few gladiators for a private showing.”

“That is correct,” said Nala and forced a small smile. The circumstances were making it difficult to be nice. “Four of your finest.”

Dayr raised an eyebrow. “Expensive.”

“Money isn't an issue,” replied Nala.

“You'll forgive me for being blunt, my lady, but that is a bold claim for someone I don't know,” said Dayr in a voice with distinct distrust.

“My name is Nala Temera.” She motioned for Ahnilr, who came forward and produced a heavy pouch from the folds of her dress. Gold coins jingled inside as she passed it to Dayr. The man weighed the pouch in his hand. “And that is proof of my claim.”

Reluctantly, Dayr nodded. “Indeed it is, my lady. May I ask what sort of an event you are looking these gladiators for?”

“A welcoming party. I hear gladiators are quite popular in parties,” said Nala in a voice that dripped of ignorance.

“Ah, yes, the nobility has found them quite entertaining,” replied Dayr.

“You are new to the city, then, my lady?”

“Oh, yes. I'm the new elven ambassador to Ramyn. Arrived only a few days ago.”

Dayr shook his head, feigning sorrow. “A shame what happened to your predecessor, my lady. Truly.”

“You know anything about it?” asked Nala in an innocent voice. She observed the filthy man closely.

“Me?” asked Dayr in a voice that seemed sincere in its surprise. “By the gods, my lady, no decent human being would have anything to do with something like that.”

“You did meet her,” stated Nala bluntly. That much she knew.

“Only under the same circumstances as I am meeting you, my lady,” came a quick response from Dayr. Too quick. Nala eyed the filthy man with scorn.

“Shall we go see the gladiators? I have just the men suitable for your party,” Dayr said and hobbled down a corridor to escapes Nala's eyes. The group followed him into a large chamber with a sand floor. There was an assortment of training aids there; straw men, wooden poles, heavy logs to build strength. Four men were there training.

Nala immediately recognized Gareth, who was swinging that huge blade of his with his upper body naked. He was even more impressive looking without his tunic. The other three she did not know, but after observing their training for a bit she had to admit they were skilled and Dayr had indeed brought her to four of his finest.

The smallest of them swung his blades with such ease and speed that Nala felt dizzy after watching him for a while. Facing such a man would be troublesome. The dark skinned man and the monstrous man, who almost rivalled Gareth in size, were exchanging blows with their blades, sending sparks flying. Their technique seemed flawless and there was immense strength behind their blows. Nala thought it unlikely she'd be able to parry a blow from either man.

All four of the men gave her and her companions looks. Gareth was the one who made most of the glances. He seemed to direct them especially towards Nala. She gave the man a small smile as a reward.

The looks from the other men were much less benign. They were a mix of apathy, hatred and hostility. It made Nala feel uncomfortable, but she bore through it. Maintaining appearances was key now.

“Do you find them acceptable?” enquired Dayr after letting Nala and her companions have a good look at the four men and their training.

“They should do,” admitted Nala. She found herself almost wishing the party was real and she'd get to see all four men perform. Sadly, the show would turn out to be real and much more personal.

“Excellent,” said Dayr in a voice dripping with honey. “When will you be needing them?”

“When was it again?” asked Nala of her companions, feigning bad memory.

“In two days, my lady,” said Ahnilr.

“Right. Two days it is,” said Nala.

“That shouldn't be a problem,” said Dayr. “Where are they to come and when?”

“Rosewood lane. Just before they light the street lamps,” instructed Nala.

“Nice neighbourhood, my lady.” The complement from Dayr seemed genuine.

“It's passable,” conceded Nala and looked around absent mindedly. She had visited the place just before they departed for the arena. It was located on the south-east portion of the central island, on the same level as the arena was. It was an area with many similar, high end buildings. It was an anomaly among the much plainer areas of the island, brought about by the success of some merchants of ancient times. A noble friend of Skander's owned the building and had allowed them use of it in this plan. The garden had won Nala over. She had wanted to stay there for an eternity.

“Is there anything else?” asked Nala in a strained voice. She wanted to get away from the filthy man.

“I believe everything has been agreed on and the advance payment is done. Allow me to show you and you companions out, my lady,” offered Dayr.

“No need,” said Nala quickly. “We can find our own way.”

“Very well, my lady,” said Dayr, sounding slightly disappointed.

Nala hurried down the corridors she remembered until she emerged outside the arena and faced the chatter of the central market. She breathed in deeply.

“Are you alright?” asked Ahnilr. She sounded concerned.

“I’m fine,” replied Nala. “Staying close to the stench of that man for so long was a strain. Fresh air helps.”

“We’d smell better if we had rolled in a pig pen,” muttered Nisoen. Dayr had been enough to unsettle even the experienced soldier that he was.

Nala laughed. It was a genuine laugh that rang as cleanly as a brass bell.

“We should hurry. Skander is waiting for us at the house,” said Nisoen.

“Do you think we made a good enough appearance?” asked Nala in a slightly worried voice as they walked through the streets.

“We can only hope,” replied Nisoen.



Dayr was busy picking out scraps of food from his hair. How the bits of food ended up there would have baffled anyone looking to find out, but few would find appeal in such an venture. Dayr never stopped to wonder. He had other things in mind than personal hygiene. In the solitude of his chambers that rivalled its denizen in disgust, Dayr pondered the happenings of that day in the dim light of a candle.

The appearance of the green haired witch would complicate things. Anyone who had even a modicum of knowledge of the struggle between Deremoth and Lorie would have recognized her for what she was. A Guardian Spirit. She was certain to throw rocks at their plans. He had already feared the worst when the little bitch had strutted into the arena, but after talking to her for a bit Dayr had become convinced she did not know she was talking to the very enemy she was looking for. She was still grasping at empty air, hoping to catch something.

“We need to kill her,” muttered Dayr to himself. “Do her like that other elf.”

“Kill who?” came a voice from behind him.

Dayr spun around and squinted into the darkness. He saw the outlines of a robe wearing figure.

“Who’s there?” he demanded and inched his hand towards the dagger he

had on his belt.

"I'm disappointed, Dayr," said the amused voice. "I'd have expected you to remember me." The figure stepped into the light and pulled down his hood.

Derian!

Dayr grew pale and fumbled down to his knees. "Forgive me! I was deep in thought and did not realize.."

Derian waved his hand dismissively to silence him. He looked around with an expression of disgust. He wondered how Dayr was still alive and not dead from the many diseases that no doubt permeated the filthy room.

"Who do we need to kill?" asked Derian.

Dayr licked his lips. Nervously, he said, "Um..my lord..a Guardian Spirit has appeared."

Derian snapped his attention to the grovelling pile of filth before him. "Are you certain?" he demanded passionately.

"I talked to her myself..I saw her. I have no doubt, my lord." Dayr managed to steady his voice and sound convincing.

"Tell me about her," demanded Derian with a passion in his voice that could have bent steel.

Dayr did his best to describe Nala and managed to do an admirable job of it. Enough so that Derian felt an uncomfortable familiarity with what he was being told. "Did she give you her name?" he demanded.

"She introduced herself as Nala Temera," replied Dayr.

"Temera? Are you certain?" The way Derian asked the question made it abundantly clear this was important.

"Absolutely." replied Dayr steadily.

Derian paced around the room. So the young elf had survived and become something more. The pieces began to fall in place in his mind. Her appearance was the likely explanation to how two members of the Blades were found dead in Cerena. This time she would be dealt with properly.

"You are right. She must be dealt with. Harshly and quickly." Derian stopped and turned his attention to Dayr once again. "Do you know where she is?"

“She was looking to hire a few gladiators for a party so she willingly gave me the address where she will be in two nights. Still, I had her followed just to see what she does.”

“Good. Good.” Derian started to pace around again. “Despite your other deficiencies, you have always been an efficient man, Dayr. It is why I chose you to run things in Ramyn. You can think and you're careful.”

“Thank you, my lord.” There was genuine emotion in Dayr's voice. Hearing such praise from his master was a rare treat and probably the only time anyone said anything nice to him.

“How many trustworthy men do you have?” asked Derian.

“There are four who are highly skilled and resilient,” replied Dayr. “One of them just joined, but I'd trust him to do what is needed. There's a dozen others who might be suitable..”

“How many people around the Guardian Spirit?” demanded Derian.

“Only two when I saw her, but there could be more,” replied Dayr hesitantly. “I'd wait for the report from my man,” he dared to suggest.

Derian nodded. “Yes, we must not be hasty. We must plan this well.” He seemed to remember his original reason for being there. “What of our other plan?”

“It is ready to go. We have only been waiting for your arrival,” replied Dayr with pride in his voice.

“Excellent.” Derian seemed to beam with excitement. He even giggled, almost like a child discovering the joy of jumping into puddles of water. “If all goes to plan, we will sweep away our greatest obstacles in one fell swoop.”

Chapter 14

*I*t took the better part of the next day to have everything set up for the following evenings party. Skander spent hours laying down spells to strengthen the walls of the building and creating the illusions to produce the sounds of a party so their guests wouldn't be suspicious of the silence.

Their guests would be met by Nala and Cheid along with the two more sensible elves. Nerduin had been relegated to staying out of the way. No one bothered to pretend for him any more. He had throw a fit about his small part, but had been told in no uncertain terms that he could not be trusted and that he would be a danger to the success of the mission. Ahnilr and Nisoen did their best to remained on amicable terms with the young noble, but even their patience was being tested by him. Only reason the two even talked to him was the fact he was a member of the High Council.

The priestess and Nisoen would greet their visitors and show them to the garden. Nala and Cheid would be there waiting. They'd spent the better part of the day finding the good hiding places and planning out what to do if someone went that way or the other.

Satisfied that they were as ready as they could be, they turned in for the night and looked forward to the next evening with anxiety.



Gareth had a bad feeling. Something was going on. Despite being allowed to join the Blades it seemed not everything was yet trusted to him. It seemed there were a great many things like that tonight.

Dayr had talked long with Monster Dunn and the others. He had been excluded from the talks. From how the others were acting after the talk it was clear something big had been announced. They were excited.

Gareth tried to pry information out of them, but he was stone walled every time and reminded to get ready for tonight. The private showing was an important

one and everything had to be perfect. Gareth had his doubts, but since no one was talking, getting ready was one of the few things he could do. All he had were his own doubts so he could not send any warning to the others. What would they have thought of him? They'd have said his nerves were failing him.



Nala had settled in the garden of the villa they had been given to use. High walls surrounded the garden, though the buildings nearby that were several stories high still had a view into it. It was one of the downsides of having such an area in the layer of the city where buildings rose so high. The layer above afforded much more privacy.

The villa itself was made of white painted stone and red tiles for roofing. It stood out from the usual grey stone buildings. It had several bedrooms, a salon, a library – everything any well off individual would look for in a house. The perfect place for a supposed elven ambassador to reside in.

It also had the advantage of confining the targets of the evening into an area that would be hard to get away from. Climbing the walls would be a tall order and the only other exit was through the house itself.

The garden itself was an oasis of flowerbeds, well tended trees and bushes and green grass. Small gravel laden pathways crossed through it and there were several benches along the way to allow for a quiet rest. It was one of those benches that Nala was sitting on when Cheid walked up to her.

“Nervous?” he asked.

Nala looked up at the young man. He was dressed in practical clothes, nothing fancy. She herself was similarly dressed with her usual cloak, tunic and swords around her waist. There would be no dresses tonight.

“A bit,” she found herself admitting. “I suppose that's how things are before any major event.”

“It'll be fine,” said Cheid. “There are only three of them.”

“I'd like to think that, but you did not see them practice,” replied Nala with concern in her voice. “These men should not be taken lightly.”

“They may be skilled with their blades, but they have no magic to support

them while we have you, a priestess and myself,” countered Cheid with confidence in his voice.

Nala was not certain how much use Ahnilr would be in a fight, but at the very least she would be able to help if anyone got wounded. Nisoen would no doubt be a great help in close combat as would Gareth. She had not seen Cheid demonstrate any of his powers, but Skander seemed to think highly of the young man so she was inclined to think he would not be completely useless.

“I hope you're right,” said Nala. “I also hope your masters plan doesn't have flaws in it.”

“It's a simple plan. Not much that can go wrong with it,” replied Cheid. He shifted some gravel with his feet. Standing still did not seem to suit him today.

“Unless our enemies have a few surprises up their sleeve,” said Nala.

“Are you always this negative?” asked Cheid.

Nala glared at the young man. He just smiled back.

“Everyone here already?” she asked instead of replying to Cheid's question.

The man nodded. “They just arrived. And they managed to keep Nerduin away.”

A wry smile appeared on Nala's face. “The toughest fight of the evening has already been won.”

Cheid chuckled. “How anyone can turn out like that little bastard is beyond me. He has no common sense and his behaviour is worse than a common peasants.”

“When you grow up in an environment where no one tells you you are wrong it is easy to become cocky and ignorant,” replied Nala. She was slightly surprised to hear herself defend the young noble.

“I suppose so,” said Cheid, but the doubt was clear in his voice. “Doesn't change the fact he's a bastard.”

Nala giggled. “No. No it doesn't.”

Cheid liked to see a smile on the young elf's face or any indication of joy or happiness. She was a price worthy to fight over to see in those moments.

“Getting to be about that time,” noted Nala. Cheid looked around. He had not realized it was already getting dark. The lamp lighters would soon be on the

streets.

“Seems so. You ready?” asked Cheid.

“Ready as I'll be,” came a reply from Nala as she stood up from the bench and stretched herself.

The two took their places as the darkness grew deeper. Nala had chosen a thick tree behind which to hide. Cheid had chosen a thick bush for himself. Both places were close to the entrance and allowed them to move in fast. Neither of them would be easy to spot in the dimly lit garden.

Cheid activated the spells Skander had laid out. Lights flared up, illuminating enough of the garden to give the impression of a party to the outside, but leaving enough shadows for the two to hide in. A quartet of strings began playing the favoured music in Ramyn and an additional spell brought about the buzz of voices any party would have.

They waited. Nala grew more nervous as time went by. What if they didn't show up at all? But her fears were unfounded. They did show up and right on time.

They heard the voices come from the house. They could make out Ahnilr and her greeting. It wasn't long before the quests appeared from the house. There were four of them instead of the three they had expected in addition to Gareth. It seemed Dayr had come along to ensure his men performed as agreed upon.

“So, where's the party?” asked the dark skinned man of the group. The rest looked around nervously. Clearly, things were not as had been agreed upon. The sounds were there, but no party goer was to be seen.

“What's the meaning of this?” demanded Dayr from Ahnilr and Nisoen. Ahnilr was dressed in a practical, yet impressive looking set of clothes. Nisoen had his combat gear on. He was playing the part of a guard after all.

“A change in plans,” said Nala as she stepped into view from behind the tree with swords in hand.

The men went for their weapons. Nala noted that Gareth also took a step away from them all to give himself more room to work with.

“What do you mean?” demanded Dayr once more. He sounded vexed.

“We know who you are and what you've done,” replied Nala. “We know

you're the core group of the Blades operating in Ramyn. We know you killed the elven ambassador.”

“Well, that is fortunate, because we know all about you as well,” came a voice from the darkness behind Nala. It was a voice she would know anywhere, a voice she would never forget. She spun around to face the black robed figure that had appeared on the gravel laden pathway.

“Derian,” muttered Nala with a voice teeming with hatred. How had he gotten in?

“Nala Temera,” said Derian. The man sounded amused. “I must admit, I did not expect to see you again. It seems killing you inside an Elf Tree was a mistake. We should have dragged you outside and played with you some more.”

“You missed your chance. This time it will be you who dies,” said Nala in a voice that left no doubt she would do all she could to make the threat come true.

Derian laughed and shook his head. “Such drama. Such arrogant confidence when you have no idea of the horror you are facing.”

Nala glanced back at the gladiators. They had amused grins on their faces and they were toying with their weapons as if they had no care in the world. Even Dayr had pulled a rusty little dagger from somewhere. She noted Cheid was still in his hideout and seemed ready to give support where it was needed.

She shrugged her shoulders and turned back to face Derian. “Have we talked enough?”

Derian grinned. “It's almost a shame you are what you are. I like your straightforward attitude.”

“I'm perfectly happy the way I am,” said Nala and lunged towards Derian, weapons drawn.

The whole garden exploded into action. Gareth swung his large blade and swatted Dayr with the flat of it. The filthy man stumbled back several feet before crashing against the building. He hit the back of his head against the stone and slumped down unconscious.

“What the hell, Gareth?” demanded Monster Dunn. Obsidian and Carrigan were too busy dealing with Nisoen and Ahnilr to notice what he had done. The elves were holding their own and Gareth was impressed at how well the priestess

held up against Obsidian with her sickles. Where she had hidden them was beyond him.

“Not much to tell really, Dunn. Put up your blade or I'll cleave you in half right where you stand,” said Gareth in a calm voice.

“So, that's the way things go, eh?” said Dunn and took a stance with his sword. “A shame. You were such a lousy card player. Now I'll have no one to make easy money off of.”

Gareth shrugged his shoulders. “I lost on purpose.” He delivered a blow to Dunn that had the big man grimacing at the force with which it hit his sword and rattled the bones in his arms. Sparks flew as the two men exchanged blows, the sound of their metals meeting mixed in with the others. The spell generated sounds of the party were drowned out by metal meeting metal.

At first Cheid had trouble deciding where to throw in his weight, but seeing Dayr flung into the wall, he ensured he would stay down with a small spell that bound his hands and feet. With that taken care of, he turned his attention to Derian and Nala. Capturing the leaders would be the most logical and important goal.

Derian was putting up a good fight against Nala. His sword was there to meet any blow Nala was trying to land. Being the observer, Cheid was the first to notice there was more going on than a mere sword fight. It was a distraction and slowed down any prayers or spells the two might cast, but Derian was certainly making an effort at it. Black strands of energy were slowly creeping out of his sleeves and up his arms. In the dim light the torches provided it was difficult to notice.

Nala pressed on, unaware of the increased danger she was facing. She was not completely surprised though when the first strand of darkness lashed out at her. It glanced her shoulder, tearing away a piece of her clothing and leaving behind a sore spot where it had struck. She was certain it would have been an open wound were it not for the blessings Lorie had bestowed upon her.

Cheid saw what happened and began an immediate counter spell. Similar strands appeared from under his sleeves and once the spell was complete, they lashed out at Derian. There was an electric crackle in the air as the strand

became entwined and struggled together. Derian jumped back and cut his ties to the strands of energy. He looked to the bushes where Cheid was.

“So there was one more of you,” he said. A grin appeared on his face. “Time to take you seriously then.” He spoke a single command and something shimmered into view beside him.

It stopped Nala in her tracks. Her reaction to it stemmed deeper down than the mere appearance of the creature. A floating skeleton torso, blue glowing eye sockets, tattered remains of clothes around it, was certainly enough to startle anyone and cause fear, but there was more to the creature than that. To Nala, the very presence of the creature felt wrong, as if an affront to everything that was good in the world. It sickened her.

She heard the startled yelp of Ahnilr behind her. She glanced back to see the priestess. She had fallen to her knees and was visibly trembling at the sight of the creature. The priestess was barely aware enough to dodge the next blow the dark skinned man called Obsidian made at her. Nala turned her attention back to the creature only to find it floating right in front of herself. Next thing she knew, she was flying through the air. She crashed into the building behind her. Dazed, she shook her head and tried to get up with a grunt of pain.

Gareth had just sunken his blade into Monster Dunn's shoulder and down towards his chest when Nala flew through the air, barely missing him.

“You piece of shit,” huffed Dunn with his few remaining breaths. “You won't live much longer.” Blood trickled from his mouth. There would be no tomorrow for him. Gareth kicked the big man from his sword. He had not gone through the battle unscathed. There were several cuts in his clothes and dried blood stained large portions of it.

“We'll see about that,” muttered Gareth and surveyed the situation. Nala was quickly getting on her feet with a determined expression on her face. She did not seem to want or need any help.

Nisoen and Ahnilr seemed to be in much greater trouble. The gladiators had worn them down and hits were beginning to land. Especially the priestess seemed to be in need of help since the skeleton figure had appeared. What ever it was, it had gotten her in a bad spot. Gareth didn't really care what the

monstrosity was, but it did not seem like anything he'd be able to deal with. The priestess, however, might be able to.

Gareth stuck his sword in and caught the next blow Obsidian directed at the priestess.

"I'll take care of this," said Gareth to the priestess and moved in to stand between her and the dark skinned man. "You see if you can do anything about that..thing."

"I will," replied the priestess with a shaky voice and carefully made her way away from the fight.

"So, Dunn bit the dust, eh?" asked Obsidian.

"Yup," replied Gareth in an expressionless voice.

Obsidian spat on the ground. "He was never much good to begin with."

The exchange of blows continued. The sound of metal hitting metal was however overshadowed by the booms and lights that the fight of magical powers produced.

Cheid had thrown many of his best spells at the floating skeleton, but they seemed to have little effect. His own protections were barely holding up against the onslaught the creature had released against him. The bush he had been hiding in was on fire along with several other spots in the garden. The young wizard grimaced. The fight was not looking good now.

Further concern was the fact Derian had withdrawn from the battle. Where he had gone, Cheid could not tell, because he was kept busy by the creature he had summoned.

The creature shrieked in its bone chilling voice and prepared for another attack at Cheid, but this time it was distracted when tree branches and vines wrapped around it, constraining its movement. Nala was back in the fight.

Having used her powers to immobilize the monstrosity, she lunged in with swords in hand, trying to cut the creature and finish the battle. She found it an impossible task. Her swords met its bones with the same sound as they would a steel blade. All she accomplished was making the monstrosity angrier. It tore the branches and vines that it was tangled in and swatted at Nala. She took a glancing blow to her shoulder that spun her around and threw her to the ground.

She thanked the goddess the wind had not been knocked out of her.

It lunged at Nala while she was getting up, only to be thrown off course by a blow of energy Cheid sent its way. It shrieked again in frustration, but seemed largely unhurt by it. By the time the monstrosity regained its bearings, Nala was already on her feet and moving away from it. It chased after her only to be stopped by a bright field of energy.

Ahnir had gotten away from the thick of the fighting and had had time to pray to her goddess. She knew what it was that they were facing. She had read about them in the books of the main temple. Deremoth had used them before to great effect and the records had indicated that there were few ways to deal with them. Never did she think she would be facing one such creature. She could only hope she was strong enough and in the goddesses favour so she could complete the necessary incantations to dispose of the creature.

The energy field shimmered as the floating skeleton slammed against it time and time again, but it could not break through it. The field had wrapped around it before it could escape and it was now neatly imprisoned. The creature wailed in protests and continued its assault against the field.

Nala jogged next to Ahnir to ensure her safety.

“Can you kill it?” asked Nala of the priestess.

“I'll need your help,” said Ahnir in reply. “Lend me your powers.” She began chanting and praying for the goddesses favour. Nala concentrated and gathered what powers she could and gave them to the priestess to use. The goddess responded to the priestess and gave her words the strength they needed. Combined with Nala's powers, it was enough.

The shimmering field closed in on the creature and began to press it from all sides. It shrieked again and attempted to escape, but there was nothing it could do. The field continued to subtract. Bones snapped. Ever smaller bits of bones snapped until the field was no larger than a pearl. Ahnir let the field fade away.

There was an audible pop and an explosion of power that knocked down Nala, Cheid and Ahnir, but left those further away standing, baffled at what had just happened.

The scream of pain that Nisoen let out woke everyone up. Derian had appeared again, behind the battle weary elf and had sunken his blade in his side. It seemed they had had enough. Carrigan left the fight and grabbed the still unconscious Dayr and dragged him along.

Obsidian was still fully engaged with Gareth, but Derian had a final trick up his sleeve. He launched a ball of fire towards the two. It forced them to part ways and allowed Obsidian to run after Carrigan and help him with Dayr.

Gareth, Nala and the rest were forced to duck and cover as the ball of fire exploded and engulfed much of the garden. It charred clothes and hair, but left everyone otherwise unharmed.

“That didn't go as planned,” said Cheid as he emerged from behind the charred remains of his hiding place. Smoke rose from his clothes and he swatted a few small flames with his hand. The garden had turned quite as the fire had erased the illusion spells.

“No, no it did not,” said Nala grimly. She was tired and could barely stand up. She had bruises all over and pain was starting to surface in places she had not noticed before. Giving so much of her power to the priestess had taken a toll. Ahnilr had rushed to Nisoen to tend to his wounds as best she could even though she looked as worn out as Nala did. As Nala looked around, it was clear everyone was near their limit. She feared the night might not yet be over.



Skander was having difficulty focusing on the papers in front of him. He hoped the plan was going well and that everyone he had involved was safe. It was unfortunate that he could not be there with them, but even at times like this there were duties he could not put aside.

Besides, Cheid was with them. Despite what Skander might show to the outside world at times, he had immense trust in the youngster and his abilities. He knew the young wizard had enough skill and power to be a balance breaker in any fight.

A knock on the door broke his train of thought. “Yes, come in!” he shouted impatiently.

The door opened and a young apprentice stepped in. He was unremarkable in almost every way; average height, average weight, brown hair, forgettable face, brown eyes.

Skander scowled at him. Something did not feel right. "What is it?"

"Master, I have come to you with an question," said the apprentice. He had a pleasant voice, though not pleasant enough that you'd remember it a few hours later.

"I don't have time for questions now. You should come back later," replied Skander impatiently and waved his hand dismissively.

"It won't take long," said the apprentice calmly.

"Ask away then," said Skander with a resigned sigh. It seemed answering the question would be quicker than talking the apprentice into leaving.

"Where's the Sun Blade?" asked the apprentice.

"What?" spurted out Skander.

"You heard me, old timer. Where is the Sun Blade?" demanded the apprentice. His voice had turned from calm to intense.

"Who are you?" demanded Skander from the insolent youngster.

The man chuckled. "That's not important. What's important is the answer to my question."

Skander's eyes narrowed. "What makes you think I would know where this – what did you call it? Sun Blade? – is?"

"Don't play ignorant with me!" shouted the youngster. "I know Ameter Temera gave you the blade."

"I see," said Skander calmly. "You're a member of the Blades."

The apprentice smirked. "So I am. Now you know I am serious. So, tell me, where is the blade and you might yet live."

"Awfully confident for a mere apprentice, aren't you?"

"I've managed to avoid all your probes into finding whether anyone in the towers was a member of the Blades. You are getting old and weak," said the apprentice. There was an aura of abundant confidence around him that Skander found troubling. There was more to this than met the eye.

"Why should I tell you anything when I know I can crush you like a bug?"

asked Skander calmly.

The youngsters face turned red with anger. "You may think so. If you do not tell where it is, I will kill you and tear through these rooms. I know it's here somewhere. Everywhere else has been looked through."

Skander leaned forward on the desk. Underneath his hands were busy drawing a symbol that would release a spell that was stored in the desk. "You might as well get started since I am not going to talk."

"You disappoint me," said the apprentice with a voice filled with contempt. Skander could sense the magic gathering around the robed figure. He finished the symbol he had been drawing and released the spell.

The two dragons carved into the front of his desk began to move. They jumped out from the wood and flew straight for the apprentice. His eyes widened and he whimpered a command while raising his hand to protect himself. He managed to thwart the first hand sized dragon with his hand, though the dragon did clamp its jaws firmly into it. The second dragon flew straight for his throat and reached its target. Blood spewed from the torn flesh and the apprentice slumped down, gurgling his own blood.

Skander stood up and shook his head. "Fool," he muttered and began to move from behind his desk to inspect the still twitching body. He stopped when something shimmered to view on either side of the youngsters remains. Skander's blood froze when he realized what he was facing.

Blood Reavers!

They were stuff of legends. The ultimate blessing passed from Deremoth to his most loyal followers. Relentless, merciless and cruel, these monstrosities rivalled in strength with the greatest of dragons. They had magic at their disposal, intellect to rely on and toughness to thwart any sword looking to cut their bones. Even one would have been a tall order to deal with, but two, that seemed like certain death.

Skander eyed the two floating skeleton torsos and the cold fires that burned in their eye sockets. The young apprentice could not have summoned these. They had already been there, sent by someone else. Someone much, much more powerful. They had only been a moment too late to save the young fool.

He needed to act fast and Skander knew it. The Reavers had already turned their gaze at him. The monstrosities dashed at him just as he pulled up a protective shielding. The creatures bounced back and wailed in anger. Their screams echoed into the corridor of the tower, startling the apprentices wandering the dark halls and waking those who had fallen asleep.

The shield would not hold for long, but it would buy him some time to think. What could he do? Taking out one of these would have been doable, but two posed a problem. He could not fight them at the same time. The other would make use of his distraction with the other one and land a killing blow in a matter of minutes.

All or nothing.

It wasn't much of a plan, but it was the best Skander could come up with in the situation he was in. The window behind him offered an escape route, albeit it could just as easily turn into a long fall to certain death.

The Reavers had begun bombarding Skander's shield with their own magic. Flashes of blue and red illuminated the room. Some of the books lining the walls caught fire and carpets began to smoulder.

Skander focused and gathered all the magic he could muster while maintaining the shield. Sweat rolled down his forehead from the effort. As the power flowed into him and around him he felt like he was swelling up, ready to burst at the slightest touch. He moulded the raw power into a spherical shape and tossed it between the two monstrosities.

The orb began to swell. The monstrosities wailed and ceased their attack. Skander's eyes widened as he realized what was happening. One of the Reavers was feeding the orb with its own magic while the other was strengthening its own protections. He had not anticipated that. The explosion would be too much for his protections.

"Clever bastards," muttered Skander and started to run for the window, but it was too late. The blast of energy threw him through the window and lit his clothes on fire. Barely conscious, wind roaring in his ears, Skander looked up at what had been his quarters.

The top of the tower blazed in blue fire. The roof had been blown away and

he could swear the entire tower was still shaking. A figure engulfed in blue fire sprang from top of the tower and flew towards the central island. It shrieked in pain. Darkness took over his vision. In the darkness his burning clothes made him look like a piece of ember falling towards the river below.



The small group hobbled through the streets of Ramyn. Their clothes were torn and more than one had wounds that bled. They had tried to bandage the worst ones with strips torn from their clothing, but the smaller wounds were still left open.

Nisoen was the worst off. Gareth had to support him so he could wobble on. The big man himself had several cuts that were already healing. His clothes were in tatters. Those would not mend themselves.

Nala had her swords in hand. She was shaken, but over all she had escaped with scrapes and bruises. No one had expected the plan to turn out how it did. They were lucky to be alive.

Ahnir stumbled along beside Nala. The priestess looked pale. The encounter had taken a lot out of her, but she had saved the entire group. If not for her, the Blood Reaver would surely have torn them all to pieces.

“Not much further,” encouraged Nala the group. She received a mix of grunts and silence as a response.

“Damn that Skander,” grunted Gareth. “Last time I’ll take a job from him.”

“Last time I’ll agree to a plan by him that leaves him safe in his tower,” said Nala. She was bitter. Had Skander been there they would now have Derian and this entire matter would have been settled.

The group hobbled on in the dimly lit streets. Few people were around and those that were quickly gave way for them. They must have looked as if though they’d come straight for a slaughtering field.

They made it to the bridge that led to the Towers. Cheid convinced the guards they were there on Skander’s business and they finally let them pass. They were halfway across the bridge when the top of the tower exploded into blue flame.

The entire tower along with the bridge shook, throwing the already weak footed group on the ground. It took them a moment to gain their bearings once more.

“No,” muttered a stunned Cheid as he looked up. “It can't be..”

“What's that?” asked Gareth and pointed at a small speck of light that was falling from high on up.

Nala squinted her eyes. Her keen eyes made out the familiar figure even in the darkness. She swallowed. “It's Skander,” she said and jumped onto the bridge railing.

“What?” demanded Cheid in a loud voice and peered up at the speck that was quickly closing in.

“Shush! Don't distract me,” said Nala without looking back. She closed her eyes and focused, trying to gather what little power she had left. She could only hope she'd make it in time. But nothing came to her. She had nothing left to give.

Dammit, I need something. I need help, thought Nala to herself.

We are here.

It was but a whisper in the small gust of wind that flapped her cloak, but the power that gathered for her to use was real and tangible. She had recognized the voice, but now was not the time to wonder. She moulded what she had been given and directed it towards the water below.

In the darkness it was hard to see, but a large, watery hand rose from the river to catch the small speck of light. Gently, it embraced the figure and carried it to the bridge. It released its catch in front of the group.

Nala swayed on the railing. She'd have fallen had Gareth not caught her and gently lowered her onto the bridge, next to Skander. She looked dazed, barely conscious.

The old wizard looked horrible. His beard and hair were charred, his clothes and skin were badly burned. Ahnilr knelt beside him and began her work. A worried looking Cheid loomed behind her.

“How is he?” demanded the worried apprentice.

“He is alive. Barely,” replied Ahnilr. “I'm too weak to help him much. I can keep him alive for a while, but we need more than that if we want him to remain

that way for longer than an hour or two. We need to move him to a safe place.”

“What ever he fought, it might come back,” said Gareth as he looked around concerned. The group had hear the shrieks echoing above. Guards were rushing towards them from the bridge and apprentices were rushing towards them from the tower.

“The tower is still probably the safest place we can take him,” said Cheid. “We can use my quarters.”

Ahnir nodded and continued her work until a group of guards and student arrived to surround the group. Cheid took charge of the situation and soon Skander was carried to the tower on a makeshift stretcher. Gareth hobbled on behind the group, carrying a limp Nala under one arm and supporting Nisoen with the other.

Chapter 15

Cheid looked around dismayed at the former quarters of his masters. The roof was gone, so were much of the walls and furniture. Charred pages from burned books fluttered around in the unconstrained wind that blew to the now open top of the tower. In some places the intensity of the magical fire had melted even the stone. It was hard to imagine anything would have survived it – the charred skeleton of someone who Cheid hoped was no one of importance was evidence of that – but Skander had along with one of the creatures he had fought.

It was difficult to tell where everything had been, but after a bit of searching and thinking, Cheid found the place where Skander's desk had been. There was nothing but a large pile of ash left and a few bits of charred wood. Cheid shifted through the ashes. He hoped for the best. If the creature had taken the sword then matters were much, much worse than they seemed to be now.

It took him a while to shift through most of the ash. He was beginning to lose hope, but then his hand happened upon what felt like the hilt of a sword. He grabbed it and pulled it out. He recognized the sun shaped pommel and a wave of relief rushed through him, but that was a short lived joy. As more of the sword was revealed from under the ash his heart sank. Much of the blade itself had melted away or been distorted. The Sun Blade was ruined.

Cheid cursed. What would this mean for the seal around Deremoth? Was it broken already? Was it only slowly weakening because the key had been broken? He hoped Skander would come to. He was one of the few who could answer the questions swirling around the young man's mind.

He rescued the remains of the sword from the ash pile. Maybe it could somehow be repaired and the spell binding Deremoth mended. Cheid had to admit it was a slim hope, but what else could he tell himself? That all was lost? That was the sort of talk that would certainly lead to things going from bad to worse quickly.

He sighed, wrapped the remains of the sword in a piece of leather skin he had brought with him and started towards the opening for the transport disc. He

dreaded having to tell Nala that the sword was ruined. She would not take it well and he doubted the other elves would either. To them it would be as if someone had opened the gates to their worst nightmares. The fact that each one of them was still hurting from last evening would do little to dampen the blow.

It was a small miracle the shaft for the transport discs had escaped the destruction with little to no damage. The disc floated up just as it used to. Despite there being no roof the elemental spirit tied to the disc was unlikely to escape.

Cheid stepped onto the disc and instructed it to take him to the dormitory level where his quarters were located. The entire tower was still abuzz over the events of the previous night. The fact the master of the tower seemed ready to croak at any time was enough to have started some wild rumours, but add the blown out top of the tower to that and some of the rumours were wild indeed.

The disc came to a halt and Cheid stepped off of it and started towards his quarters. It was a short walk down the corridor. A group of students were huddled near his door, whispering amongst themselves. Cheid spotted even one professor there. He did his best to ignore the group. They fell silent and watched as he passed by. In his mind Cheid was happy he didn't have to face questions from them. There had been plenty of those already with many being of a nature he did not feel comfortable answering.

Cheid let out a sigh of relief as he closed the door to his quarters behind him. It wasn't much of a room and it seemed cramped with all the people already there. There was room for a bed and a desk, but not much else. Now there were several priests in there working on Skander.

Nala was standing by the bed. She looked tired and Cheid couldn't really fault her for that. She had exerted herself quite a bit yesterday. Though compared to Ahnilr, Nala looked positively energetic. The priestess had had very little rest during the night, but still she continued working on Skander along with the other priests. Gareth stood next to Nala and looked grim. He alone would have made the room seem small, but now he just ensured the cramped feeling turned into one of being squashed.

“How was it?” demanded Nala from Cheid. She sounded impatient.

“Not much left up there,” replied Cheid and made an look at the priests. Not everything could be discussed in front of them. Nala got the hint and did not ask further.

“How's he doing?” asked Cheid in return.

“Better,” came a reply from Ahnilr who stepped away from the bed and slumped into the chair by Cheid's desk. The other priests similarly removed themselves from the bed and Nala herded them out. There wasn't room for them to rest in the room anyway.

“I think he'll make it,” said a tired Ahnilr.

Cheid looked at his master. He still looked horrible with burnt skin and charred hair, but he could see the slight improvements the priests had managed. A wave of relief washed over the young apprentice. Not everything was lost.

“So, did you find it?” demanded Nala now that the room was void of ears that should not hear everything.

“I did,” replied Cheid in a grim tone. He unwrapped the piece of leather to reveal the broken sword. The amount of cursing that came from Nala would have made a sailor blush and Cheid had trouble believing she knew so many underhanded words. Even Gareth looked at her a bit uncomfortably.

“Can it be fixed?” asked Nala after calming down a bit.

Cheid shook his head. “I don't know. I can't do it, that I know, but whether anyone can? I just don't know.”

“Is Deremoth free already?” asked Ahnilr.

“Again, I don't know.” It frustrated Cheid that he could be of so little help. “Skander might know, but when will he wake up?”

“It's impossible to say,” admitted Ahnilr somewhat reluctantly. “He was gravely injured. It's a small miracle he's even alive. The effects of healing can be unpredictable. Some might make it and be up in a few days, some might not make it at all.”

“Maybe some in the elven kingdom might know?” offered Nala.

Ahnilr rubbed her temples. “Certainly. Getting word to them though would take days and by then it might be too late, depending on what the situation actually is.”

“We simply know too little,” said Cheid.

“What about the other tower masters?” asked Gareth. “Surely they must know something.”

Cheid shook his head. “Three of the Masters are not in Ramyn right now. The master of the Air tower is, but he is barely two decades older than me. I'd be surprised if he has read anything overly specific about events that took place centuries ago.”

“So what do we do?” demanded Nala. “We can't just sit here doing nothing.”

“Well..” Cheid started to respond, but was interrupted by a commotion outside the room. The door flung open and two guards stepped in with swords in hand. They wore chainmail with an purple overcoat that bore the symbol of the empresses personal guard.

“All clear,” said one of them and both took position on either side of the door. In stepped a woman dressed in fine silks. She was about Nala's height with a body build that was even slimmer than hers if possible. The woman's blonde hair was tied in an elaborate arrangement and there was no shortage of decorative pins and pearls. Her blue eyes scanned the room and seemed to not everything. Her gaze stopped at Cheid for a moment and look of consideration appeared on her delicate face. Nala noted with interest that Cheid had turned pale, though he still looked like a sun tanned farmer compared to the ivory white skin of the woman who had entered the room.

Cheid was the first to come over his surprise. He fell to one knee and lowered his head. “Your imperial highness,” he said loudly enough for everyone in the room to hear. In his heart he hoped she had not recognized him. How could she? They had been only children the last they met.

Gareth was quick to follow Cheid's example, though even knelt down he seemed to dwarf the empress.

Nala didn't bother mainly because she had not been raised in such a way. Showing respect was done in other ways among the elves. She didn't consider her to be someone she owed allegiance to anyway. That belonged to her goddess and perhaps the elven High Council, though she was having serious doubts whether the council belonged on that list any more.

The empress ignored Cheid and focused her gaze on Nala. She seemed to examine every inch of her and note every small anomaly that separated her from any ordinary elf. It made Nala shift uncomfortably, though she did keep her eyes equally fixated on the empress.

“Empress Eleria,” said Ahnilr in a respectful tone as she stood up and bowed to her slightly.

“Honoured priestess,” came a reply from the empress with a slight nod of her head. Her voice was smooth, the kind no one would mind falling asleep to. It emanated a strong sense of trustworthiness and security. “How is he?” A hint of genuine concern seeped through in her voice.

“He'll live, your highness,” replied Ahnilr.

Eleria waved her hand. “Please, there is no need for the honorifics. You seem exhausted, please, sit down.” she motioned towards the chair the priestess had been resting on. Ahnilr gave a grateful smile and sat back down. “And you, stand up.” The words were directed at Gareth and Cheid. They both rose, though Cheid looked like he wanted to crawl under the bed and hide.

“When he'll wake up, I do not know,” concluded Ahnilr.

The empress seemed troubled. “What happened to him?”

“We don't know for certain,” said Nala quite bluntly. “But judging by the sound we heard, he was fighting a Blood Reaver.”

“A what?” asked Eleria.

“Blood Reaver. A tool of Deremoth and his cult,” explained Ahnilr. “Very deadly.”

“Deremoth?” the empress seemed even more lost. “You're talking about things that should not exist in this day and age. What has the old sack of bones gotten you all into?” The remark surprised Cheid. Clearly, Skander had had closer contact with the empress than he had let on.

“It's a long story,” muttered Gareth.

“Indeed it is, but it is one she might need to hear,” said Ahnilr and looked to Nala to hear her opinion.

“I suppose we have no choice,” conceded Nala. “Just send the guards away. This story is not for all ears.”

Eleria motioned the guards to leave and they quickly left the room, closing the door behind them.

“Well then, shall we begin?” asked the empress. She seemed eager to hear what had brought about the current situation. Nala knew she'd be a whole lot less eager once the story was told. And she was right.

It took each of them a good bit of time to tell their own part of the story. The more she heard, the more troubled the expression on the empresses face grew. She showed true emotion when Nala told her story. There was sympathy in her as well as anger at the horrible things that had taken place and at the people behind all of it. Compared to Nerduin, the empress was void of the hubris that her title might have bestowed on anyone burdened with it. She had a grim expression on her face as the stories were finished.

“Why didn't you bring me in on this, Skander?” asked the empress of the unconscious wizard.

“If you do not mind me asking, what is your relationship with him?” asked Cheid almost sheepishly.

“He has been a mentor and a valued advisor ever since I took the throne,” replied Eleria. “It was a secret so it's not surprising you did not know, even if you are his apprentice.” The empress gave the young man a knowing glance.

Cheid shifted uncomfortably. The conversation seemed poised to head for waters that he did not wish to navigate at this time.

“So, given what we know, what do we do now?” asked Gareth. Cheid gave the big man a grateful look for shifting the discussion back to business.

“With the Sun Blade broken the matter has clearly progressed beyond what a small group like yours can do,” said the empress. “You need help. I will give it in the name of the Ramyn empire.”

“Doesn't change the fact that we have no clues as to what we should do,” said Nala.

“There are many people I can call upon to give us direction. Priests, great wizards, scholars and wise men. We will know more once we talk to them.”

“How fast can these people be gathered?” asked Nala.

“By the evening we will know more,” replied the empress. “We will convene

at the palace. I'll arrange matters so that you will all have access." She might well have been the nicest empress in the world, but she was still an empress and was used to deciding matters and doing things her own way. There was not much the small group in the room could do to oppose her plan, though they had little reason to. What hope they now had lied with her.

"We will meet you then," said Nala. She was starting to like the empress. She did not fuss over trivial details and went straight to the point.

"I will also arrange my personal guard to hunt down Derian and his remaining accomplices. They have no place in my city." The empress looked determined to clean the stain they had spilled onto the city.

"A good measure to take, even if it is unlikely they're to be found," said Gareth. "I doubt they'll return to the arena."

"Doesn't hurt to try," said Nala.

The empress nodded. "Good. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a great many people to contact." Eleria nodded to everyone in the room and left. They could hear the heavy footsteps of her personal guard as they walked away.

Cheid looked relieved and dismayed at the same time. He had dodged the arrow for now, but the coming evening put him right in front of the bullseye once more.

"Well then, seeing as we have a plan for the time being, I think I'll go get some sleep," said Gareth and left the room. Cheid had arranged rooms for all of them in the tower, much to the protest of some first year students who had to share a room with them.

"I'd better go see Nerduin and fill him in on what's going on," said Ahnilr and rose up. She did not seem eager at all.

"I'll come with you," offered Nala. She wasn't overly keen on meeting the young noble again, but letting Ahnilr go alone would have been foolish. Nerduin was outside the safety of the tower and the priestess was tired. She would be an easy target for any cult member lurking around.

The priestess gave Nala a grateful smile and the two left the room. Cheid was left alone in the room with his unconscious master. He stepped on next to the bed and looked at the man he had admired for most of his life. In his current

state he did not look like much, just like any other old man, but still in Cheid's eyes he was a stronger figure than any other he had seen.

“Wake up soon,” he whispered to his master. “We need you.”



The bridge crossing the river was surprisingly empty when Nala and Ahnilr stepped onto it. The curious crowd of the morning had lost interest quickly when it became evident that what ever had happened during the night was not ongoing.

Rumours had started to spread, but most of them were way off base and attributed the explosion to a spell gone wrong or some other sort of accident. Had they known the truth there would have been a lot more buzzing going on.

“Do you think we should try to contact Loriele to find out whether Deremoth has awakened?” asked Nala of Ahnilr.

The priestess shrugged her shoulders. “I've tried. On that, she is silent, despite all the help she has provided in healing Skander.”

“Maybe if I tried?”

“There is nothing to lose by trying,” said the priestess as the two passed the bridge guards and turned to a street that led to the inn the elven delegation had been using. A moment of silence passed between the two.

“How did you know how to defeat that monstrosity we faced last night?” asked Nala, breaking the silence.

The priestess glanced at the hood covered Guardian Spirit. “It was pure luck. I happened to read a book on the matter when I stayed at the main temple of Loriele.”

“What's the city of elves like?” asked Nala.

“You've never been there?” Ahnilr sounded surprised.

“Only as a small child,” replied Nala. She sounded a bit bitter. The sheltered life her parents had provided her was becoming an inconvenience for her. “I don't remember much of it. My parents never told me much either.”

“You're a true Forest Guardian then.” Ahnilr had a small smile on her face. “The city of elves is much like Ramyn in certain ways, but instead of these

towering stone structures, it is built on Elf Trees. It lends the city a much more lively feel. It's so much greener, so much more beautiful.”

“And the inhabitants?”

“They are not all like Nerduin.” The priestess seemed to have read Nala's mind. “Mostly they are just like the people here in Ramyn; decent, ordinary folks going about their business, not caring about the politics of the nobles.”

“How would they react to someone like me?” It was a question that had been on Nala's mind for some time now. Would she be welcomed into the city?

“The ordinary people would probably welcome you with open arms and treat you with as much respect as any member of the High Council.” Ahnilr hesitated for a moment. “As for the nobles and the High Council, I can only advise you to be careful. Their schemes and plots are complex and I am certain some would seek to use you to their benefit. Somehow the humans think we are above such things, but in truth we are just as bad as they are.”

“As soon as there is power, there are those who seek to gain it by any means,” said Nala. She sounded like she was quoting some text she had read, but the moment the words had left her lips she knew it was the first time she had heard those words. Another memory from a past Guardian Spirit seeping through? Ahnilr was giving her an odd look.

Nala shook her head, “I don't know where that came from. Maybe the past memory of another one like me.”

“Does that happen a lot?” inquired the priestess.

“Not really.” Nala sounded uncertain. “Ever since Loriel visited me it seems the memories come in easier when they are needed. I still can't just think of something and get the answer from the memories.”

A silence fell between the two once more and it lasted all the way to the inn they were headed to. It was a tidy place, well suited for quests of higher standing. The common room was looking empty, save for the lonely elf nursing a mug of wine with a smug look on his face that was enhanced by his apparent drunkenness. Nala sighed. Nerduin was bad enough sober, what would he be like when drunk?

Ahnilr wasn't fazed by the glare the young noble threw her way. After all

that happened, she was not in the mood to indulge the ego of someone she cared very little for. She was here to update him on the events out of courtesy towards the High Council.

“Well, if it isn't the witch and her ward,” said Nerduin as the two took seats at the table. Which was which was not clear from his slightly slurred statement, but it set both the women in a mood that was less than favourable to the young noble.

“As you are a member of the High Council, I am here to update you on what has taken place during the night,” said Ahnilr. Nala could not help but admire how calm she kept her voice. She had to do her best not to say anything or reach across the table and tickle the man with the sharp end of her sword.

“Well, lets have it then. Tell your story then leave me be. You've made it abundantly clear that's all I'm good for,” said Nerduin with a smirk on his face. His tone did not reflect the words of self pity.

Ahnilr showed considerable patience in explaining the events. As the dark nature of the happening unravelled, Nerduin began to show more interest. By the time the priestess finished, the young noble was in full swing.

“You should have taken me with you,” said Nerduin. His arrogant tone had returned. “None of it would have happened had I been there. Derian would have been caught.”

“Perhaps,” said Ahnilr in a voice that managed to hide that she though the young noble delusional. “The situation is what it is. You've been informed and I'm certain you will keep the High Council appraised of the situation.”

“Oh, I will,” said Nerduin gloatingly. “They will hear every little detail.”

“Good. Now, if you'll excuse us, we must return to the Tower and get some rest and prepare for the evening.” Nerduin nodded and Ahnilr and Nala rose.

“I'll see you tonight then,” hollered Nerduin after the two. Both turned to him with a stunned look on their face.

“Of course I will come meet the empress,” said Nerduin. “I am, after all, a member of the High Council.”

“Of course,” replied Ahnilr, nodded her head and turned to leave. Nala followed the priestess out the door. Both women let out a loud sigh as the door

closed behind them.

“By the goddess, I wish I could sink my sword in his gut,” muttered Nala.

“I understand how you feel,” said Ahnilr. “But doing so would not be wise.”

“Wise? No. Satisfying? Yes.”

The priestess chuckled as the two walked the street. “Maybe it's better that he joins in. Maybe his eyes will finally be opened.”

“If we're lucky the guards won't let him up to the palace layer,” said Nala.

“He'll worm his way past them. He is a member of the High Council after all,” replied Ahnilr.

“Well, he is a worm after all..”

Both women laughed and continued to chatter about more delightful matters as they walked back to the Tower.



Nala fondled the pendant around her neck. It carried the empresses symbol. A herald had brought one for each member of the group. Nerduin probably never got one, but she still had an uncomfortable feeling that he would somehow manage to make an appearance.

With the pendants visible, they had had no problems getting to the nobles layers of the city. The few glimpses Nala managed to get of it left an impression on her. The privileged ones truly led a different kind of life.

The guards at the transport point to the imperial layer examined their pendants closely. They even had a wizard test them, but none found anything wrong so they were allowed to pass. The entire group was together, though Niselur still needed to rely on Gareth to help him along.

They had tried to make themselves as presentable as possible, changing their tattered clothes for new, higher quality ones, but they still looked like a bunch of adventurers who just happened to be wearing fine, but practical clothes. None of them was willing to sacrifice appearances for functionality in the situation they were in.

Even though the group was heavily armed, the guards did not bother them about the weapons. The power of the pendants surpassed any security concerns

they might have had.

The transport disc emerged from the dark shaft and came to a slow, smooth stop. The group stepped off of it to a second check by guards. They were just as thorough as the ones on the layer below. It seemed redundant, but then they were guarding the heart of the empire. Was anything too much?

The transport disc had come out on a small, stone paved clearing. It was surrounded by walls nearing thirty feet in height. What was unusual about it was that they did not seem to be inside the fortress, but rather outside it. The single gate leading inside was closed and seemed nigh impregnable. On top of the wall they could see archers and spear-men looking down on them. They were ready to rain down death should the need arise.

The guards found their pendants to be genuine once again and the gate screeched open. The corridor through the walls seemed almost tunnel like, so thick were the walls.

The end of the tunnel corridor brought them straight to a large parade ground. A herald was waiting for them.

“Ah, the quests of the evening, Welcome.” The herald was a pleasant enough looking young man with sandy hair, green eyes and a body build that left an impression, but did not make him threatening. “Follow me. The empress is waiting.”

The group followed closely as the herald guided them towards the palace that loomed a fair distance away. Nala took the opportunity to look around as much as she had time to. The parade ground did not offer much to look at; only a few barracks buildings and the occasional patrol of guards or a bureaucrat rushing along with a pile of papers in hand.

They entered a palace buildings and were greeted by polished, white marble floors. The walls were lined with decorative paintings, elaborate tapestries and paintings of emperors of past. There were the occasional statues and busts depicting the same emperors. It was hard to compare the sight to anything else since nowhere else had Nala seen so much luxury and beauty in a such a short timespan. Gold and silver were used generously and even the curtains lining the windows – windows that had clear glass, not the misty kind found in many lesser

buildings – were made from the finest cloth available.

Nala was not the only member of the group that found herself stopping at times to admire a particular painting. Their guide was thankfully a patient one and allowed them their moments before hurrying them along. The empress was waiting for them after all and keeping her waiting too long was unacceptable in his mind.

They seemed to wander through corridors for hours on end until they arrived at a pair of decorated door. Their guide turned to them.

“The empress will meet you behind these doors, but before entering I would like to remind all of you of proper etiquette.”

“We know all about that,” said Nala. She had no patience for further delays nor was she in the mood to listen to some self-important court lackey lecture her on proper behaviour. “We’ve already met the empress once today.”

“Right,” the herald looked a bit put off by the blunt answer. “Several others have already arrived. I am certain you will all be introduced to each other.”

“What are we waiting for then?” asked Gareth. The herald took one glance at the big man and decided it was better to just let them in instead of stalling with things the group found pointless. The doors were opened and the group walked into what looked to be a meeting chamber.

There was a large, round desk in the centre of the room, with room for twenty people to sit. The wall opposite to the door had a throne and tapestries, clearly marking it the empresses seat. As the herald had said, there were already people there. Almost a dozen men stood there, some in pairs engaged in vigorous talks. Nala could see priests of various faiths, most notably one from the Order of Salvius, a group dedicated to preserving history and information. There were men who looked like scholars. Some of them were carrying books with them as if prepared to cite information from them.

Some turned to look at the diverse group that entered the room. They were openly curious, some even came over to exchange a few words and enquire what their role was in the whole matter. The empress had not told them everything, but enough to get them looking for the right bits of information.

There was a commotion at the door and soon they slammed open. The

herald tried his best to lecture of proper etiquette, but the figure marching in would have none of it. Of course, Nerduin would not listen to lectures from someone who wasn't even an elf. He strode into the room as if he was the empress herself. He did not stop to talk with anyone, but simply looked for the nearest seat and made himself comfortable. His entrance and behaviour caused more than one frown and whisper in the room.

“Well, you were right. He did manage to worm himself inside,” whispered Nala to Ahnilr.

“Sadly so,” came a reply from the priestess.

The room fell silent as the door opened again and the imperial guards walked in with the empress closely behind them. She wore a practical looking dress, though she still managed to look high above everyone else in the room. Eleria walked through the room and took her seat at the throne. She motioned the rest to take their seats and for the guards to leave the room.

Nala stuck close to the rest of her group, though she ensured that she was seated as far away from Nerduin as possible. Ahnilr and Cheid sat on either side of her while Gareth and Niselur took a seat on her left side, adding two more bodies between her and Nerduin.

“Greetings and welcome,” said the empress after everyone had taken their seats. “It has been on short notice, but I am happy to see so many of you have made it here. Hopefully we will have answers as well.” Eleria let her gaze move over everyone in the room. “As I stated, the Sun Blade has been broken. What we need to find out is what effect that has on the seal around Deremoth.”

“Your highness,” said a grey bearded man. He was bald and his skin looked like old parchment. It took effort for him to stand up. His clothing revealed him to be a scholar from the imperial library. “While I am certain you have done everything possible to confirm the facts, I simply can not believe the sword to be destroyed.”

“It is true,” said Cheid and stood up. He took out the piece of leather and unwrapped the remain of the Sun Blade from it and placed it on the table for everyone to see. There was a murmur as the men whispered to each other and some rose from their seats to examine the remains more closely. The empress

allowed them their moment of examination before taking control once more.

“The proof is in your hands,” she said and the murmurs died down. “The question we now need an answer for is how this affect the seal around Deremoth. Is he already free? Is the seal just weakening?”

“Your highness,” said the priest of the Order of Salvius. He was a gentle looking man and his voice was a soothing one. “The old books detail the process with which the seal was created. The power used was immense and the planners were thorough. From what I and my order have managed to gather, they did not make the Sun Blade a single point of failure. Yes, if used properly it could have freed Deremoth immediately, but in being destroyed, it should not have caused the entire seal to be broken.”

“What does that mean?” asked Eleriel

“The destruction of the key has merely weakened the seal,” replied the priest.

“Weakened? How much? Will Deremoth be able to escape?” the air was filled with questions from people around the table. The empress had to tap the floor several times with a rod that was next to her throne to get silence and allow the priest of Salvius explain further.

“How much the seal has weakened I do not know, but as I said, it should not be broken. The more time passes the weaker the seal will grow. Eventually, it will grow weak enough for Deremoth to escape and torment the world in his dragon form.”

The room was eerily silent as everyone took time for the words to sink in.

“Can the sword be repaired? Can the seal be strengthened somehow?” asked one of the men around the table.

“Strengthening the seal would be near impossible,” said the priest of Salvius. “It took the strongest priests of the time to create it. To strengthen it would take a similar gathering and I don't see how we could accomplish that in any sensible time when the threat isn't imminent. It is human nature to react only at the last moment.”

An uncomfortable silence fell to the room once more. The priest of Salvius broke it.

“While strengthening the seal would be difficult at best, weakening it further is much easier. If the followers of Deremoth concentrate their effort to it, then they can free their patron god much sooner.”

“How soon?” asked the empress.

“I do not know, but it is safe to say it would be wise to ensure the Blades do not get the opportunity to do so.” The reply from the priest started another round of shouting and arguments. A single voice of laughter silenced the room. Everyone turned their eyes towards the young elf noble who was the source of the laughter.

“Pray tell, Nerduin Stardancer, what is so amusing?” The voice of the empress was void of any sort of amusement. The looks he got from around the table were similarly not amused.

The young elf took a moment to settle down his laughter. “This entire matter is amusing,” said Nerduin in a mocking voice. “So what if Deremoth gets released? His followers are few and far between. They pose no threat.”

“Do I need to remind you that they killed your ambassador?”

Nerduin waved his hand dismissively. “She was of little importance. A new ambassador was quickly found and he's already on his way.”

Nala could not believe what she was hearing. Did he really care so little for his fellow elves? A fellow High Council member no less? She looked to Ahnilr to see a similar expression of disbelief that must have been on her face as well.

“We don't need to do anything about this so called problem. The only reason we're even discussing this is because the people sitting over there utterly failed and caused it in the first place.” The young noble pointed to Nala and her companions. “We should be talking about proper punishment for them instead.”

Gareth looked ready to jump up and snap the little weasels neck, but somehow he managed to keep himself under control. He realized that such action in front of the empress would not be wise. Best let the fool dig himself a deep enough ditch that it would collapse on him.

“If there is no problem, as you seem to imply, then why should these people be punished?” asked the priest of Salvius. He managed to sound respectable even in the face of the blatant foolishness Nerduin was exhibiting.

“These people have acted against the followers of Deremoth. Had they not done so and in the process angered them, then there might have been a way to resolve the issues peacefully,” said Nerduin.

“There's no negotiating with the followers of Deremoth,” said Cheid. His voice sounded strained. “They hate elves. All they want to do is kill you and your kind.”

“Has anyone tried to talk with them?” asked Nerduin. He stood up from his seat. “This course of action that would have us kill them all on sight is not going to solve our problem.”

Again, it was Cheid who first noticed the starting change.

“Shit,” he muttered to himself. Ahnilr happened to glance at him then so he nudged her to look at Nala. The priestess understood immediately.

Nerduin continued his assault against the logic of everyone else in the room, including the empress. The expression on her face was one of carefully hidden contempt.

Ahnilr placed her hand on Nala's shoulder. “Nala, are you alright?” It was said as a whisper.

The young elf took a long time to answer. “She's coming.” It was all she could muster to say through gritted teeth. Struggling against letting the goddess in was like standing in the middle of a large rapid and trying stop the flow of water with your hands. Her attempts to get through were gentle enough, she did not wish to harm Nala, but there was a sense of urgency in her that indicated that her patience was not infinite.

The air grew thicker. The magical energy gathered around Nala. She tried to hold on, but it was too much for her to handle. She found herself gently guided to that safe corner of her mind. The goddess used a gentle touch with her, tried to reassure her that everything would be alright, but it was not enough to completely drown out the panic that was taking over her.

“You little worm,” the voice thundered in the room. Everyone seemed to shrink into their chairs as Nala stood up and jumped on the table, her gaze fixed on Nerduin who was now stuttering. The atmosphere in the room changed into an oppressive one. It was clear to everyone there was more to Nala than her slender

appearance let on. "You call yourself an elf? You call yourself one of my children?" The strange voice spoke with Nala's mouth as she walked on the table to face the young noble. Her face was a mask of rage.

Nerduin managed to gather himself and stare back at Nala. "You have no place here. Go back where you came from." It was said weakly, but the defiance was there.

Nala's eyes narrowed. "You dare deny me?"

Nerduin seemed desperate. He pulled a dagger from under his clothes. "If you do not go willingly, I will send you by force."

"Fool," said the voice. Before she could say more, Nerduin lunged at her with dagger in hand. The dagger met Nala's skin with a bright blue flash. The blue light engulfed the young noble. He shrieked in pain and dropped the dagger that had already partly molten. The light turned into flames and dug into his flesh. He tried to run, but got no further than a few steps before his legs gave way. As he hit the floor he was nothing but a charred corpse.

"The Flames of Purification," whispered Ahnilr to herself in disbelief. The implications of how they had dealt with Nerduin were grave indeed.

Startled eyes from around the table looked at Nala. Some, those lucky few who could still breathe and move, inched away from her. Guards burst into the room, swords at hand, but they froze as soon as they took their first steps into the room. Nala turned to face the empress who seemed calm considering what had just happened. The empress managed to motion to the guards that the situation was under control.

"The priest of Salvius is right," said the strange voice with Nala's mouth. There was no indication of even acknowledging that she had just killed an elf, an noble no less. It did not indulge in the formalities one might expect when speaking with an empress. She commanded and expected her will to be done. "The seal is not broken. You must prevent the followers of Deremoth from weakening it. You must send a group to Moroth's Tooth to guard what is there. Nala must be in that group. You must also talk to Skander. He has a last trick up his sleeve."

The oppressing feeling that had taken over the room lifted. Nala slumped

down onto the table as the sighs of relief were breathed around the room. Ahnilr rushed next to Nala to see how she fared. The guards stepped deeper into the room and kept a close eye on Nala and the charred corpse of Nerduin.

“How is she?” asked Eleria with a slightly startled voice. Others in the room began to quiet down as it became obvious the danger had passed.

“She's out cold. The dagger seems to have done nothing to her,” replied Ahnilr.

“What was that?” asked one of the scholars. Others muttered in an approving tone. They wanted explanations.

“That was the voice of a goddess,” said the priest of Salvius. He seemed calm and largely indifferent to what had happened. “I believe we have been given a direction in which to go.”

Further questions filled the air, but no more answers were given. Nisoen had knelt beside the smouldering body of Nerduin. He seemed distraught despite the obvious dislike he had held for the man. Most of it was the sense that he had once more failed in his duty to protect those who had been entrusted in his care. He looked at the still unconscious Nala, hoping to invoke some reaction of hate from within himself that would allow him to perform his duty and arrest the woman, but nothing like that came to him. It was clear in his mind Nala had not done the deed, but the goddess had. How could he, a mere mortal soldier, seek justice against someone like that?

Cheid cursed in his mind. Not that he minded Nerduin being dead, but his death was certain to cause problems down the line and those problems would stack up on Nala, not the goddess that had caused it. If they were to follow the instructions received then the fastest route to Moroth's Tooth would take them through the Great Forest and the kingdom of the elves. There would be no way to avoid questions. He remained seated and tried to formulate some sort of a plan.

Gareth sat in his chair, stunned. He had witnessed something he never thought possible. Never did he expect to see it coming from someone like Nala. At first glance she was as threatening as a small puppy, but if you got too close there was a row of sharp teeth waiting for you. Now it seemed that row of teeth belonged to a dragon. And here he had feared for her safety. He shook his head

and stood up and walked to Ahnilr.

“Need any help?” he asked.

The priestess looked at him. There was concern on her face. “If you could carry her? I'll ask the empress to arrange a room for her.”

Gareth nodded. Gently, he lifted Nala from the table. She felt light in his hands. He looked at her unconscious face. She looked calm with her eyes closed, though that serenity was somewhat broken by the piece of cloth Ahnilr had stuffed in her nose to stop the bleeding. None the less, the protective instinct inside Gareth kicked in and he vowed in his mind to see things through with the young elf and ensure she made it through alive.

Slowly, the meeting dispersed. Gareth carried Nala to a room the empress arranged. He noted that two guards followed them. It seemed a sane precaution from the empress considering what had just happened. It was late so the empress had arranged rooms for everyone from their small group, but Gareth did not feel the need to rest. He spent the night sitting next to Nala's bed, watching over her.

Chapter 16

*I*t was morning when Nala came to once more. Her head was killing her again and she felt like someone had stuck a straw inside her and sucked out every drop of energy she had.

Before even opening her eyes she remembered what had happened. Despite knowing it was not her fault, despite the fact that she had despised the man, she felt tears roll down her cheeks at the memory of him burning to death. Why? Why had the goddess done that? His dagger had certainly not posed any threat to either her or Loriel. There must have been some reason. The goddess would not kill an elf on a whim, would she?

She felt a gentle touch on her cheek as someone wiped away a tear. Nala opened her eyes, expecting to see the comforting face of Ahnilr, but to her surprise she found herself looking at the face of Gareth.

“Ah, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you,” the big man said and looked ashamed.

Nala smiled weakly. “It was time to wake up anyway.”

“How do you feel?” asked Gareth. The genuine concern that shone through in his voice warmed Nala's heart.

“I've been worse,” replied Nala.

Gareth chuckled. “That's not very reassuring coming from someone who has been dead.”

Nala managed a laugh herself even though it made her head throb even more. “It's just a headache. A bit of food and a lot of sunlight and I'll be good as new.” She looked around and was relieved to see the room had a window and that the curtains were drawn open, letting the light in. The room seemed luxurious compared to others she had seen. There were soft carpets covering the floor, a real high quality mirror, a desk, several comfortable looking chairs. Even the bed she was in was large enough to hold three more people and the mattress felt like she was resting on a piece of cloud.

Gareth noticed the way Nala was looking around. “The empress was kind

enough to give us all rooms in the palace for the night.”

“Despite what happened?” asked Nala weakly.

“She knows it was not you. That it was the goddess and her judgement that took Nerduin's life. To be honest she seems almost grateful about it.” Gareth tried a smile, but it soon died when he saw that Nala was not amused.

“Why did Loriel do that?” asked Nala out loud to herself.

“Ahnir has a theory about that,” said Gareth. “She'll discuss it with you once she return from the Tower.”

“The Tower?”

“They're trying to wake up Skander to see what that last trick up his sleeve is.”

“Will they be able to? He wasn't that well off yesterday.” Nala had her doubts whether the old wizard would ever wake up, despite his bold claims about having an understanding with death.

“Skander's a tough nut. Tougher than me,” said Gareth. “He'll pull through.”

Nala just nodded. There wasn't anything she could do about it. Right now she needed rest. With help from Gareth she got up and took a seat by the window.

“You really like the sunlight, don't you?” asked Gareth as Nala sighed with pleasure.

“It's..complex, but I don't think I could live without sunlight,” replied Nala as she looked out the window at the towers and ceilings of the imperial palace and the garden beyond them. “I was changed, my life tied to an Elf Tree. I think in the process I became partly a tree.”

“Ahnir told me your story,” said Gareth. He had thought his half-bloodedness was a difficult thing at times, but it paled in comparison to what the young elf before him had been pulled into. “At times it's not easy being different, but if you keep in mind that it is what we do that most defines us in other peoples eyes, then you are bound for a better life.”

Nala smiled up at the big man. “The goddess promised me I would not walk my path alone. I'm glad you have happened upon it.”

Gareth shifted uncomfortably and looked away feeling a bit abashed. "I'll go see if I can't find you something to eat." He was quick to leave the room.

Nala chuckled to herself as the door closed behind the big man.



"Well?" asked Cheid from Ahnilr. The priestess was leaning over Skander, praying and channelling healing powers to the old wizard. Even compared to yesterday he was looking much better. The priestess did not respond.

Cheid shifted for a better look. He had his doubts whether the old wizard could yet be awakened. He needed more time to recover. Maybe the goddess would grant extra favour today? After all, she had made it clear yesterday that they needed to talk with the old wizard. In the process she had also created a whole bunch of new problems and Cheid had spent the better part of last night working on them in his mind. Despite that, solutions were few.

Skander coughed, showing the first sign of life since his fall from the Tower. Ahnilr leaned back and looked relieved. Cheid stepped closer and took hold of Skander's hand.

"Master, can you hear me?" he asked, looking equally relieved as Ahnilr.

The wizard coughed again and opened his eyes. He had trouble focusing them. "Where..?" He coughed again. His throat was dry as a desert.

Ahnilr handed Cheid a cup filled with water and he helped the wizard take a few sips. "You're in my room," explained Cheid. "You've been out of it for a few days since the explosion. It's a small miracle you're even alive."

Skander breathed in heavily. There was a rasping sound every time he did that. "What has happened?" he asked, struggling with every word.

Explaining it all took quite a bit of time from Cheid, but it was needed for Skander to fully appreciate the situation. Otherwise he might not have been willing to discuss the last trick he supposedly had. As the story progressed, he seemed to gain strength, contrary to fears Ahnilr had expressed about him being up for a long time.

"Shit," muttered Skander as Cheid finished his story. The word seemed insufficient to sum up the mess that had cropped up, but it was all Skander had

the strength for.

“We believe that following the course of action Lorie gave us is the wisest right now. What we need from you is the last trick from your sleeve,” said Cheid. He feared that Skander might slip back to unconsciousness at any moment, so he pushed on hard to get what was needed.

“It's hidden,” said Skander. He still struggled to produce every word.

“Where? In your study?”

The old wizard shook his head. “In the library. Section on spirits. Third shelf. Fourth book from the top row. Page five. Read..first..letter..every..line..” Skander closed his eyes and fell unconscious.

Cheid looked to Ahnilr who took a quick look at Skander. His breathing was calm.

“He's just asleep,” said the priestess. Cheid let out a sigh of relief.

“Let us hope the book is where he said it would be,” said the apprentice.

“And if it isn't?” asked Ahnilr.

“Then we'll have to talk with him again.”

Cheid left the room for the library. The priestess remained behind to monitor Skander. The corridors were empty of student. Many of them were in class during this time. The fall of the Tower Master was not allowed to disrupt the daily routines too much. He was, after all, not that involved in the daily teaching activities. He mostly just managed things on a larger scale and made decisions regarding filling position and so on. The day to day teaching and other duties were handled by lesser masters.

Cheid stepped onto a transport disc and instructed it to take him to the library level. The library level actually took several floors of space. It was one of the few places in the Tower than had stairs leading from floor to floor. Much of the space was filled by shelf after shelf filled with books, but there were a few islands of tables and chairs to allow for on location research. Cheid found a few student doing just that when he arrived. They greeted him with a silent nod, but otherwise left him to his task.

He hurried through the corridors the shelves created. It was an familiar place for him and he knew exactly where he needed to go. He enjoyed the

atmosphere of the library and often went there when he had spare time. The smell of the old books and the silence took him to places in his memories no other place would take him. For inexperienced students the library could become a maze where they got lost and there were librarians available to guide such students or fetch the book they wanted for them.

It took Cheid but moments to find the right shelf, find the right book and flip to the right page. He looked around to ensure he was alone and then read the first letters of every line on the page in a soft voice that did not carry far. He felt the familiar tug of magic at work when he finished, but saw no obvious effect immediately.

Then, a floor stone rose just a few feet away from him. It floated up all the way to eye level with Cheid. The young wizard put the book back in the shelf and looked into the hole the stone had left behind. He found a box in the hole and took it out. The stone floating above him descended silently back in place. How many other such hideouts did the old wizard have stashed around the tower? It was a clever way to ensure items were safe even from such disasters that had struck the Tower Master.

Cheid examined the box. There was nothing particularly interesting about it. Just a normal wooden box of about two feet in length and a foot in width. He opened the box, hoping what was inside would be more interesting.

There was dry hay inside and Cheid had to dig in a bit to reveal what was underneath. He lifted out a cylinder made out of wootz steel that barely fit inside the box. On one end it had a hollow spike and on the other a handle that could be pressed down. The cylinder itself was hollow with a latch that opened, allowing something to be placed inside it. Cheid dug around the box some more and happened upon a glass container that was filled with a cloudy liquid. The container seemed to fit inside the cylinder perfectly.

He shook his head and placed the items back inside the box. How this was going to help them was beyond him, but the goddess and his master had deemed the items valuable to the cause. He needed to talk with Skander some more to find out what the item was and what it was supposed to be used for.

Cheid grabbed the box under his arm and started to make his way back to

his quarters. He was certain the cloudy mixture was one of his masters many potion mixtures. The question was what sort of an mixture was it? Trying it would have been madness since it was as likely to kill you as it was to do something beneficial to you. The hollow cylinder seemed to be a delivery system for the mixture, but for what would you need such a huge dose?

“Sometimes I wish you'd share more with me, master,” muttered Cheid to himself as he walked the empty corridors to his room. Skander was still unconscious despite Ahnilr leaning over him again with prayers. She stopped when Cheid entered the room and set down the box on the single desk in the room.

“Is that it?” asked the priestess and moved to examine the box.

“Yes, but I have no idea what it is or what its use is,” replied Cheid.

Ahnilr opened the box and examined the cylinder and the glass container. She had to shrug her shoulders and admit she had no clue either.

“We need to talk to Skander again,” said Cheid with a determined voice.

“I don't think we can. Not today.” There was a reluctance in the priestesses voice towards waking up the old wizard again.

“This isn't the time to be hesitant,” said Cheid. It pained him to say it, but he knew that if it was him laying there unconscious, his master would have slapped him until he woke up and spilled the information. “We need to get moving as fast as we can.”

The priestess did not seem convinced, but she returned to the bed and her prayers again. It took a lot of effort out of her, but Skander awoke once more.

“Master, I got the items, but we have no idea what they are or how to use them. We need you to tell us,” said Cheid. Skander looked confused for a moment, but then the memory came back to him.

“It is a device I had crafted for a particular occasion. It is pure chance it might now become useful,” said Skander. He still had trouble talking and the words came to him with a slight struggle. “The liquid will kill anything. I mean it. I've tested it on enough exotic beings to say that with certainty. The problem is you have to inject a large amount of it into what you want to die. That is what the cylinder device is used for. You put the liquid container inside it, stick the hollow

needle into your target and push the piston at the top to push the liquid out.”

“What are we supposed to use it on?” asked Cheid.

Skander managed a grin. “Deremoth's dragon, of course, should he break the seal.”

Cheid looked at his master in disbelief. “How are we supposed to manage to do that?”

“You should hope you don't need to figure that out, but now you have something to fall back if you need to,” said Skander.

“Let us hope we do not need to,” said Ahnilr as she checked on Skander. “He needs to rest now. We have what we wanted.”

Cheid nodded. “You should do as the priestess says, master. We will handle things from here on.”

“You damn well better,” muttered the old wizard. “I don't want to wake up to a world where Deremoth roams free.” Skander closed his eyes and seemed to fall asleep.

“We should go see if Nala has awoken. We need to talk to the empress as well,” said Ahnilr after ensuring Skander was comfortable.

“They'll think we've lost our minds when we tell them about this thing,” said Cheid as he picked up the would be dragon slaying device.

“Are you sure we haven't?” asked Ahnilr as she gathered her things and opened the door.

“No. No I'm not,” Cheid had to admit. The chain of events leading up to this point was far from sane and the choices made along the way were perhaps not the wisest, so the thought of having lost his mind did not seem too far fetched to him.



Nala felt full. Somehow Gareth had managed to find enough food to host a small banquet. Even her ravenous hunger had not been enough to eat it all and even Gareth's help did not change the situation that there were still several chicken legs on a large platter, along with baked potatoes, roasted pork, gravy, cheese and an assortment of fruits.

“What did you do? Loot the garrison for all its food?” asked Nala as she leaned back in her chair and nibbled on some grapefruit. It was her first time eating them and she found them quite delicious.

Gareth gulped down the bit of chicken he had just ripped off the leg in his hand. “I just asked the nearest servant for some food. I guess they eat a bit differently here in the palace.” He raised a large mug and gulped down a bit of the beer.

“I guess so,” replied Nala as she eyed the large man sitting opposite to her. She was not unaware that the man had saved her life on the bridge to the Tower. Were it not for him she'd have fallen to the river below and an almost certain death. She was not unaware that the man paid special attention to her. She found it more likely he had grabbed a servant by the collar, carried him with him to the kitchen and ensured they got an ample portion of food by intimidating the kitchen staff. Not that she minded a bit of harmless extra attention. It actually made her feel nice and Gareth was far from the worst man she had ran across.

“You're not fully human, are you?” asked Nala of the big man. It was on impulse that she asked the question.

Gareth stopped eating and looked at Nala. “No, I'm not. My mother was human, but my father was a troll.”

“How did that happen?” asked Nala. It genuinely intrigued her. From what she had gathered trolls were not the most likely of the races to get intimate with another one, especially a human.

Gareth shrugged his shoulders. “I suppose it was the usual. Woman meets man, they fall in love and so on.” He bit into to the chicken leg again.

“You mean you don't know?” asked Nala.

“My mother died when I was seven. My father, well, I never met him. What little I know about him is what I can remember my mother telling me.” Gareth spoke in a calm voice that didn't show any emotion.

“I'm sorry. I didn't know.” Nala felt bad for asking about a painful past.

Gareth smiled. “Don't worry about it. Nothing to be done about it. Do I wish my life had been different and that my mother had lived longer and that I'd met my father? Sure. Have I lived a bad life despite all that has happened? No. I'm

mostly proud of who and what I am.”

“Mostly?”

“Everyone makes mistakes at one point or another in their life,” replied Gareth. His tone made it clear it was not a subject he wished to discuss further at this time.

Nala nibbled on the grapes in silence. Gareth continued devouring the chicken legs. The silence was closing in on being uncomfortable when there was a knock on the door. Nala rose to open the door. The food, sunlight and rest had done their job. She was feeling much better, almost normal by now.

It was Cheid and Ahnilr and both of them seemed pleased to see Nala up and walking. Cheid frowned at Gareth who remained seated and enjoying the food.

“Weren't you supposed to look after her?” asked Cheid of the big man.

“Who do you think got her all this food?” asked Gareth, not phased at all by the glare he received in response. He just grinned and grabbed another chicken leg.

“Gareth told me you were talking to Skander. Did he tell you what you needed to hear?” asked Nala of the two after they had found a seat for themselves.

“He did,” replied Cheid.

“Though it wasn't exactly what we might have hoped for,” added Ahnilr dryly.

They explained briefly what they had discovered. The look of disbelief was equally great on Nala's and Gareth's faces.

“Damn that old bastard. I knew he had crazy ideas at times, but something like this?” Gareth sounded like he had trouble believing what he was hearing.

“He is right, though,” said Nala. “Where we previously had nothing to fall back on, we now have something.”

“Even if that something is as crazy as jumping from the top of the Towers of Magic and thinking you'll grow wings on the way down,” muttered Gareth.

Nala glanced at the big man with a stern look on her face. He raised his hands in surrender and returned to emptying the table of food. Ahnilr had a

small smile on her face as she observed the two.

“So what do we do now?” asked Nala.

“We'll talk about that when the empress gets here,” replied Cheid. “She needs to weigh in on the matter as well.”

Nala nodded. Eleria was likely the one to help them the most so taking her words of advice would be wise. She looked around and suddenly realized Nisoen was not in the room. “Where's Nisoen?”

“He's resting,” said Ahnilr. “His wounds still take a toll on him. I'm amazed he managed as well as he did yesterday.”

“A soldiers pride,” said Gareth from the table. He had yet another chicken leg in hand.

“Shouldn't he be here as well?” asked Nala. The old soldier could well have some ideas that the others might not think of.

“It's better if he rests,” said Ahnilr. “I have a feeling we will need him at full strength where we'll be going next.”

Cheid nodded in agreement. It was then that the door opened and the empress entered. She did not bother knocking, it was her palace after all. She wore a surprisingly common looking attire, something you might find on a wealthy merchants daughter. She waved everyone to remain seated, though none of them had started to get up. It was a force of habit for her.

“How was Skander?” Eleria asked as she had taken a seat.

“Better,” replied Cheid.

“Did you find out what his last trick is?” The empress wasted little time in getting to business.

Cheid showed the empress the device they had found and explained its use. Ahnilr gave some more information on Skanders condition in the process.

Eleria shook her head. “I was hoping it would be more than a device that asked for a suicidal wielder, but I suppose it is better than nothing.”

“The question is, where do we go from here?” said Cheid.

“The goddess pointed out our path,” said the empress. “We must send a group to Moroth's Tooth. Your friend Nala must be in that group.” The empress looked at the green haired elf. She was uncertain whether sending her on the

journey was the wisest thing to do. The events of last evening had done nothing to increase her trust in the goddess or her choice of tools.

“The fastest way there is by boat to Wroth and from there to Serum and then through The Great Forest,” said Cheid. “If we can get help from the elves the trip would go that much quicker.”

“Nisoen and I will certainly do our best to ensure help is given,” said Ahnilr. She did not mention that the fate of Nerduin would make that a more difficult task than it should have been. She did not wish to lay additional burden on Nala's shoulders. “We'll go with the group in any case. We still have our original duty to fulfil.”

“Of course.” The empress nodded her head to Ahnilr.

“I might as well go too,” said Gareth. Everyone turned their eyes at him. “Don't look so surprised. The old man paid me to see this through and that's what I'll do.”

Ahnilr had a small smile on her face. She was certain there was something entirely different than gold behind the man's motives, but she thought it best to let him have his little lie to hide behind.

“How about you, Cheid?” asked Nala. The young wizard had proven quite useful during the encounter with Derian and his monster and would no doubt be equally useful in the future. He was also the one Nala had known the longest in the group and she hoped he would come along if only to give her a slightly more familiar face to look at during the journey.

The young apprentice had to think about the situation for a bit before responding. He did not wish to leave Skander alone in his current state, but then again the old wizard would have demanded he go with the group to keep an eye on how things progressed. He had to admit that he wanted to go as well, if only to ensure the safety of Nala, so in the end the decision was quite easy for him. “I'll go with the group,” he said.

“Well then, it seems we have our group,” said the empress. “I'll arrange my personal ship to transport you to Wroth. From there on, you'll be on your own.”

“Thank you. That's more than we could ask for,” said Cheid. Nala nodded in agreement as did Ahnilr. Expecting the empress to try and extend her powers

beyond the borders of her domain was not going to bring about much results. The relations with the neighbouring kingdoms were not that good to begin with, and seeing soldiers from the empire march in their lands would only further strain relations. Gaining support by diplomacy would have taken too long. They could only hope the elves would be inclined to offer extra assistance.

“We do still have one problem,” said Ahnilr. Everyone turned to look at the priestess. “We do not know where, exactly, Deremoth lays sealed.”

The mood in the room sunk like a rock thrown into a lake.

“The area around Moroth's Tooth isn't small. Searching would be a futile attempt. It could take years to find it. We need clear directions,” said Cheid.

“Where do you suppose we'd get them?” asked Gareth.

“I don't know,” admitted Cheid.

Nala knew. The moment Ahnilr had mentioned they didn't know where Deremoth was, a memory had rushed into her mind. She had seen the cave entrance and how to get there. She had seen the previous Guardian Spirit venture in with torch in hand, chasing after someone. She had seen the large hall like opening that followed the long, downward sloping tunnel. The dragon encased in crystal like substance filled much of it. She felt the same feelings as her predecessor did at the sight. The mixture of disgust and fear. The dragon invoked terror even in its sealed form. The memory faded as her predecessor ventured closer to the sealed creature.

“I know where we need to go,” said Nala. This time everyone turned to look at her with a surprised expression.

“How?” asked Ahnilr.

“The memories of my predecessors. One of them visited the site. I know where it is,” replied Nala.

“Are you certain? It had to have been centuries ago. Much could have changed,” said Ahnilr.

Nala nodded. “There were enough permanent land signs for me to find my way. They can't have all changed.”

“Well, another problem solved then,” said Eleria. “I'll continue efforts back here to come up with a solution to strengthening the seal. Maybe there is

something yet we can do about it.”

“Lets hope there aren't any more problems,” muttered Gareth.

“You should all rest while you can,” said the empress. “Let me arrange the details of the journey and round up what you need equipment wise.”

“I'd like to take a last look at Skander to ensure he is well taken care of,” said Ahnilr.

“I've got a few things I need to wrap up the the Towers,” said Cheid.

“I need to sort a few things out myself,” said Gareth.

The empress eyed all three of them as they rose to leave. “You don't know the meaning of rest, do you?”

“We'll have a day or two to rest on the ship,” said Cheid. “Besides, some things you just have to do yourself.”

“Fine, fine,” conceded Eleria. “Just make sure you're at the docks by sunrise.”

“Of course,” replied Cheid and left the room. Ahnilr and Gareth followed him, leaving only the empress and Nala in the room.

“And how are you doing?” asked the empress of Nala.

“Much better,” replied Nala. She felt a bit uncomfortable being alone with Eleria.

“Does what happened last evening happen often?” There didn't seem to be anything besides pure curiosity behind her question.

“It was only the second time it has happened,” replied Nala. “Though both instances have happened within a few days.”

“You think it'll continue to happen?”

Nala shrugged her shoulders. “I honestly don't know. What the goddess does and why is sometimes beyond me.”

“So you wouldn't have killed Nerduin?” asked the empress.

The question surprised Nala. Would she have? Earlier that day she had wanted to sink her sword in his guts, but given the opportunity would she really have done it? She had to sort her thought for a moment before answering. “No, I wouldn't have killed him had it been up to me.”

Eleria smiled a bit and stood up. “That's what I wanted to hear. You have

the room for the night. I can arrange your belonging to be retrieved from the inn you're staying at so you can rest some more.”

“Thank you,” said Nala and returned the small smile.

Even though she was feeling better, some more rest would not hurt. As soon as the empress had left the room she put herself in the sunlight and relaxed.



Calling the ship luxurious would have been an understatement. It wasn't a large ship, only two masts, but it pushed the boundaries for what could sail up river. It had intricate decorations along the railing with ample use of gold paint. The figurehead in the front was carved to look like the empress herself and the paint job on it almost brought it to life.

Nala and Ahnilr had their cabin at the stern of the ship. It was large enough to hold them both comfortably and the décor made it seem like they were inside an high-end inn instead of a ship. Gareth, Cheid and Nisoen had their cabin at the bow of the ship and even though it was slightly less luxurious, it still left them with comfortable enough settings.

The harbour was coming to life with the first ships of the day arriving and leaving. The massive iron chains that blocked access to the harbour during the night had been lowered so ships could pass. Nala stood by the railing and looked on with curiosity as the people at the docks went about their business.

There were carts loaded with good passing by, a few sailors whose evening had gone on too long rushing to their ships and harbour officials with their clerks rushing about to ensure the empress got her share in docking fees and taxes.

The smell was different from what she had expected. By the stories she had heard and read there should have been a smell of fish, but instead the dock was filled with scents from spices, burning incense, paint and fresh tar as the crews did some small repairs and waterproofing before setting out again.

What caught Nala's attention was the small column headed for the ship she was on. She could make out Ahnilr and Nisoen leading it. A wagon followed the

two elves. Nala felt a lump form in her throat. The wagon held the remains of the elven ambassador as well as Nerduin.

She watched on as the wagon rolled to a stop and crew from the ship lifted out the two bodies. They were in wooden boxes, wrapped in cloth and covered with ice. The benefits of being of someone of significance. You could expect priests to take the effort of preserving your remains until they could be put to ground with the proper ceremonies in the proper place. A commoner would have found his corpse rotting away until the smell started to bother the caretakers at which point they'd dispose of the body the way they saw fit, unless the family happened to claim the body before then.

Nala looked on as the bodies were carried aboard the ship and below deck. Seeing the two bodies brought back the thoughts the rush to start their journey had swept away. How could she have done that to Nerduin? Nala knew she wasn't responsible, but it still bothered her that she had been used to kill an elf, even if that elf had been a selfish bastard that might even have deserved it. It had not been her choice and that was what bothered her. Would the goddess do it again? Was she to be a mere tool used in things that went against her own ideals?

She turned away and returned to observing the docks. The horses pulling the wagon had been led on-board and now a large crane and a system of ropes and pulleys was being used to load up the wagon. It would be their transport once they reached Wroth.

Gareth and Cheid had yet to return. They had brought their things aboard, but had left to make some last minute acquisitions. What more they needed besides what the empress had already supplied the group with escaped Nala.

A gentle hand on her shoulder startled her and made her jump a bit. The small laugh from Ahnilr calmed her down.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you," said the priestess.

Nala looked a bit abashed. "I was just deep in thought."

"Thinking about what?" asked the priestess as she leaned on the railing next to Nala.

"About Nerduin," admitted Nala.

The priestess turned to look at her with concern. "I should have spoken to you about it sooner, but the travel preparations got in the way. I'm sorry."

Nala looked back at the priestess, curious.

"Do you know what Loriel did to him?" asked Ahnilr.

"She killed him," said Nala bluntly.

"No," said the priestess firmly. "She tested him and he failed. For that he was judged."

"Tested him for what?" asked Nala. Her curiosity had been awakened.

"Whether he was pure. Whether he had been tainted. The flames burned him because he had dealt with things he should not have."

"Stop being cryptic," snapped Nala. Between the elemental spirits that had taken a shining to her and other matters, she was in no mood for further puzzles. "I've had enough of that in recent days. Just tell me what really happened. Explain it to me."

The priestess looked a bit surprised to hear Nala say that to her in such a tone, but she began to explain none the less. "The Flames of Purification is what she used. It is something the priests of Loriel can use to test the loyalties and dealings someone has had. It sniffs out the dark bits someone has touched. It has varying degrees of effect; some might receive nothing, some might get a small burn on their fingertip and some might be consumed completely."

"So Nerduin had dealt with something he shouldn't have?" asked Nala.

Ahnilr nodded. "It can't have been just a small connection. He must have really been in deep contact with something – or someone – who had considerable evil in mind. It tainted him to the very core, otherwise he would not have burned to death."

Nala thought about the revelation. It seemed to offer an explanation to some things that had been creating doubts in her mind. Could Nerduin have been the one who had revealed the location of the Sun Blade and led Derian and his ilk straight to Nala and her parents? That seemed plausible given the new information. He had been a member of the High Council so he would have had access to the information.

"You look like you've just realized something," said Ahnilr as she examined

Nala's face.

Nala hesitated for a moment, but then decided Ahnilr could be told of her suspicions. "I and my parents have talked about how the Blades knew to come looking for us. Our only conclusion was that someone on the High Council must have spoken where he shouldn't have. With what happened to Nerduin, it could be that he was the source of the information and handed it out willingly."

Ahnilr considered the idea for a moment before reluctantly admitting that there was a good chance it might be true. "However, there is yet no proof to conclusively say that. Still, it is certainly something we should keep in mind once we get to the Elven kingdom."

"Probably something we shouldn't talk about too openly," said Nala. She knew enough to understand that such accusations needed solid proof behind them and that talking about such things without any would lead to problems for yourself rather than your intended target.

"Agreed," said Ahnilr. Something caught her attention at the docks. She saw the big man that stood above the rest of the people like a man on a horse would. Gareth and Cheid were returning. "Looks like our two companions are returning. We'll be able to set sail soon."

Nala peered to the crowd and saw the two. Both were carrying packages in their hands. "Good. The sooner we get moving, the better."

The two men walked the plank to the ship and stashed their shopping's in their cabin before returning to the deck. They made their way to Nala and Ahnilr.

"You find what ever it is that you went shopping for?" asked Nala.

The two men gave her a boyish grin. "Sure did."

Their grins made Nala think they had something planned. "What did you buy?" she asked with a suspicious voice.

"It's a secret," replied Cheid and winked at her. The young wizard looked happier and more relaxed than he had in days. Despite everything that had happened, it seemed an adventure was enough to push away any dark clouds hovering in his mind.

Nala turned to look at Gareth, hoping for a more comprehensive answer from the big man, but he offered no more information. He had the same aura

about him as Cheid did. The two seemed to share the almost child like enjoyment of travel and promise of future adventure. The thought that they'd be able to visit the Elven Kingdom no doubt played a part in their good mood, despite the dark nature of the rest of their journey.

The captain of the ship walked over to the group. He had a white moustache that gave him a certain air of respectability. His skin was well tanned from all the hours spent on deck. "Is all of your group aboard?" he asked in a coarse voice.

"We're all set, captain," replied Cheid.

"Good. We'll head out then. The empress instructed us to ensure your safe arrival to Wroth and that is what we'll do." Without saying any more, the captain turned and began shouting orders. The crew hustled around in a seemingly chaotic manner, but the effectiveness of their actions left nothing to doubt. The ships was under way faster than any of Nala's group could have imagined.



Derian looked back at the city of Ramyn from top of his horse. The escape had taken him longer than he had anticipated. The city guard had been alerted quickly to their presence and they had had to spend the entire day avoiding patrols until they could finally slip through the checkpoints with the aid of a few loyal members of the Blades among the guards.

Not all had gone to plan. Losing two of the Blood Reavers was a big blow to the strength of the Blades. He had sorely underestimated his adversaries. That priestess in particular had been an unwelcome surprise.

Not all had gone badly though. The Sun Blade had been destroyed. Though not the optimal outcome, he was happy to take it. It would be a slower road to freeing Deremoth, but it was a road that had previously been closed. Now all they needed to do was walk the path and cut down anyone who got in the way.

The two gladiators and Dayr had escaped with Derian. They would no doubt prove useful down the road. He was certain there would be people coming to them. They might get there slower than they did, but they would come. He had

the advantage of knowing where Deremoth laid shackled. Knowing how difficult the place was to find he had no doubt it would take anyone else a considerable amount of time and energy to find the way in. That left plenty of time for Derian and his companion to work on weakening the seal and gathering more bodies to defend the location.

He whipped the horse into motion, his companions following him. They rode through the open plains, straight towards Moroth's Tooth.