

Guardian Spirit

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Part Three

Fallout

Chapter 17

*T*he ship sailed smoothly up the river, pushed by the gentle breeze that blew from down the river. Nala spent much of the first day on the deck, enjoying the sunshine and looking at the ships crew as they went along performing their duties. It was her first time on a ship so everything about it intrigued her. The crew respected her privacy and despite the curious glances she gathered with her appearance, they did not approach her unless she made the initiative to ask something. They were happy to give her questions answers. Perhaps the fact she was showing genuine interest in their duties and life aboard a ship helped them accept her more readily.

Nala did note that the gentle breeze seemed to carry with it whispers that only she could hear. Sometimes when she was leaning on the railing she could swear she heard whisper coming from the water below. She figured they were similar elemental spirits that had talked to her in the Towers of Magic and gave them little notice.

As evening fell and the sunlight began to wane, large lanterns were lit at the stern and bow of the ship. The ship lowered anchor for the night since sailing in the darkness would have been too dangerous and the crew needed rest from the rowing as well.

For Nala and Ahnilr, there was no worry as they settled in the comfort of their cabin. Cheid and Gareth had their own at the bow of the ship. The calm river made the ride a smooth one so Nala had no trouble sleeping. There was no heaving or rocking that could have made her sick. She slept soundly and well into the next day. Even then she would not have woken up had it not been for Ahnilr and a tray of food that made her mouth water.

“Good morning, though I suppose it is almost mid day,” said Ahnilr with a small smile.

Nala rose from under her blanket and rubbed her eyes, still groggy from having just woken up. “Good morning,” she mumbled and ruffled her greenish hair. Her nightgown was slipping over one of her shoulders.

“Breakfast?” asked the priestess and motioned towards the tray of food she had brought with her.

“Yes, please,” said Nala and stumbled to the small table and sat on a chair. Both of them were fastened tight to the floor so they wouldn't move around should the ship sail in rougher waters.

Ahnir spooned her a bowl full of stew and cut her a thick slice of bread and cheese. It almost made Nala feel like she was back home and her mother had just kicked her out of bed. It had not been that unusual and it had often ended just like the situation was now; her sitting at the table half asleep while her mother put breakfast under her nose.

“What's the matter?” asked Ahnir. Nala's thoughts must have shown on her face.

Nala managed a smile, even if it was a sorrowful one. “Just thought about my mother,” she replied to the priestess and spooned in the first mouthful of stew.

Ahnir said nothing further. Even though her own family was well and alive, she had seen plenty of those who had lost loved ones. For a long time some things would remind them of events they had experienced together with those who had been lost. It was part of the process of grieving and it was best to let them live those moments in peace. The expression on Nala's face told the priestess enough to let her be and enjoy the meal in silence.

“When will we arrive in Wroth?” asked Nala as she finished her meal.

“I heard it was a six day trip up the river, so maybe five days from now,” replied Ahnir.

Nala ruffled her hair a bit more, but found her fingers stuck in a tangle. She sighed as she raked her fingers through the locks of hair to untangle it.

“Do you have a brush?” asked Ahnir.

“I do.”

“Go get it then. I'll brush your hair,” said the priestess. “Otherwise your hair will be in tangles for the rest of your life.”

Nala trudged over to her backpack and dug out the brush she had taken from her parents room. Ahnir sat on the bed she had been sleeping in and Nala

sat down on the floor in front of her. Even though the tangles in her hair demanded some firm approaching, it was soothing to just sit and have someone look after her.

It also brought back memories for her of times when her mother had done very similar things. Nala had to blink hard not to cry.

“There's nothing wrong in crying,” said Ahnilr. The priestess seemed to have an uncanny ability to read Nala's mind. Perhaps it was her body language that allowed her to so accurately see what the young elf was thinking.

“I promised myself I wouldn't cry over their loss any more,” said Nala in a steady voice. “I spent several days doing just that.”

“It's not good to suppress emotions like that,” replied Ahnilr and continued brushing Nala's hair. “They might seep out when you least want them to.”

It was easy to forget that Nala did not have centuries of wisdom and life experience to rely on. She had mere decades that made her almost a child in the eyes of her fellow elves. The fact she had been chosen by the goddess to fulfil a role that anyone would have trouble with did nothing to better the situation. The memories of the past Guardian Spirits were not consistent enough to offer her the wisdom she sometimes needed.

Ahnilr had seen that and decided she would do her best to guide the young elf where she needed it. She felt it an obligation as a priestess of Loriel to help her chosen one, but as a person she would have done the same thing. Nala seemed worthy of help even without the goddesses touch.

“What will you tell the High Council?” asked Nala suddenly. There was concern in her voice and Ahnilr could not blame her for it. There were those who would likely blame her for Nerduins death instead of the goddess, his family likely being at the top of the list of those who would do it.

“I'll tell them the truth,” she replied to Nala. It was all she could really do. Lying would not lead to anything good.

“How do you think they'll take it?”

“Most of the High Council will accept it once they meet you. It's hard to deny what you are.” A particularly nasty tangle happened upon the brush and demanded the priestesses attention for a moment.

“But some will not?” asked Nala, wincing as the priestess worked on the tangle.

“Nerduin's family is likely to ignore the facts. They have pull in the High Council that might cause a few members to side with them.”

“So they'll blame me?” asked Nala weakly. The thought laid a burden on her. She had not wanted Nerduin dead, but the goddess had deemed otherwise. There was nothing she could have done to prevent it, but now she'd likely face consequences for it? It did not seem right to her.

“Possibly,” replied Ahnilr. The tangle had been smoothed over. “But you should not allow that to deter you from being who and what you are. Be proud of yourself.”

“How can I?” asked Nala. “Even I sometimes think that hiding behind the excuse that 'Loriel did it' feels weak.”

“But it's the truth,” said Ahnilr sternly. “In the end that is what will prevail.”

“We can hope,” said Nala silently. Ahnilr continued to brush her hair. The tangles were gone now and the hair was becoming smooth and shiny. The priestess put down the brush, leaned forward and embraced Nala from behind in an affectionate manner.

“You have friends who will stand by you, no matter what. That alone will be enough to help you overcome anything,” she said to Nala.

The embrace from the priestess had come as a surprise to Nala. It felt like forever since someone had given her such an hug. It seemed to fill a need inside her and she instantly felt better. The words of the priestess further made her feel better. She turned around and threw her arms around the priestess, returning her embrace.

“Thank you,” she whispered to the priestess while fighting away tears. This time they were not ones of sadness, but of happiness.



Cheid stood on the deck of the ship, leaning comfortably against the railing

and watched as the scenery slowly passed by. Despite everything, this was his first time going upriver into Wroth. The young man intended to enjoy what he could during the journey, despite the gloomy circumstances surrounding it.

“First time going this way?” asked Gareth as he settled next to the young wizard.

“Yeah, it is,” replied Cheid. “You ever been to Wroth?”

“I have,” said Gareth. “A couple of times. When you work for Skander as long as I have, you end up travelling quite a lot. I suppose some might call it a perk of the job.”

“Some might call it a downside,” said Cheid. The young wizard was the sort who enjoyed the stability a steady home provided. The occasional excursion to somewhere else could be fun, but in the end there was no place like home in his mind.

“Some might,” admitted Gareth. “I never much minded.”

“How long have you worked for Skander anyway?” asked Cheid. Skander had never told him much of the people working for him.

Gareth pondered the question for a bit. How long had he worked for the old wizard? It was hard to remember a time he hadn't. “Probably around twenty years,” he finally replied.

“That's a long time,” said Cheid.

Gareth nodded. “It started out as a simple bodyguard job, but over the years it turned into secret missions and all sorts of other, more dangerous, things.”

“He has a habit of doing that,” said Cheid with a small smile. “He'll first give you a little something and before you know it, you're in it knee deep with no way out.”

Gareth chuckled. “Sounds exactly like him.”

“I hope he'll be all right,” said Cheid. The topic had brought back some of the worries he had over his health. “He did look much better when we left.”

“He's a tough old bastard,” said Gareth. “If he's not dead yet, he'll be better in a weeks time.”

Cheid just nodded. Deep inside he knew the big man was right. Few were

as tough and resilient as Skander. His age was a testament to that considering the lifestyle he led and the dangers he faced.

“Nisoen still resting?” asked the young wizard just to keep the conversation going.

Gareth nodded. “He may not be as tough as Skander is, but he's no softie either. A lesser man would still be bed ridden and not going anywhere.”

Cheid smiled a little. “Ahnir has a good touch in that regard.”

“That woman can work wonders,” admitted Gareth. While he felt the pain of any injury just as others, he had never really experienced anything that had him in bed for a long time. He couldn't really relate to such injuries, but he could appreciate that the priestess did a wonderful job of shortening such situations for others.

“I'm glad we have someone like her with us,” said Cheid.

Gareth couldn't argue against that.

“When do you suppose we'll arrive in Wroth?” asked Cheid just to break the silence.

“Tomorrow, the day after at the latest,” replied Gareth. “The ship's making good time even against the current. The wind has been in our favour.”

“I wouldn't mind a few more days on this ship. Once we get off, I doubt we'll have as comfortable places to rest in,” said Cheid.

“I know what you mean. I'm not looking forward to sleeping on the ground,” said Gareth.

“At least the company doesn't seem to be too bad,” said Cheid with a small smile.

“Now that Nerduin is gone,” grinned Gareth. Despite everything his remark made Cheid chuckle. He'd never admit it in public, but the big man was right. Now that Nerduin was gone, they were left with a group that got along quite well and had already been through a trial by fire and survived it. Still, hearing the name reminded Cheid of something he had meant to discuss with Gareth.

“You know some will blame her for his death, right?” asked Cheid of the big man.

Gareth nodded. “I figure there will be some.”

“We need to look out for her,” said Cheid. His voice was determined.

Gareth nodded again. “I’ll do my best to keep her safe.”

Cheid turned to look at the big man and extended his hand to him. “That makes two of us.”

Gareth turned to the young wizard and took his hand. “Let’s hope that’s enough.”



It was late afternoon as the ship sailed into view of Wroth. Compared to Ramyn the city seemed tiny, but would likely have dwarfed many other cities. High walls surrounded the city and a total of three rings of walls sectioned the city, making it a fortress that few would want to attack. Unlike Ramyn, most of the buildings were of wood and few reached more than two stories in height.

The ship sailed into port. The insignia of the empress of Ramyn attracted quite a crowd. It was rare to see a ship bearing those symbols dock in the city without prior announcement. The captain had to do a whole lot of explaining to the dock officials about his business in the city, though he did manage to do it without drawing too much attention to the small group that was being left in the city.

It took a few hours, but finally the group was cleared to leave the ship. By then it was too late to move out so they sought an inn for the night. The wagon and horses made that a challenging job, especially since they needed to guard the wagon so nobody sneaked in to mess with the bodies. Losing either one of them would have made entering the Elven kingdom that much more difficult.

Finally they found an inn with a suitable stable to accommodate all their needs. Nisoen decided he would sleep with the wagons to ensure they remained untouched during the night. Nala and Ahnilr shared a room while Gareth and Cheid had a similar arrangement.

Having settled in, the group gathered in the common room to enjoy some supper before turning themselves in for the night. There was a buzz in the common room. They could over hear several references to the ship of Ramyn’s

empress and the wild guesses as to the business it had in the city. There were mentions of a small group that had departed the ship, but fortunately no one seemed to make the connection to them.

The supper was uneventful and the food wasn't the best, but it filled their stomachs. Gareth seemed to like the beer most of all. It was amazing to look how much the big man could stuff inside himself.

"We're being watched," said Cheid out of the blue. No one else had noticed anything.

"You certain?" asked Nala. She glanced around, but saw nothing but guests of the inn enjoying the evening. No one stood out. The rest of the table seemed to do the same, though no one did it too obviously.

"I'm certain. The man with the purple cloak. By the window. He has been following us ever since the harbour," said Cheid.

"A member of the Blades?" pondered Ahnilr. "Or an agent of the king of Wroth, keeping an eye on the empresses possible spies?"

"What ever the case, we should be mindful of the fact that we are being watched," said Cheid and sipped some beer from his mug. "Especially you, Nisoen. Be careful tonight."

"I will. It's not the first time I'm guarding something alone," replied the elf. He looked to be doing a lot better. The wound on his leg had healed up fairly well, much of that thanks to the efforts of Ahnilr, and he seemed to be in good spirits regarding the journey the group was on.

"I doubt the Blades would have us picked out yet, but it never hurts to be careful," said Gareth. "Derian was not caught so he might have managed to spread the word."

"Unless he's too busy gathering his followers to where Deremoth is," said Nala. She doubted Derian cared about the small group headed his way. He'd have plans to deal with them in the mountains, not in the cities where it was more difficult to place a trap or ambush someone and a body drew inevitable attention from the city guard.

"Well, we'll see how the night goes," said Nisoen as he stood up. "I think I'll turn in for the night."

Ahnir gave the elf a look that conveyed her concerns for his safety. She received an encouraging smile in return.

“Best I turn in as well,” said Cheid and stood up. He looked to Gareth, but the big man shook his head and pointed to the just filled mug of beer he had in hand. Cheid shook his head, left the table and climbed up the stair to where their room was.

Nala and Ahnir spent a bit more time at the table talking with Gareth and drinking wine, though both of them took care not to drink too much. Both women made their way to their room at the same time. They left Gareth at the table. He was still gulping down beer and nibbling on some of the leftovers of their supper.

The night passed without incident. Even Gareth managed to finally get up the stair without too much stumbling or noise. The morning brought with it light rain. It was the fine, misty sort of rain that made clothes cling to your skin and everything damp, but didn't really form puddles on the ground.

The group ate their breakfast and gathered their belongings and were on their way right after the morning buzz of people hurrying to their workplaces. They made their way to the southern gate of the city and from there took a raft across the river. The canvas covered wagon was large enough to hold them all even with the two coffins so they didn't need to buy horses. They'd need to abandon them anyway once they entered the Great Forest.

Cheid was happy to note that their shadow did not follow them further than the raft. It felt safe to assume he had been working for the powers of Wroth instead of the Blades.

Gareth grumbled about the rain as he sat on the drivers perch next to Nisoen. The wagon had just rolled off the raft and begun making its way around the lake and towards Serum, which was the last city before entering The Great Forest. It served as a sort of gateway between the elven kingdom and the human world. The journey would take them almost a month, even with the fairly well maintained road that they had to travel on. They figured that with the help of the elves, they would make good time on the rest of their journey.

Cheid, Nala and Ahnir sat in the back of the wagon, in the shelter the canvas covering it offered from the rain. Compared to the ship the wagon offered

a bumpy ride, but it still beat riding on a horse in the rain. They entertained themselves with stories and the occasional game of cards. For Nala the card games were a new curiosity that she found quite enjoyable, not least because she seemed to have luck on her side and won quite a few of the games, despite her lack of experience.

The journey itself offered very little to entertain. A few hills here and there broke the flatness of the grass plains and farmlands. Small villages and farmhouses could be seen from the distance, but none of them held enough appeal to make the group divert their course from the main road.

The road was mostly empty of other travellers. A few farmers with their wagons occasionally passed them by and a single group of travelling performers, but even they stopped the group only to ask how the road ahead of them was. Nala figured Gareth was scaring off any would be conversation strikers with just his presence and the others in the group tended to agree, though they welcomed the uninterrupted pace.

During the night the wagon offered them much needed shelter that was sorely lacking in the open plains. Despite the first days rain, the rest of the journey went under a sunny sky. It was a windy day when the group finally arrived in Serum.

It wasn't much of a city, more a collection of wooden buildings lumped together. Logging seemed to be the main industry there as they passed several sawmills on their way through. How that fit in with the nearby Elven kingdom was a bit of a mystery. Nala knew from her own upbringing that cutting down trees was deeply frowned upon. She was certain there was considerable tension between the people of the city and the elves of the forest.

She even asked about it from Cheid and Ahnilr. They had to admit that the relations were strained and that there had been incidents where loggers had found arrows whistling their way and there were cases where lone elves had found themselves beaten by the loggers. Wroth had had to negotiate with the elves several times on the matter and now there was an unsteady peace, but for how long that would last was anyone's guess.

“Should we spend the night in the city or roll on into the forest?” asked

Gareth as he peeked inside the wagon. They had rolled to a stop right by an inn.

“How long do we have to travel to reach the Elven City?” asked Cheid.

“It's probably a full days journey until we meet the first patrol,” replied Ahnilr. She did not specify how much longer it would take to get to the city from there. “With the wagon it might take longer. The road isn't exactly the best and it ends abruptly after a while. We can't really move these coffins without the help of an patrol.”

“So, spend the night here and move on in the morning?” asked Gareth.

“That seems like the wisest choice,” admitted Ahnilr.

Gareth nodded and instructed Cheid to drive the wagon to the stable behind the inn. The inn itself wasn't much to look at compared to what they had seen previously, but it would beat sleeping on the ground. Despite the run-down appearance at least the inn was clean and the keeper seemed to take pride in ensuring the food he served was excellent.

It was an uneventful evening and night. Gareth was the one who gathered the most interest, but even that was lukewarm at best and didn't go further than a few curious looks. The elves were ignored as if they weren't there, which seemed odd considering the strained relations. Perhaps the locals simply wished to avoid starting any troubles.

The morning broke with a clear sky and a slight breeze. The group ate their breakfast and moved on with their wagon. They followed a small dirt road that led into the forest. Soon they were deep in the forest.

The trees surrounding them seemed ancient and towered high above them. Thick foliage let through small slivers of sunlight to lessen the shadows of the forest.

Nala felt at home among the trees and the sounds of the forest animals. The same could be said of Ahnilr and Nisoen, but Cheid looked around himself nervously, as if expecting an attack any moment. Gareth was calmer, perhaps because he was travelling inside the wagon this time, but even he seemed a bit cautious.

They followed the dirt road as far as it took them. It finally wound up at a small clearing. There was no obvious way forward from there, just untouched

forest in every direction. This was as far as they would go with the wagon.

“What do we do now?” asked Cheid. Nisoen sat beside him at the drivers seat.

“We wait,” replied the battle hardened elf.

They did not have to wait for long.

Nala looked on with curiosity from inside the wagon as the patrol emerged from the forest. She counted twenty elves, each with a longbow in hand and a sword at their side. They were dressed to blend in and that they did, though Nala had to admit her Forest Guardian brethren at home had done a better job of it. Not that an inexperienced eye would see that. To most they were invisible among the undergrowth.

“What brings you to the Elven Kingdom?” demanded the patrol leader in elvish. He was young, perhaps a few decades older than Nala, which made it all the more interesting that he was leading a patrol like this one.

“We're attending to business set to us by the High Council. We are bringing home two fallen brethren, both former members of the High Council,” said Nisoen in the common trade language so Cheid and Gareth could follow the conversation. “I am Nisoen Dawnvine. In the name of the High Council I relieve you of your patrol duty and ask you to help us escort our fallen ones back home.”

The elves of the patrol seemed stunned at the news. The patrol leader was the first to gather himself enough to talk. He had switched to the common trade language as well. “We were aware of the demise of the ambassador, but not of another members of the Council falling. Who is it that we have lost? Who was responsible for it?”

Nisoen hesitated. Should he tell the full story? He never got to make the decision as Ahnilr stepped out of the wagon and spoke.

“The one who fell was Nerduin Stardancer,” said the priestess and looked on at the elves gathered around the small clearing. She was wearing her priestesses robe to reassure the elves of their cause.

“What happened, honoured priestess,” asked the patrol leader.

“Loriel judged him,” came the short reply from Ahnilr. Murmurs filled the air as the elves pondered the cryptic answer.

The patrol leader motioned for his men to quiet down. “What do you mean he was judged by Lorie?”

“Nerduin raised his hand against the *Mala’d Jal*,” Ahnilr wanted to continue, but the murmurs and out right shouting from the elves of the patrol made that impossible. She waited for the patrol leader to get things under control again, though even he seemed to have difficulty containing his questions. Finally things quieted down and Ahnilr could finish her explanation.

“The goddess put him to the test with the Flames of Purification. He failed and was burned to death.”

That caused another round of murmurs among the patrol.

“What you are saying is disturbing news indeed, honoured priestess,” said the patrol leader. “It has been centuries since there last was a *Mala’d Jal* and that Nerduin fell in the circumstances you describe is perhaps even more disturbing and unbelievable. Given all that, how are we to know your story is true?”

“Because I’m here,” said Nala as she emerged from the shelter of the wagon. The hood of her cape was down, allowing everyone a good view of her appearance. She felt uncomfortable under the investigative eyes of the patrol, but she bared through it.

The murmurs filled the air once more. As Nala looked around, she saw expressions of disbelief and looks of curiosity. Some turned into expressions of delight and reverence, some into concern and fear. Her appearance was a double edged sword. She brought with her the blessings of the goddess, but at the same time she was a sign that a grave threat loomed over the elves. What surprised her was that everyone seemed to see her for what she was and accepted it.

“*Mala’d Jal*,” said the patrol leader and bowed to Nala. She didn't really know how to respond to it so she just nodded her head.

“Considering all that you have presented me with, I have no choice but to agree to escort you to the city,” said the patrol leader. A few members of the patrol were still whispering to each other excitedly, but most seemed to have calmed down and come to grips with the situation.

A few orders and a bit of time and the group was on its way. Four elves carried each of the wooden boxes with the bodies. Two elves were left behind to

keep an eye on the horses and the wagon and the clearing in case anyone else was seeking passage to the elven kingdom. They also served as guards against anyone who might have been following the small group.

Nala felt a bit of joy walking through a forest once more. Compared to the stone laden streets of Ramyn the ground felt soft under her feet and much more comfortable to walk on. Had she asked Cheid about it she might have gotten a different opinion of which was more comfortable. The young wizard seemed to have trouble finding his footing and moving without being scratched by every low hanging tree branch or bush.

The patrol leader held a tight pace and by evening Cheid and Gareth were sweating profusely and seemed ready to collapse at any moment. They were not used to trekking in the wild. Even Gareth, who thought he was in good condition, had to admit he was not prepared for this sort of exercise.

Nisoen looked a bit worse off still, mainly due to his wound still acting up occasionally, but he managed on without complaints. Ahnilr made some concerned glances at him from time to time, but said nothing since the veteran seemed determined not to let anything get the better of him.

Nala seemed to be the one to enjoy the trek the most. There was a slight tingle in her legs, signalling small protest at the strain, but she found it invigorating. It had been a while since she had aches that came from something other than a fight.

What the others around her did not notice was the elemental spirits that she seemed to attract. Many of them brushed past her and the others, some of the earth spirits she stepped on unknowingly, but they all greeted her as a sister and welcomed her to the forest.

She did her best to act normal and ignore the spirits, but she had to wonder what was going on. The spirits at the Tower had been baffling enough, but now there was a small army of them from different elements greeting her. She realized it was something she needed to talk about to someone with more knowledge than her. Perhaps her parents or Ahnilr or a High Priest of Lorie. There was bound to be one in the elven city after all, who else would know more about Guardian Spirits and their powers?

It was getting dark when the patrol leader finally ordered a stop. Chedi and Gareth slumped down immediately to catch their breath. The elves tried their best, but could not hide the small smiles as they passed the two to set up proper camp.

“You two all right?” asked Nala as she walked up to them.

“Fine, fine,” gasped Cheid. “Just a little short of breath.”

“Good exercise,” said Gareth in between breaths.

Nala smiled. “There will be more of it tomorrow.”

The two men groaned. They knew their muscles and joints would be sore and stiff tomorrow, making the trek that much more worse.

“Don't tease the boys,” chided Ahnilr as she passed by.

Nala pretended to pout, but it soon turned into a mischievous giggle.

“You're enjoying this, aren't you?” asked Cheid in an accusing tone.

“What's there not to enjoy?” asked Nala innocently. “This forest is so beautiful.”

Cheid grumbled something Nala could not make out, but she could guess the general nature of his words.

The evening went along peacefully. Small fires kept the group warm along with some elven wine, music and good stories. The elves had plenty to share, but the small group they had picked up remained reluctant to share details of what had brought them to the forest, besides the return of the two bodies.

The night passed by without incident and they continued their travels after a quick breakfast. Cheid and Gareth had been right to fear the continuation of the journey. Their muscles cried in protest, but both pushed on with grimacing expressions on their faces.

It was two more days until they reached the edge of the city.

Ahnilr had compared the elven city to Ramyn and Nala had to agree that there were some similarities, but in her mind the city was different from Ramyn like day from night.

Where Ramyn was cold and lifeless stone, the elven city was vibrant and full of life. There were birds and other animals as much as there were elves. The Elf Trees towered higher than the stone buildings of Ramyn, but there were no

walkways connecting them to each other, save for the groups of trees that belonged to members of the same family. Some such groups comprised of tens of trees and seemed to create a small town of their own.

The ground was mostly grass and other undergrowth you'd expect to find in any forest. A few beaten paths criss-crossed it, but largely everything was left in its natural order.

Much like Ramyn though, there were elves going about their daily chores just like people in any city would. Even then they took care to preserve the natural order of things and avoided stomping on the plants that gave the city the closeness to nature that was sorely lacking in any human settlement.

Many of them stopped to look on with curiosity at the group that passed them by. It was an unusual sight in the city, most notably because of the two humans, but also because they were clearly transporting two bodies.

Nala wore her cape, hood up, and tried to remain in the shadow of Gareth. The big man proved a good distraction and allowed her to go unnoticed. She did not wish to make her appearance in public just yet. It would create too much commotion and right now it was more important they get through the city with as little commotion as possible. They had no time to deal with a crowd that might gather to hinder their progress.

Cheid had to admit that the city of Elves was more than he had imagined. He found himself thinking it wouldn't be a bad place to settle in. There was a calm that was lacking in many human settlements. There didn't seem to be the usual noisy market or merchant hogging their goods on every passer by. What shops he saw were content with putting a small sign indicating their presence and trusting the customers to come should they find a need for their goods.

Gareth found himself thinking along much the same lines as Cheid. He had travelled and seen many places and cultures, but the elven city had captured him the moment he stepped foot in it. He had to admit it had been difficult to tell where the city started and the forest ended. An army could pass right by without ever knowing what they had missed. There had been no walls to hold out enemies or gates with guards to inspect those coming and going. To Gareth it seemed like an oversight, but the city still stood after millenniums so who was he to question

the effectiveness of it?

They walked through the city, along the beaten paths. The further inside the city they got, the larger the Elf Trees became. It made sense that the older trees were towards the centre of the city and the younger, smaller ones made up the outer edges of it.

The patrol stopped at a large tree that had several others bonded to it. Combined, it rivalled in size with the arena in Ramyn, but it stood many stories higher than it.

Ahnr came up to Cheid, Gareth and Nala. "This is where the High Council meets. Nisoen and I will go in first to ensure the bodies are given to the right people and then we're going to brief the council on what has happened."

"What about us?" asked Gareth.

"I'll have you escorted to one of the waiting halls. You'll probably be called once we're done briefing the council," replied the priestess.

"Probably?" asked Cheid.

Ahnr shrugged her shoulders. "It's up to the council. I can only guess what they'll do, but I'm confident that after hearing what we have to say, they will want to talk with you."

"Well, what are we waiting for then?" asked Nala.

Chapter 18

*T*he hall where the group had been guided into to wait made it difficult to believe they were inside a tree. In size the hall compared favourably to those they had seen in the imperial palace of Ramyn.

The walls lacked many of the elaborate tapestries, but they were replaced by the intricate forms the grains of the wood formed. In many ways the walls were more beautiful to look at than the tapestries or paintings of the imperial palace. There was much more details to be discovered in them.

There were windows, but they were simple and functional ones whose only purpose was to let the light in. There were chairs and tables in the room. They seemed to grow directly from the floor.

Gareth and Cheid were quick to find themselves a seat to rest their weary legs. Ahnilr and Nisoen were tending to the bodies and their proper treatment, leaving Nala alone with the two men.

Even she found it hard to believe an Elf Tree could grow to such scale. Compared to this her parents tree seemed tiny. Then again, the age difference between the trees must have been hundreds, if not thousands of years. They were likely tended to differently as well.

There was a commotion in the hallway outside the room. Nala could make out the shouts and crying. A mother calling for her son. Nerduin's mother, figured Nala. She was tempted to step out and meet her face to face, try to explain what had happened, but she realized now would be the worst of times for that. Instead, she headed to the table where Gareth and Cheid sat and tried to block out the noises from the hallway.

“What's the commotion about?” asked Cheid as Nala sat next to him. Their ears were not as keen as hers.

“Nerduin's mother,” replied Nala quietly.

“Ah.” Cheid glanced that way with slight concern. Gareth seemed to ready himself to fight off anyone looking to come even close to them.

Their fears were unnecessary this time. The voices began to gain distance.

Nala sighed out of relief. She hoped they could move on from the city before she had to face anyone from Nerduin's family, but she feared that was a dream that would not come true. She doubted the High Council would be up to making quick decisions. They'd likely debate the matter for at least a few days. They'd probably want to test her as well, but she was determined not to play along with games like that. The goddess had proven what she was plenty of times already and it seemed that every time she needed to do that it led to further problems for her.

She feared being pulled into the politics of the High Council. Nothing good would come out of it.

"How long until they'll see us?" asked Gareth.

Nala shrugged her shoulders. "You heard what Ahnilr said. Even she didn't know when. It could be an hour, it could be it goes until tomorrow."

"I hope they'll bring us some food then," said Gareth. The big man seemed to always take any chance he could to enjoy some food.

"I'm sure they'll look after us," comforted Nala the big man.

They waited. The most excitement the group got was when Cheid paid homage to the throne. He came out all worked up and proceeded to ask questions from Nala.

"What is that liquid in the pit below the seat? How do you keep it smelling like I had just stepped into a forest?"

The young elf looked a bit baffled to have such obvious questions thrown at her, but she soon remembered Cheid was visiting an Elf Tree for the first time. Of course he wouldn't know about such things and the same held true for Gareth.

"It's all thanks to that liquid," she began to explain and both men listened to her intently. "It's something the trees themselves produce. It absorbs all the waste our bodies produce and turns it into sustenance for the tree. It has the benefit of also masking any smells as you noted."

"Compared to the outhouses and crap shafts we have in Ramyn it sounds like a huge improvement," said Gareth.

"Don't they fill up rather quickly?" asked Cheid.

"The liquid is quite potent in what it does," replied Nala.

"Do you think they'd mind if I take a sample of it?" asked the young wizard.

He looked to be completely serious about it.

Nala had trouble not laughing out loud so hiding her amusement was a huge failure. "If you want to stick your hand down there I doubt anyone will stop you. Just don't come touching me after you've done that."

To her disbelief the young wizard dug out an empty vial from one of his pockets and returned to retrieve the sample then and there. Nala had to harp at the youngster several times to go wash his hands after he was done.

It was several more hours until they were directed into the meeting chamber of the High Council.

It wasn't an impressive room, but much like the one they had been waiting in. The only difference were the twelve high chairs of which two were empty. The other ten each had someone sitting in them. Six were men, four were female, and each one had an air of importance around them.

"Ah, there they are," said an old elf and motioned the three to come forward and join Ahnilr and Nisoen in front of the ten. He was the first elf that Nala had seen that actually looked old. His skin was like parchment and the long hair that flowed down his back was grey. Most unusual for an elf. Despite his appearances his voice was strong and carried well.

The chairs formed a half circle and Nala and her companions stood in the middle of it, giving the council members a clear view of all of them. They looked on curiously and examined Nala as closely as they could from the distance. It was impossible to tell what they were thinking. Not showing your thoughts was a skill one could not do without in the High Council.

"Greetings to you, travellers. I am Lonaac Silentflame, the head of the elven High Council," said the old elf. Cheid and Gareth made an courteous bow and introduced themselves in return, but Nala remained silent and made no gesture to acknowledge the council.

"What of you, Nala Temera?" asked the old elf and looked at her intently. "Have you no greeting for us?"

"I assume you already know who and what I am," replied Nala calmly. "Why don't we get on to the business at hand?"

The old elf let out a rasping chuckle. "I can see your father in you. He was

always straight to the point. It is a shame what happened to him and your mother.” Lonaac sounded like he genuinely meant it. His reaction caught Nala off guard and made a chink in her defiance, but she continued on anyway.

“The question now is, what will you do about the current situation,” said Nala.

“Indeed,” admitted the old elf. “The situation calls for decisive action.”

“Before we do that,” interrupted a female voice from the left side of the table. “We should assess her part in the death of Nerduin Stardancer.”

There they were; the words Nala had feared would come at some point. She looked to Ahnilr, but all the priestess could do was shake her head slightly with an apologetic expression on her face. She had not been able to convince all of the council of the true nature of the events.

“We have already discussed the matter, Inorinn,” came a male voice from the right. It sounded strained. “The council will not take action in the matter at this time.”

“Then the council is populated by fools,” replied Inorinn. “We can not let the death of a member of this council pass by without an thorough investigation.”

“The priestess of Loriel has already provided us with all the details of the event,” came another male voice. “There is nothing to investigate.”

“We are to take her word for it then?” asked Inorinn. Her voice left little doubt as to how high she valued the word of Ahnilr.

“She has sworn it in the name of her goddess,” said Lonaac. “The decision has been made. This council will consider the matter closed.” His voice left little room for arguments, though judging by the way Inorinn shifted in her chair, the matter was far from settled in her mind.

“My apologies,” continued the old elf, directing his words to Nala and her companions. “The internal debates of the council are not something you should have to witness.”

“I came here expecting that some would not accept the truth at face value,” replied Nala. “Best I can do is be myself despite it.”

She ignored the snort that came from right of the table. She had no doubt as to who was the source of it.

“An admirable attitude,” said Lonaac with a slight smile. He shifted in his chair before continuing. “The council has received a report of what has taken place. The situation is distressing to say the least. Deremoth can not be allowed to break free from the seal holding him. We must move to stop the Blades from further weakening the seal. We must also investigate any possibilities in strengthening the seal and fixing the Sun Blade.”

Nala began to feel better about the situation. It seemed the council was willing to take action and take it quicker than she had dared to hope for.

“However,” continued Lonaac, “we must carefully consider how we proceed from here. The council has yet to form a solid plan. It is my hope that in the coming days we will be able to come to an understanding.”

“With all due respect to the council,” said Cheid. “This is not the time to debate or play politics.” The young wizard sounded annoyed. Nala was not the only one who saw the time wasted.

“We understand your concern, apprentice of Skander,” said the old elf. Cheid was a bit surprised at the way he was addressed. He was not accustomed to people calling him that. “But we must make the decision in accordance with our rules. It is our intention to help you, but we must ensure that help does not come at a too high a cost to us.”

“When will you make a decision?” asked Nala.

“We will call for you when we do,” replied Lonaac.

“Do not waste too much time or you will find Deremoth and his dragon plotting out the sky above you,” said Nala, turned away and walked out. She ignored the murmurs from around the table. Gareth and Cheid followed her after making a somewhat more amicable exit. Ahnilr followed quickly behind the two men.

“Well, you gave them something to think about,” said Cheid and broke the silence. The young elf came to a stop and the small group huddled together in the hallway.

“We can't waste time here, no matter what they decide,” said Nala. “I say we give them two days and then we head to Moroth's Tooth on our own if need be.”

“I agree,” said Gareth.

“Or we could leave tomorrow,” said Cheid. He clearly did not put much faith in the council making a decision quickly.

“With their help everything would be so much easier so I'm willing to give them a bit of time,” said Nala. “And there are things I wish to do here for myself,” she added and looked at Ahnilr. The priestess nodded slightly in return.

“I'll arrange it,” said the priestess. What, exactly, that would be was left a mystery for the rest of the group. “I hope the council will make a decision by then, but what ever they decide, I will come with you.”

“Is this her?” came a voice from behind Nala, interrupting the groups negotiations. The words were said in elvish. She turned around and came face to face with a blonde haired elf. She was dressed in the colours of mourning, but still managed to look radiant. Nala had a sinking feeling she knew who she was facing. The woman measured her from head to toe with an expression of contempt and hatred. She was taller than Nala so she had no problem looking at her down her nose.

“Lady Stardancer,” said Ahnilr and bowed slightly.

Nerduin's mother, thought Nala. She wanted to say something, but found no words came to her.

“I see it is her,” said the woman, completely ignoring Ahnilr. “For the murder of my son, I hope the council will punish you in accordance with our laws.”

“If they don't, I will arrange something for her,” came a younger voice from behind the mother. She looked to be a smaller, younger version of the Lady. Gareth took a step closer to Nala just in case even though he did not understand the words. The tone of the voice told him enough.

“Shush, dear,” said Lady Stardancer and turned to the younger elf. “I know you adored your brother, but we adhere to what the council decides.” The look the younger elf gave Nala would have killed her on the spot if that had been possible.

Everyone in the group was wise enough not to tell them the council had already decided they would do nothing. Hearing the news from them would have upset them even more than it would when they heard it from the council.

“Are you going to meet the council, Lady Stardancer?” asked Ahnilr to steer the conversation away from Nala.

“We are,” replied the woman as she turned to look at Ahnilr. “Now if you’ll excuse us, we have no more time to waste on your sort.”

The group watched as the two elves marched past with two guards in tow. Nala sighed out of relief as they were out of sight. It had not been as bad as she had feared.

“What was that about?” asked Cheid.

Ahnilr and Nala gave the two men a quick briefing on what had been said.

“I think we should leave before the council tells them the bad news,” said Cheid. Gareth nodded in agreement.

“Good idea,” said Ahnilr and they all hurried along the corridor and outside.



Nala, along with Cheid and Gareth, had hoped they would have time to wander the city, but given the situation it seemed unwise, at least on the part of Nala. Even the inn they were staying at seemed dangerous at times as people flocked to see Nala as word spread of her presence.

Initially Nala just tried to ignore them and enjoy her food and drink in peace in the common room, but at times those who came to see her got into arguments with others and some approached her with questions she did not have answers for. The presence of Gareth and his large sword seemed to keep most away, but some were still courageous enough to approach her. The big man had to shove several people away from her because they got too enthusiastic and grabbed her. It got so bad that Nala had to confine herself in her room while Gareth stood outside with his sword visibly laid out as warning to anyone looking to talk with her.

She could understand the curiosity. She knew she'd have the same reaction were she normal once more and someone like her came to where she lived. It only saddened her that some took the matter with such passion that it caused concern for her own safety.

“Quite a bit more passionate these elves than I expected,” said Cheid from

his seat.

Nala turned from the window to glance at him. "We're really not that different from anyone else," said Nala and returned to admire the view from the window. The least she could do to enjoy the city. "We're curious just as anyone else. Sometimes that takes too big a hold."

Cheid hemmed. "I have a habit of doing that myself at times."

"I've noticed," said Nala with slight humour in her voice. More grimly, she continued, "I expected I'd gather some attention, but I never expected it to get like this."

"It would have been nice to tour the city," said Cheid longingly.

"You're free to go if you want to," said Nala. She didn't want to hold back the young wizard. "Gareth is plenty enough to keep everyone away."

"I don't want to leave you in a bind," said Cheid, but his voice gave away that he was just a few words away from giving in and leaving.

"Just go," said Nala. "I've got some things to do anyway that you probably shouldn't be seeing."

The young wizard gave Nala a look that said more than the words following it. "All right, I'll go."

The young wizard gathered his belongings and left the room. Gareth gave him a questioning look as he passed by.

"She told me to go explore the city," said Cheid.

"Be careful," said the big man.

"I will," replied Cheid and waved his hand as he went down the stairs. Truth be told he didn't expect much problems for himself. It was Nala that was more a concern. He might gather a few curious looks, being a human, but other than that he'd probably be left alone.

As he walked through the common room his suspicions were confirmed. He got a few looks, but that was it. He stepped outside and looked around. There were elves going about their business as if any other day. Nothing seemed out of place.

Cheid had trouble deciding where to go. He didn't exactly know the city or what was there so he ended up wandering around without much direction. He

visited a few shops that seemed interesting. He had to admire the craftsmanship that the carpenter had put into the furniture on show at his shop. The reverence for the material shone through much brighter than on any humans work.

He also happened upon a wine makers shop who was kind enough to offer him some samples. Likely because he was an exotic visitor and had a few stories to share that the shop keeper seemed to enjoy. In the end he left with a wineskin full of some of the best wine he had ever tasted.

It was hard for Cheid not to stop all the time to admire the city. There was so much beauty and life there that it was hard to forget you were in the middle of the largest elven city. At times it felt almost as if you were in the middle of a wild forest with no one else around. The elves certainly knew how to get around unnoticed and generally left everyone to their own business, unless they happened to be someone they knew and felt like changing a few words with.

Even a curiosity like Cheid was largely left alone. Only the children occasionally got close to him and asked a few question in elvish. Cheid had to shake his head and try to let them know he did not understand them. Usually the children ended up pointing at him, laughing and running away. Cheid tried to shrug it off, but he had a nagging feeling they were mocking him.

It wasn't until he reached some of the older trees that he began to worry whether he should turn back. He was starting to lose track of where he was.

“Well, if it isn't the human companion of that *thing*,” came an elven voice beside him. Cheid turned even though he didn't understand the words that had been spoken in elvish. He did, however, recognize the young woman who had said them.

“Young lady Stardancer,” said Cheid in a forced courteous tone and bowed slightly. He was unsure whether his common trade words would be understood. He noted the two guards that were with the lady. He needed to tread carefully now.

“Hmh, my mother is Lady Stardancer. *I* am Tibiniah Stardancer.”

Cheid was relieved that the response came in a language he could understand. “Of course. My apologies, Lady Tibiniah.”

“So, where is that murderous companion of yours?” asked the young

woman.

Cheid did his best to ignore the tone and insulting words. “She is resting at the inn we're staying at. The journey here was quite long.”

“To think the council would let her off without any punishment. It's intolerable,” complained Tibiniah. “You can tell her that the council might not do anything, but I will.”

“With all due respect, I would suggest against that,” said Cheid.

The young elf snorted. “Of course you would. She's your companion.”

“True, but I am also thinking about you. Nala is not someone you can take on. Worst case, you will end up dead and your mother will suffer another loss,” replied Cheid with a calm voice that had no hint of boasting or threat in it. It was a simple statement of fact.

Tibiniah seemed to consider the words for a moment, but only for a moment. The hatred she felt was stronger and soon surfaced once more. “I don't know why I even stopped to talk to you. Give my regards to that murderer. We'll settle the matter some way.” With that, the young elf maiden walked away, her guards in tow.

Cheid sighed out of relief. He looked around, trying to decide which direction to go to. He hoped to return to their inn and convey the encounter to Nala. She needed to be aware that she was a target and the words that had been said in the hallway of the High Council had not been said merely in the heat of the moment.



Nala had spent an uneasy night at the inn. She couldn't quite get to sleep properly and just ended up tossing around in her bed. The encounter Cheid had had with Tibiniah bothered her. She hoped it would remain at the level of angry words.

She was grateful when the first rays of morning sunshine came through the window. Today she would get to talk to the High Priest of Lorie. Hopefully he would have some answers for her as to the elemental spirits and why they were

so attracted to her.

Nala put on her usual attire and fastened her swords around her waist. She found Gareth fast asleep outside her door. She poked the man a few times to wake him. He seemed a bit ashamed to have been caught dozing off while he was supposed to be on guard, but Nala forgave him quickly. In her mind the man should have been in his own bed sleeping. The journey had taken more of a toll on him than her.

The group enjoyed a satisfying breakfast in the common room and waited for Ahnilr to arrive. She would guide them to the temple, though Cheid would be left behind. He wanted to go explore the city some more and Nala saw no reason why he shouldn't. It was an hour more until Ahnilr arrived. Gareth strapped his large sword to his back and off they went.

The main temple of Loriel was a sight to behold. Statues of her, carved from Elf Wood, guarded either side of the entrance. The doors were filled with carvings that told of her exploits and symbols to bring her favour and protection to those who entered with clear minds.

The temple comprised of three Elf Trees that were bonded together. In the centre there was a branch covered clearing that served as the main hall and had the altar. The trees surrounding it housed quarters for priests, acolytes and others who attended to the temple. There was a library, classrooms – everything a temple that taught new priests and worshippers needed.

Nala gathered curious looks and many whispers as Ahnilr guided her through the halls to the quarters of the High Priest. Gareth had been left to wait by the entrance to the temple. Some of the more attuned acolytes even knelt down to show her respect, which just made her feel uncomfortable. She did not feel worthy of such reverence.

“I wish they'd stop doing that,” she muttered so only Ahnilr could hear her.

“Doing what?” asked the priestess.

“The whole kneeling down thing.”

“You could tell them to stop,” said Ahnilr, sounding slightly amused.

“Somehow I get the feeling they wouldn't listen,” said Nala and scowled at another acolyte who had knelt down. His face grew pale as he saw Nala's

expression. She quickly tried to smile re-assuringly to try and save the situation, but it was too late. There was no telling what horrors the acolyte now expected in his future. Nala sighed with a look of resignation on her face.

“You're probably right,” said Ahnilr. The priestess had seen the incident. “Just ignore them and try not to think about them.”

“Easier said than done,” muttered Nala.

There were two acolytes standing watch at the High Priests chamber door. They took one glance at Nala and opened the door. She was expected and the instruction to let her in immediately had left no room for doubt.

The room she entered reminded her much of Skander's room. The large desk dominated the room and brought the attention of anyone entering straight to the person sitting behind it. The walls were lined with shelves of books and religious apparel. There was even a small, personal altar of Loriei in one corner of the room. A few chairs in front of the desk offered guests a comfortable looking seating.

The man behind the desk rose up to greet Nala and Ahnilr. He was taller than Nala by a foot or so. His robe made it hard to tell much of his body build, but his hands were slim which suggested he was a thin man. His brown hair was cut short, which was unusual for an elf, and his equally brown eyes examined Nala closely.

“*Mala'd Jal*,” said the man, using the elven name for what Nala was, and bowed slightly. Nala was pleased the man did not kneel down. “I am Anorl Emberrat, the High Priest of Loriei.”

Nala nodded. “Greetings, High Priest. Thank you for seeing me.”

The priest motioned for the two women to sit down and took his seat behind the desk. “Please, call me Anorl. I find too much formality to be..confining. I hope I can call you Nala?”

Nala smiled. He looked to be a man she could get along with. “Of course.”

“Now, I understand there was something you wished to discuss with me?” There was curiosity in his voice, but at the same time there was a hint that it was he who would have rather asked the questions.

“I was hoping you could maybe tell me more of what I am. There are things

happening that I'm finding confusing.”

“What sort of things?” asked Anorl.

Nala told him of the spirits that had been coming forward to speak with her. She told of the happening at the Tower where they had come to aid her. Some of the things she told Ahnilr was hearing for the first time.

The High Priest leaned back in his chair as Nala finished. He looked to be in deep thought and it was a while before he spoke. “What you need to understand is that when Loriel made you the way you are – a story I would certainly like to hear, by the way – you became something that is not entirely of this plane of existence.”

“I know I became bonded to the Elf Tree of my parents,” said Nala.

Anorl nodded. “Certainly, but that is not all. You stand between the planes, almost as a spirit yourself, perhaps as a sort of a gateway between them. The fact that I hear the goddess has used you to express herself has further contributed to that situation, bringing the spirits attention to you. They see you for what you are and accept you as one of them. Their sister.”

“So this has happened with others like me?” asked Nala.

“The details are few in many cases, but there are indications that your predecessors had the ability to communicate with the elemental spirits,” replied the High Priest.

“But what does that mean for me?” asked Nala. She looked to Ahnilr who looked to be deep in her own thoughts, pondering what she was hearing.

“That I do not know,” replied Anorl. “What you do need to come to terms with is that you are no longer a mere elf. You are a tool for the goddess and you have been forged together with the Elf Tree of your parents and the spirits of the elemental planes. We do not call your kind Guardian Spirits for nothing.” The High Priest used a stern voice to convey the seriousness of what he was saying.

Nala had to admit to herself that she had already abandoned the idea that she was like the other elves, but she had not realized how large the difference had grown. She found herself in a world that was much more vast than the one she had lived in prior to being touched by the goddess.

“Just remember that doesn't mean you're alone,” said Ahnilr.

Nala nodded. It was then that a memory was nudged free from the locks the goddess had imposed on them.

The memory was old, much older than anything that had surfaced before. It was from the very first Guardian Spirit. It was hard to tell what was going on, but it was obvious the Guardian was dying.

He had wounds all over and looked on the brink of losing his consciousness. He was at a clearing, bare footed and sword in hand. He found a soft spot of dirt and dug his feet deep into it. He stuck his sword in the ground and leaned against it as he concentrated.

Elemental spirits began appearing. They whispered to him much like they did to Nala, but at the same time they seemed to have much more influence over him. He seemed to struggle against them. The spirits did not relent. They seemed to be the ones in control.

Other elves appeared in the clearing. They had concerned looks on their faces, some carried swords and bows of their own. The Guardian pleaded for them to stay away, but some ignored him and moved closer. The spirits swirling around him lashed out at the elves, killing two of them. A pained expression took over the Guardians face as he saw what happened. He cried out for Lorie and her mercy.

The spirits around him seemed to mock him and tried to influence him more, for him to kill more. Nala felt the desperation of the Guardian. If the spirits got their will, he'd kill everyone in the clearing and from there on everything beyond it. He had relied on the spirits too much. They had began to rule his actions instead of the other way around.

Another presence entered the clearing. The goddess had heard the plead of her chosen one and come to his aid – or so Nala thought. She heard the goddesses voice as if she was inside her own head.

“You've filled your duty, but in doing so you have betrayed me and sold yourself to the elemental spirits. Instead of ruling them you have become their slave. Now, may you serve as a warning to those who come after you and at the same time give my blessing to the race of elves.”

Nala felt the rush of power that swept over the clearing. She heard the cries

of the Guardian. She was certain they would haunt her for the rest of her life as would the sight of the Guardian turning. His feet seemed to sink further into the ground. Where there had been two feet there now was one. His body stretched and small branches began appearing from all around his body. It was becoming impossible to tell what he had been before, but Nala immediately recognized what he had become; an Elf Tree. The growth was extremely accelerated and in a matter of minutes the tree had reached a point where it dropped its first seed.

“My children,” came the voice of the goddess to the elves still in the clearing. They looked startled and fearful. A slight breeze lifted the first seed of the tree from the ground and floated it over to the elves. “This is my gift to you. Plant it, tend to it and it will provide you with homes worthy of you.” More seeds dropped from the tree.

Nala jumped up from her seat and backed away, causing the chair to fall. She breathed heavily and looked around startled. Ahnilr and the High Priestess both looked at her with concern.

“Everything all right?” asked Ahnilr. “You looked horrified and then you jumped up like that.”

Nala swallowed. Her throat was dry. She still heard the screams of the first of her kind. “It was just a..memory..”, she mumbled and lifted up the fallen chair.

“Must have been some memory,” said the High Priest and eyed Nala as she took her seat again.

“It was,” said Nala with a quivering voice. “I saw the moment the first seed of an Elf Tree was given to us.”

“A great day in our history,” admitted Anorl. “But surely it should not upset you so?”

“Perhaps history has polished off some of the rough edges of it,” replied Nala.

“What do you mean?” asked Ahnilr. “What did you see?”

Nala hesitated, but decided it was best to tell the story as she had seen it. The two listened intently as she described the event. Ahnilr expressed genuine surprise at hearing what had happened, but the High Priest did not show any emotion towards what he was hearing, even though it painted quite a different

image from what the official story for the first Elf Tree seed was these days.

“Time certainly has made the story gentler,” said Ahnilr as Nala finished. “They don't even mention the first Guardian Spirit.”

“Did you know this?” asked Nala of Anorl. Ahnilr turned to the High Priest, equally curious to hear his response.

“The details of the story have been lost,” said Anorl. “I had suspicions that there was more to it than what is told today, but to hear the true story like this..” He shook his head. “Even in light of this, the story we tell our children is accurate even though it leaves some details out. Perhaps for the better.”

“I certainly would have liked to know the details a bit earlier,” said Nala. It seemed to her the deal she had made with the goddess was getting worse at every turn. New problems and dangers cropped up from around every corner. Now she had to worry about standing her ground against the elemental spirits.

Anorl spread his hand in an apologetic manner. “The history of the Guardian Spirits is one that is sorely lacking in details. Perhaps that is the will of the goddess, but rest assured, I will have your account of the events written down so they may be read by others.”

Nala had a suspicion said writing would be buried deep inside some library where no one was likely to find it. She was becoming increasingly aware that certain matters pertaining to the goddess and, indeed, the history of her worship had been smoothed over time.

“I thank you for your time, High Priest,” said Nala and rose once more. “I've gotten the answers I sought.” Even if the answers themselves did not satisfy her.

Anorl smiled. “I'm glad I could be assistance. You are always welcome here.”

Ahnilr rose and bowed slightly and followed Nala out the door. They walked the corridors, towards the exit. They did not speak. Nala had her hands full just trying to sort everything out and trying to come to terms with the fact the elves were living in trees that were, essentially, the children of the first of her kind. She had trouble believing Loriel would have handed out such a severe punishment to someone she had herself chosen, but she had seen the memory. There was no denying it.

“Oh, we're leaving already?” asked Gareth as the two women exited the temple. He was casually leaning against the wall.

“I have some more business to take care of in the temple. I'll meet you later at the inn,” said Ahnilr and returned to the temple. She had no doubt Gareth remembered the way back.

“Well, I guess it's just the two of us then,” said the big man. Nala nodded absent-mindedly and started walking. Gareth gave her an odd look, but said nothing. Clearly something had happened that occupied her mind now.

They had barely gotten a few hundred feet from the temple when something caught Gareth's eye. He reacted immediately.

“Watch out!” he shouted and shoved Nala out of the way. The small elf stumbled and fell to the ground. Once she regained her bearings and turned back to look she saw Gareth laying on the ground. Two arrows were stuck in his chest and one in his left thigh.

Another volley of arrows came after her. One missed, two found their target, but even the steel tipped arrows failed to penetrate her skin more than a quarter of the length of the tip. Still, the depth was enough to cause a small wound and have the arrow stick to her. One was stuck in her stomach and another near her chest.

Still baffled, Nala glanced around herself. She saw the three figures with bows in hand. They turned to run, but not before she could get a good look at one of them. She recognized her, despite the cloak she was wearing. The elves on the street looked at the scene baffled, no one knowing really what to do.

Nala grimaced and pulled out the two arrows. The wounds did not worry her for they were shallow and not enough to cause much harm. Before anything else she crawled to Gareth to see how he was doing. The arrows seemed to have missed everything important and the man was already grunting and trying to gather the strength to pull out the arrows. Nala grabbed hold of his hand and pushed it to his side.

“Just rest. Let Ahnilr take care of it,” she said to the man. She looked around and saw the priestess already rushing out of the temple towards them. At least someone had had the sense to pass the word to the temple.

“Are you all right?” asked the priestess of Nala as she knelt beside Gareth and started to work on getting the arrows out.

“I’m fine,” replied Nala. At least physically she was. The arrows had been meant for her and it pained her to see Gareth have taken them for her. It angered her because she knew what had led to this. Before she realized it, she was standing up and looking to go after the would be assassins.

Sister..

Sister..

What is the matter?

The whispers came to her. She glanced around and saw a few elemental spirits from the plane of air swirling near her. She hesitated. Given what she had seen, did she want to have anything to do with them? She decided that in this situation their help was worth the risk.

“Did you see the three bowmen?” asked Nala of the spirits.

“No,” Ahnilr began to reply, but she quickly realized Nala was not talking to her. She returned to pulling out the arrows from Gareth.

Yes.

“Can you guide me to them?”

Why?

“They tried to kill me, but ended up harming my friend. I can’t let that go.”

The air around Nala stirred as the spirits swirled around her. She could feel the spirits were upset over hearing someone had tried to kill her. Their anger seemed to fuel her own.

Follow us.

“Ahnilr, I’m going after the people who did this. Take care of Gareth.”

The priestess tried to object, but she was too late. Nala was already walking away with purpose in her steps. She saw the slight shimmer whirling around her and worried that the spirits might be influencing her to further their own goals.

The spirits guided Nala through the city. All the time more and more of them gathered around her and soon there were enough of them that they started to become clearly visible. She began to attract even more attention thanks to that, but everyone was kept away by the combination of her expression and the ever

growing amount of spirits around her. The air swirled around her and pushed around a wall of bubbly water. The ground around her feet seemed to be rippling and alive as the spirits from the plane of Earth followed her.

It was a longer walk than she had expected, but it only gave her more time to gather the anger inside her. It was a part of the city where the very oldest trees were. Some even had walls made up of bushes and small trees surrounding them and gates of elf wood, which was highly unusual for what she had seen of the city. Most places were open and you could easily walk in to greet the residents.

Here.

They came here.

The spirits around her were abuzz and it was difficult to hear anything else but their voices. Nala eyed the gate before her. She doubted it would be opened for her, but it was better to try than to simply use violence as the first option. She tried to push open the gate, but it did not budge. A small window appeared in the and someone peered through it.

“Who goes there?” came a question. Nala could barely make it out from the noise the spirits were making.

“I'm Nala Temera. I have business with a lady of the house.”

The window closed. It did not seem like a good sign to her, but she waited patiently. The window soon opened again and the same eyes peered through it.

“You are not welcome here. Be gone.”

Nala sighed. “Either you open the gate or I will open it.”

She was fully aware that she had attracted a crowd of curious onlookers behind her, but she wasn't going to let the matter slide. Not after what had happened.

“Threat's won't do you any favours,” said the voice behind the gate and the window closed.

“Fine,” muttered Nala and took a step back. “Will you help me?” she asked of the spirits surrounding her.

Yess..

Yes.

“Good. Let me guide you in return,” she said and focused on conveying her

thoughts to the spirits. She found herself battling against their will. They sought her to do much more than force open the gate. It was a struggle, but the incidents with the goddess seemed to have given her some tools against their attempts.

Soon, a large stone fist rose from the ground before her and smashed into the elf wood gate. She felt a bit sorry for having to ruin such a nice piece of craftsmanship, but they had left her no choice. The first hit seemed to do nothing but cause a lot of noise, but after the fourth one the gate flew from its hinges and smashed into the inner yard.

Nala stepped through the ruined gate. She was greeted by what looked to be one of the most well tended to gardens she had ever seen. Had the circumstances been different she might have been inclined to stop and admire the sight, maybe even take a seat there and just forget what ever she had come for, but today was not one of those days. She was more concerned about the four guards that had their bows aimed at her.

“Leave. Now,” said one of the guards with a commanding voice. They all looked a bit nervous at the sight of her, but at the same time it was obvious they were prepared to do their duty towards the household they were protecting.

“I’ll leave when I have what I came for. I have no desire to hurt any of you so just let me pass.”

“We can’t allow that,” said the guard.

Nala drew out her swords. “A shame.” She stepped forward. The guards let their arrows loose.

Immediately the spirits swirling around her became more active. The combination of air and water spinning around her intensified and swatted away the arrows flying towards her. The ground below the guards gave way and they sunk in, unable to chase after her or fire their arrows in any sort of effective manner. They were no longer a threat to her so she just ignored them and walked past them, towards the large tree looming in the middle of the garden. She hoped that she would find what she was hunting for there.

There were more guards waiting at the tree, but their arrows met the same fate as their companions and the guards themselves quickly found themselves in

similar pits they could not get away from.

The door to the elf tree offered little resistance compared to the gate. A single hit from the stone fist sent it flying inside. There was a frightened yelp as Nala stepped inside. She saw her prey standing in the large reception hall she had stepped into along with her two accomplices.

“Begone!” yelled the young female elf from behind her two companions. “You're not welcome in this house.”

Nala chuckled. “Seeing as you just tried to kill me and wounded my friend I had little doubt about it, Tibiniah Stardancer.”

The young elf grew pale. No doubt she had expected to escape without being noticed. Maybe it was the situation she found herself in, but she said something to her two companions and they pulled out their swords and rushed at Nala.

The swirling spirits made things difficult for them, but they pushed on none the less and actually managed to come close enough for Nala to have to block their hits with her own swords. Given the advantage Nala had, the fight was a short one and both men soon found themselves disarmed with wounded hands that didn't allow them to continue the fight.

Nala walked up to the young elf maiden and pointed a sword at her. “I should kill you right here,” she said coldly.

Sisterr..

Kill her..

Kill..

The spirits around Nala whispered and egged her on. They had no moral qualms with ending the life of someone not of their plane. Nala found herself in a tug of war with the spirits and it was becoming harder and harder to say no to their demands.

The young elf lifted her head and looked at Nala down her nose. “You killed my brother. The council refused to act on it. Justice needed to be served.”

Nala shook her head, but before she could respond a gasp from the stairs leading to the upper levels caught her attention. She turned her head slightly and saw the Lady of the Stardancer family. The older woman had a look of shock on

her face.

“Killing my son was not enough?” she asked of Nala coldly. “Now you've come to kill my daughter as well?”

The accusation hurt Nala. She knew full well the pain of losing family, but here she was, threatening to rob another one's daughter from the world. She let her swords fall to her sides. The spirits around her protested. They wanted her to kill both of them.

“I did not kill Nerduin,” said Nala. “Loriel did, but even she can't be blamed. The Flames of Purification do not lie. Your son had dealt with forces he should not have and he paid the price for it.”

“Liar!” shouted Tibiniah, but was quickly silenced by the stern look her mother gave her.

“Inorinn did not tell us this,” admitted Lady Stardancer.

“Inorinn?” asked Nala. “Have you not spoken to the full council?”

“No,” came a reply.

It was then and there that Nala lost all desire to harm the young fool who had tried to kill her. She was but a pawn in a game she was not even aware was being played. She put her swords to their scabbards and dismissed the spirits surrounding her. They were reluctant to go and she suspected at least a few lingered around despite her wish, but at least she had been able to will most of them away. She had retained control over the situation.

“You're being used,” said Nala and turned to look at the Lady. “Inorinn is using you in her own political games. Speak to the full council or even other members of it. You'll hear the truth.”

“She wouldn't dare,” muttered the Lady, but it was clear she was beginning to have doubts of her own.

Nala shrugged her shoulders. “Believe it or not, she is. If it were up to me your son would still be alive, but sometimes the choice is taken from us.” She sounded genuinely sad. “You've already lost enough. I'm not going to take your daughter. There's no point. You're just being used without knowing it.”

She turned around and began walking away. The two women looked at her slightly baffled that she would give up so easily when she had wrecked through

so many obstacles to get to where she was. She could have killed both of them and they knew it.

Nala walked through the garden and the ruined gate. The guards she had encountered were still struggling to free themselves. All they could do was watch as she passed them by. She gave one of them an apologetic smile.

The crowd of curious onlookers was still outside the gate and an immediate buzz began when Nala walked out. She did her best to ignore them and started to make her way back to the temple. She hoped Gareth had not been hurt too badly. It was clear to her that the sooner they got out of the city and back on the road again the better off they'd be. The political games could not be allowed to derail their mission.

She had no trouble getting back. No one dared to bother her as word spread of what had happened. She did notice that some of the curious looks had turned into ones of caution. They were starting to understand that she brought with her more trouble than good things.

Nala approached the temple. At least Gareth had been carried from the street to somewhere more private. An acolyte spotted her and ran to her to guide her to where Gareth and Ahnilr were. The temple had an extensive infirmary to tend to the sick and wounded and they had arranged a bed for Gareth, though the big man did not seem to have much use for it. Nala was hard pressed to tell he had even been wounded. Were it not for the bandages around his chest and leg, he seemed to be doing just fine. He was eating with as good an appetite as ever.

"What happened?" demanded Ahnilr as Nala stepped into the room. Gareth turned his attention from the food to her as well.

"Tibiniah Stardancer," replied Nala.

"Did you kill her?" asked Gareth.

"No," replied Nala. The relief on Ahnilr's face was immeasurable. Nala told a shortened version of the events, leaving out certain bits pertaining to the elemental spirits. The two did not need to worry themselves with it.

"Political schemes," muttered Gareth with disdain. "Nothing else quite as dirty as that in the world."

Ahnir nodded. "Hopefully they will talk to the full council and get the entire story. Maybe that will cool down the young Tibiniah."

"I have my doubts," said Nala. "Still, I'd rather not kill her now, knowing what I do."

"Well, tomorrow's our last full day here," said Gareth. "Let's just stay out of sight and out of mind. Then quietly sneak out in the morning."

"I'm inclined to think that is the best plan," said Ahnir.

"Fine," conceded Nala. "But will your wounds be healed by then?" she asked of Gareth.

The big man gave her a wide grin. "With the help from Ahnir, I'll be as good as new by tomorrow."

Chapter 19

The journey had gone relatively well for Derian and his companions, despite the fact he had pushed the horses so hard on the first day that they had nearly died of exhaustion. It was not out of fear of someone getting there before them that he pushed the animals hard. It was his own desire to be there quickly that drove him. He also didn't mind putting as much distance between him and Ramyn as possible.

Dayr, Obsidian and Kerrigan offered little complaints on the pace he set, mostly because they feared the man enough to understand the words would not be received well.

The open countryside had not cared of their passing. Few farmers looked on curiously as they rode past like they were being chased by a dragon, but none got in their way. The few times they stopped at some unknown village that wasn't even worthy to be mentioned on a map they ran into positive surprises. They found a few members of the blades that joined on their journey. One even had messenger pigeons that allowed Derian to send word to a wider area.

Derian knew they would need the help once they reached their destination. There were creatures roaming the mountain that made no distinction on what god you worshipped. As long as you had flesh around your bones, you were a target for them to feast on. They'd lose men just getting to the cavern that led to the imprisoned god. Keeping it would demand even more men. He hoped the word would reach at least a few wizards or priests that were members. Their help would be invaluable. He feared the single Blood Reaver he had left would not be able to cover everything that was needed, though it would certainly be of great help.

By the time the group reached the edge of the Great Forest it had grown from four men to a full dozen. Still less than Derian had hoped for, but at least he now had a priest and a wizard from Voroth to offer support.

The group did not enter the forest, but rather travelled along the edge of it. They feared that if they tried to take the route through the forest an elven patrol

would happen upon them. That was an encounter they did not wish for. The best choice for them was to head south where the strip of forest they had to cross was much thinner. After that they'd need to cross the river and pass the Northern Guardians, a series of large towers the Kingdom of Mandor had built long before the Troll Wars to guard their northern border. The towers were still in use today, though with much lessened garrisons. Still, combined with the river, they formed perhaps the most well guarded border you'd run upon. The advantage the group had was that no one would be looking for them in Mandor. They were just another group crossing the border.

Derian pondered whether he should send a few men to Deslen to buy some weapons and supplies. Those who had joined from the small villages had brought with them a horse and clothes, but not much in the way of anything useful in killing. A few rusty swords would not cut it in the mountains. On the other hand a few days delay seemed unacceptable to him. The journey had taken a long time already.

In the end he decided the supplies would be worth, so after they crossed the river and entered Mandor, they headed south for a bit more and sent a few men to the city to gather what was needed. Derian figured that the days added to the journey still left them well ahead of anyone else looking to enter the mountains in search of Deremoths cavern.

The men returned from their supply run with several extra horses that carried food, armour, weapons and other items that would be needed in the mountains. A few clothe changes and they began to look more of a mining expedition than a bunch of rabble that had decided to leave their home villages. A few pickaxes and other mining equipment completed the image.

The items were not only for the disguise, but also because they might prove useful. The area around Moroth's Tooth was far from stable and tremors could well have caved in the passage to the sealed dragon. Derian hoped that would not be the case, but it was better to be prepared for the worst than to be without the tools to solve the situation should it arise.

So they rode on and faced little difficulties. Even the patrols that they encountered passed by without giving them much notice. A mining expedition

was not that unusual an sight, even if they were a bit late in moving out. In his messages, Derian had instructed two locations where to meet up and they were now headed for the second one, right at the base of the mountains.

To his relief, there was another dozen men there, two of them wizards and three priests. Now he had a force together that he felt comfortable to brave the mountains with. Getting to the mountains had been the easy part. Getting to Moroth's Tooth alive and well, that was a whole other challenge.

After a days rest, the group ventured on, towards their goal.



The morning sunlight woke Nala. She almost wished it hadn't, but then she remembered this was the last day they would spend in the elven city. She hoped the council would reach some decision.

Given the events of the day before she expected the day to be a boring one. They had decided to stay indoors and together to avoid any problems wandering around alone might cause. On the other hand, it mean she didn't need to be anywhere so she let out a content sigh, turned her side and buried herself under the blanket once more. She was just about to fall asleep again when there was a knock on her door.

Muttering to herself, she reluctantly slithered from under the blanket and went to the door. She cracked it open only slightly to see who it was. It was Ahnilr.

“What is it?” asked Nala groggily.

“The council has made its decision,” said the priestess. “They want to see us as soon as possible.”

That woke Nala right up and she quickly threw on some clothes and secured her swords around her waist. Gareth and Cheid were already ready and waiting for her when she came down stairs to the common room. She barely had time to grab a piece of bread for breakfast before they left to meet the council.

Shivers ran down Nala's spine as they entered the Elf Tree of the High Council once more. She recognized the tree from the memory she had

experienced in the High Priests quarters. This was the first Elf Tree. Part of it was the very first Guardian Spirit. It bothered her slightly that apparently no one knew the full history or at least no one spoke of it in public.

The full council was there to greet them in their chamber. Lonaac was the spokes person for the council as usual.

“Thank you for coming,” said the old elf.

Everyone in the small group bowed slightly.

“I assume the council has reached some sort of decision?” asked Nala after the minimal formalities had been tended to.

Lonaac nodded. “Indeed we have, but before that I would like to offer you an apology.”

Nala raised an eyebrow. She had not expected that, nor had anyone else in the group.

“A member of this council has caused you problems by acting against the orders she was given. We did not hear of this until Lady Stardancer demanded to see the full council.” The old elf seemed genuinely upset over the matter. “Rest assured that we will deal with the matter with the severity it demands.”

Nala nodded. “What of the young lady of the Stardancer family?”

Lonaac looked like he had dreaded and expected the question. “Do you wish to present charges against her?”

Nala glanced at Gareth. Personally, she had no reason to seek further retribution against the young elf. She felt her visit had been sufficient and the fact they had been used in a plot unbeknownst to them was enough to alleviate any guilt on their part. Gareth shook his head. He felt the same way it seemed.

“We have no reason to charge her with anything. I hope the council will see the matter as we do,” said Nala.

Lonaac nodded. He was visibly relieved.

“However, there is something you should consider when you punish this council member of yours,” continued Nala. Lonaac looked curious. “You should consider that it was only the High Council that knew where the Sun Blade was kept, yet somehow the Blades found their way to me and my parents. I've suspected that someone on the council leaked that information to people they

should not have. What happened with Nerduin and now with this member of the council, you should investigate the matter thoroughly.”

There was a heated mutter around the table as the council members discussed the matter. Such a heavy accusation against one of their members? That was unprecedented. Lonaac listened in on all sides. Some were willing to investigate the matter, others opposed it and felt there was not enough evidence, but in the end the decision was made. As the discussion died down, he nodded. “While it pains us to admit it, it does seem your accusation has some truth to it. You have the word of the council that the matter will be investigated fully.”

“Thank you,” said Nala.

“Now then, why don't we move on to what we came here to discuss?” asked Lonaac.

There was visible anticipation on the part of Cheid, Gareth, Ahnilr and Nala.

“You must understand that the elven kingdom is already facing a threat,” continued Lonaac. “The Northern Barbarian tribes have ventured into the forest in the west and are causing problems. Much of our readily available forces are there and we can't pull them away to help you.”

Nala tried to keep her composure. So they would not get the aid they had hoped for. They'd make do without, then.

“But we can't ignore your mission either,” continued the spokesperson. “As such we will provide you with what aid we can without increasing the risk in the west. We will provide you with transport that will take you to the southern edge of the forest in a few days. We will also send with you a dozen of our finest men.”

Nala felt relief. It was certainly less than they had hoped for, but at least it was something. The quick transport alone was a valuable help.

“I believe you have met captain Relait Skytracer?” asked Lonaac as an elf stepped beside him.

The name was unfamiliar to Nala, but the person who stepped next to the old elf was not. It was the captain of the patrol that had guided them to the city. His name had never come up during their journey, despite everything, but he had given the impression of being a dependable sort.

The captain nodded to everyone in the group. "It seems we meet again. I have personally chosen the men who will join us and I can vouch for every single one of them. They are the most skilled in their respective fields."

"The council believes time is of importance on this mission so we have also dispatched a message to the kingdom of Mandor," continued Lonaac. "They have garrisons all along the river. They will provide you with horses, food and any other equipment you might need. We also explained the situation to them and asked if they could provide additional men. Whether they are willing to do that or not, we do not yet know, but we have had nothing but good relations with them ever since the Troll Wars and they have helped us on more than one occasion, as we have helped them. I would be surprised if they did not offer at least a few men to guide you to the mountains."

The bit of news made Nala feel better. The council had indeed made decisions. While she had hoped for more from the elves themselves, the fact that they were asking their allies to be involved in the matter showed they took the matter seriously. The fact they had chosen a captain the group was at least slightly familiar with further convinced her that they sought to help them the best they could in their current situation.

Now all they had to do was gather their belongings and follow the councils instructions. They would depart the next day.



Nala, Cheid, Gareth and Ahnilr arrived together at the clearing they had been instructed to meet on. The dozen other elves that were to accompany them were there as well, along with several lightly built wagons. They seemed barely strong enough to carry a few people, but on closer examination it became apparent they were made of Elf Wood and were thus far more sturdy than they looked to be. They could probably carry six or seven people each along with their belongings. To see such an amount of the precious wood in one place was a sight in itself and made the wagons more valuable than anything Nala had seen before.

There was nothing in view that could pull them, so she had to wonder what sort of transport they were. She wasn't the only one who had noticed it.

“So, how are we going to get to the edge of the forest? Walk?” asked Cheid.

Ahnir smiled. “The same way Nisoen, Nerduin and I got to Ramyn so quickly. With those wagons.”

“But there's nothing here to pull them,” said Gareth.

“The High Council will see to it that there will be,” replied Ahnir mysteriously. She did not seem willing to spoil the surprise.

Relait came walking over to them. He had a bow over his shoulder and a sword at the hip. He wore a light leather armour that did not seem to hinder his movement much while still offering some extra protection against anything looking to harm him. The cloak he wore had leaves sown into it and brown patches in it, making it the ideal disguise in any forest. It reminded Nala of the clothes many of the elves at her home forest used to wear.

“You have everything with you?” asked the young captain as he got close enough.

The group made one final check before agreeing that they did, indeed, have everything.

“Nisoen asked me to convey his apologies that he could not join you in this final leg of your journey,” said Relait. “The council has tasked him with an investigation that he felt was just as important to see through.”

Nala smiled. So the council had handed Nisoen the duty of investigating the trouble making council member. That certainly made her feel better. Nisoen could be trusted to do a proper job of it and leave no stone unturned. At the same time she felt slightly disappointed that he would not be joining them. He was certainly someone they could have used on the journey.

“A shame,” said Gareth. “He's a good man.”

The others in the group seemed to agree, but Nisoen had made his own decision and they had to respect that.

“So, captain, how do we plan on getting to the edge of the forest?” asked Cheid. Maybe the captain would have a looser tongue than Ahnir did.

Relait raised an eyebrow. “You have not been told?”

“The priestess over here refused to explain things to us,” said Gareth.

The captain looked at Ahnir and a small smile grew on his face. “Then I

shall not spoil the surprise.”

“Bunch of co-conspirators,” muttered Cheid. The young wizard did not like to be held in the dark. More importantly, he wanted to learn everything he could while travelling the world; be it for leisure or on a mission like this. Duty is no excuse for not learning, had Skander said to him many times and it was a lesson he had taken to heart, and doing so had served him well so far.

They waited for some time before things started to progress.

“Ah, here he is,” said Ahnilr.

The group turned to look and saw the elf walking towards them. He was dressed like a wizard would for any official occasion. The robe was far from practical, but served to present a certain aura that was expected of wizards. The decorative embroidery on it told he was among the most highly skilled wizards. Had he been at the Towers of Magic, Cheid figured he would have been on par with Skander as far as rank went.

“Everything ready?” asked the elf in the melodic language of the elves.

“We're all set, honoured wizard,” responded Relait.

“Good. I may begin then?”

The captain nodded and cleared everyone away from the wagons.

Cheid looked on with great interest as the wizard began his work. Maybe he'd show something he had not seen before. Everyone who was attuned to magic felt it gathering in the clearing. The familiar tingle went through their bodies and made some shuffle.

The first shimmers began to appear by the wagons, where the horses pulling them would normally have been. What was materializing there took the form of a horse. Even after it had completely come into being, it was translucent and you could see through it as if it was clear water.

“Interesting,” muttered Cheid. He was unsure what exactly the creature was. It wasn't an elemental or even an elemental spirit. Some other creature from the elemental planes? There were all sorts of beings in those plains, many unknown to the outside world. Exploring the planes was dangerous at best and few had the skill to do it without ending up as a corpse their students would find shrivelled up in the morning.

Glass like strands began to extend from the creature that wrapped around the wagon. Its blue glowing eyes examined the clearing and everyone in it with indifference.

The elf wizard began summoning another creature. It appeared much in the same manner as the first one, though it did seem slightly larger than the first one.

“What are those things?” asked Cheid from Ahnilr.

The priestess looked a bit surprised the young wizard did not know. “They're from the plane of Air. We call them Wind Riders.”

“You mean we're going to fly to the edge of the forest in those wagons?” asked Gareth weakly.

“Yes, that's the plan,” said Ahnilr.

Gareth looked horrified at the idea. He'd rather have walked the distance and suffered some more muscle pains.

Cheid and Nala on the other hand had a gleam in their eyes that told of anticipation at experiencing something new. Their eagerness was infectious even to Ahnilr who had ridden the wagons several times. She had always enjoyed it.

The third creature had finished materializing and attaching itself to the wagon. The elf wizard seemed slightly tired, but looked just as ready as ever to continue on.

“Well then, shall we go?” asked Ahnilr of the rest of the group. The dozen elven warriors were already loading up their belongings to the wagons.

They piled their belongings inside the wagon. The wizard took the drivers seat while Nala and the rest of her group, along with the captain, took a seat in the back of the wagon. There was no canvas covering the back so despite the high corners they had a good view of everything around them.

As they took a seat, the glass like strands moved closer and wrapped themselves around their waist, fastening them to the wagon tightly. Gareth tried to fight against the things, but even his strength wasn't enough to break it.

“Just leave them be,” said Ahnilr to calm everyone down. “They're the only thing that will keep you from falling down once we're in the air.”

Gareth immediately stopped fighting the thing, though his uncomfortable

pose made it clear he did not fully trust the thing.

“He's coming with us?” asked Cheid as he saw the wizard taking his seat in the front.

“He has to. He'll have to let the creatures go for the night and summon them again in the morning.” said Ahnilr. “But he'll take us only to the edge of the forest. He'll return here after that.”

Cheid seemed to perk up. “Maybe I can talk with him to learn a bit more,” he mused to himself.

“You can try,” said Ahnilr. She did not believe the wizard would be willing to share secrets that easily.

Nala did not pay much attention to the conversation. She was too busy observing the creature pulling the wagon. It seemed to puff up slightly and then it began to walk. It was a steady, slightly angel climb. It was as if the creature was walking up a ramp instead of thin air. Soon they were high above the tree tops, soaring towards the south at a pace that put the fastest of horses to shame. They'd have no trouble reaching the edge of the forest in a few days at the pace they were going.

The wind ruffled Nala's hair as she peaked beyond the safety of the wagon. She smiled at the sight of the forest that had turned into a green mat. It was like a much more detailed version of the map Skander had produced back when he was explaining the world to her. As she turned to look up the white clouds were closer than she had ever seen them. She almost hoped they would climb higher so she could touch them.

She saw the two other wagons flying next to them. She admired the creatures pulling them. Despite the speed they were going at, they seemed to be on a gentle trot instead of running at full speed. She had to wonder how fast the things would go with a lighter load or even with just a single rider.

She turned back inside the wagon with a wide grin on her face. She found Cheid had a much similar look on his face. Gareth on the other hand looked pale and was clinging to the wagon with all his strength.

“Come on Gareth, it can't be that bad?” asked Cheid. “It's as smooth a ride as on the ship to Wroth.”

"It's not the smoothness of the ride," said the big man. "It's that I know there's nothing below me that I can put my feet on should the wagon fail."

"Who'd have thought, the big man is afraid of heights," said Cheid jokingly.

Gareth put one hand on Cheid shoulder. "At least I know who I'll use to break my fall."

Nala giggled and the two men were soon grinning at each other like two boys who had just gotten away with stealing a freshly baked pie. Even Relait had trouble keeping a grin off his face. It seemed every time they took to the road the atmosphere of the group got less tense and more open.

They had no problems during the day and as evening began to slowly creep up to them, they settled down to ground at a small clearing they had spotted from high up. They set up camp and began preparing the last meal of the day. Guards were posted.

After the wizard had dismissed the creatures, Cheid made his advance towards him. The wizard was reluctant to discuss the details of the spell, but Cheid kept at it. At least he was getting other bits of information out of him and learning things he had not known before.

Nala found herself playing the part of an observer. She didn't really have anything particular to do so she spent her time watching and learning. The elves were quite proficient in setting up the camp and setting up a perimeter to ensure they night went undisturbed. Even though the elves claimed the forest for themselves, it was far from being a tamed one. There were still beings and animals there that could pose a danger to an reckless traveller.

She looked on with amusement as Cheid struck a conversation with the elven wizard and tried to pry the secret of the magnificent flying creatures out of him. He didn't seem to have much success in that area, but clearly he was learning something because he kept on talking with the wizard.

Gareth made himself useful by gathering some dry wood for the camp fires and helped with getting water for the cooking from a nearby creek. From where Nala was looking at things the big man seemed to be recovering from the flying quite well. Certainly there was no longer any sign that the arrows that had struck him were giving any trouble. It was amazing how fast he had healed and he

claimed his healing powers were weak compared to a full blooded troll. It made Nala wonder how their armies had ever been defeated during the wars.

What remained of the evening went by quickly as the group enjoyed the food that had been cooked up and shared a few stories between themselves. Nala and Cheid were excused from guard duty and so would have been Gareth, but he insisted on doing his part. Much to the groups relief, the night went by without incident.



Nisoen felt a slight sting of guilt as he watched the wagons soar across the sky. He had hoped to at least say farewell to them in person, but his duties had prevented that. He wished them well. Though he had not spent as much time with them as Ahnilr had nor interacted with them as much, he had grown fond of the group and the mission they were on certainly warranted all the help it could get. He had hoped the council would have done more, but given the situation they had been unable to.

The task the council had given him had seemed more important to him than being on the mission. He was but a single sword that could easily be replaced by another, but on the investigation he could offer something many others couldn't. He knew the impact of it and, knowing Nala, he wanted to do everything he could to get to the bottom of it. He was certain the Guardian Spirit would approve of his choice in the matter.

Returning from his thoughts back to reality, Nisoen stepped inside the High Councils tree and continued on to a small room with guards on the outside. Inside, there was a table as well as two chairs. Nisoen took a seat in the other chair and eyed the woman opposite to him. Inorinn eyed him back with contempt.

“Council member Inorinn, do you know why you are here?” asked Nisoen.

The woman snorted and refused to answer.

“You're here because you failed to obey the councils orders. You gave the Stardancer family false information which led to a severe incident,” continued Nisoen. He saw no reaction from the woman.

“You are also being investigated in relation to leaking information about the

whereabouts of the Sun Blade and as a result causing the death of tens of Forest Guardians.” Nisoen saw a slight twitch on the woman's face. She knew something.

“The council has given me great freedom in investigating this matter. I suggest you co-operate so we can keep things civil.”

“And if I don't? You'll do what? Torture me?” Inorinn laughed mockingly, but the look on Nisoen's face soon stifled it.

“I hope we won't need to go there,” said Nisoen steadily. “Of course, there are other ways. For a start, we can go with the Flames of Purification if that makes you feel more comfortable.”

Inorinn grew pale. Her determination wavered, but it was only a momentary lapse. She soon gathered herself and presented the same stone wall of calmness that she had before.

“Let me ask once more. Why did you not tell the Stradancer family the whole truth?” asked Nisoen.

The council member looked hesitant. “That was simple political scheming,” she finally replied.

“Would you kindly elaborate for someone who does not understand the political scenery that much?” asked Nisoen.

The woman sighed. “The Stardancer family is an old and important one. My hope was that young fool of a daughter the Lady has left would have gotten herself killed while assaulting the Guardian Spirit. That would have shamed the family as well as left them without any heirs. A perfect opportunity for my family to strengthen its position in the council and among the nobility.”

Nisoen found himself at a loss for words. He had known the politics could get heated at times, but for someone to so casually manipulate others into such acts? He had believed better of his kind.

“Don't look so shocked,” mocked Inorinn. “You think this is the first time someone in the council has schemed to have others die? Funny how there was no investigation in those cases.”

“What of the Sun Blade?” demanded Nisoen.

“That was all Nerduin,” said the woman and leaned back in her chair,

almost leisurely.

“What do you know of it?”

“The young Stardancer certainly was involved with things he should not have been,” said Inorinn. Even she seemed a bit disgusted with it. “I tried to find out more, but I never got enough evidence. He met some shadowy figures during certain times, but my agents never got close enough to hear what they discussed. More than a few lost their lives trying to find out.”

“You thought that if you could expose what he was up to, you'd be able to shame the Stardancer family,” said Nisoen dryly.

Inorinn grinned. “You're a quick learner, captain.”

“What of these shadowy figures? Is there anything more you could tell about them?”

“What's in it for me?” asked the woman.

Nisoen had expected the question at some point. “The council has only tasked me with the investigation. The verdicts are all up to them. All I can do is note that you were helpful and hope the council takes that into consideration.”

Inorinn pondered the response before continuing. Nisoen suspected she was tallying up the favours that were owed to her and whether the single gesture from her would be enough to turn a few heads and get her a lesser punishment, maybe even get her off the hook completely.

“Do your best and you will have yourself a deal,” said the woman.

“You have my word,” assured Nisoen.

The woman leaned forward and spoke in a soft voice. “The young Stardancer was not the only one who met the shadows. There was another member of the council as well.”

It was a good hour later that Nisoen exited the room and instructed the guards to look after the council member with utmost care. She was now more than a suspect. She was a witness.

What she had told had Nisoen feeling uneasy. Things had taken a turn for the worse and he found himself in a mess much deeper than he had thought. It was a delicate situation and he would need to tread very carefully in his investigation.

He was starting to wish he had flown off with the wagons as he walked down the corridor.



The ride in the sky was much less comfortable on the second day. Rain poured down on them and whipped them like any horse driver would. The speed they were going at made the rain drops sting when they hit bare skin so everyone was huddled up tightly inside their cloaks. The rain did force the the wagons to slow down some, but not enough to cut the sting out and the group did not want to delay their arrival by more than they already had.

“Who ever designed these damn things should have given rain a consideration,” muttered Gareth to himself as he pulled the hood of his cloak deeper over his face.

“You can't put canvas on these things,” said Cheid next to him. “It'd interfere too much with the creatures ability to pull the wagons.”

“Well they should have built the wagons like a walnut then,” said Gareth, sounding vexed.

“A walnut! You're a genius,” said Cheid enthusiastically and tried to scribble a few notes down on a piece of paper, but the pouring rain made it a difficult task. He finally made a small shelter from his cloak and managed to write down what he had wanted to.

Gareth shook his head. How the young wizard could be so enthusiastic in a situation like this was beyond him. As far as he was concerned they should have stayed on the ground until the rain stopped. Better yet, they never should have agrees to fly in the damn things.

Nala was still enjoying the ride despite the rain. It might have been a bit bumpier and a whole lot wetter, but it revealed an entire other view on the world. The dark clouds above looked a lot more ominous closer up and the rain gave the landscape below a different look,

Back home the rainy days had been some of the best she could remember, mainly because she had the luxury of being able to spend them inside by a warm fireplace reading a book or training with her father in the training room. Those

days had been true family days where they spent much of the time together.

Those memories still made her like the rainy days, even if she was outside getting trenched.

As she looked forward, past the wizard guiding the wagon, she could see the edge of the dark clouds coming nearer and the sunlight bathed landscape that awaited them. It was hard to estimate how long it would take to reach the edge of the rain front, but it seemed it would not take more than an hour, if that. They would get the opportunity dry themselves before having to set up camp.

“Do you think we'll reach the edge of the forest today?” asked Nala of Ahnilr, who was sitting next to her. She had to raise her voice to overcome the wind and rain.

“With this rain slowing us down, we might not,” replied the priestess. She was huddled under her cloak much like the others. Her mood was closer to that of Nala's. She had the same appreciation for rain, albeit for different reasons.

Everyone on board sighed out of relief as they flew out from under the rain clouds and sunlight hit them. They wanted to shrug off the wet cloaks, but the wind was chilly enough that even a wet cloak was better than not having one. The only positive side of the wind was that their clothes would dry faster.

Nala pulled down her hood and let the wind ruffle her hair as she peered over the wagons corners. Even if the ground below was the same green forest in every direction she could see, the sight of it never seemed to grow old to her. She bet she could spend her days happily zipping along the sky and admiring the landscape.

Time did not seem relevant up in the sky and before she knew it, she could see the edge of the forest coming in closer. To the west she could see mountains looming on the horizon. They had not flown directly south, but rather slightly to the south-west so they would arrive as close to the mountains as possible. That meant a shorter trip to Moroth's Tooth by land.

The wagons settled down on the river bank that began right at the edge of the forest. They were left on the wrong side of the river.

“Why didn't we land on the other side?” asked Gareth as they unloaded their belongings. There was not much sunlight left in the day so to him it did not

seem like they'd get across today.

"We'd rather not show the wagons to too many people," replied Relait.

"But how will we cross the river?" asked Cheid.

The captain motioned to a few of his men and they hustled into the forest. Soon they came out, dragging behind them small boats that could carry four people at a time.

"This is a common crossing place for us. There are always several of these small rafts hidden," he explained to the surprised Cheid.

Nala was more interested in the stone tower that loomed up river, on the other side. Even at the distance where she could barely see it, it seemed huge.

"What's that tower?" she asked.

"It's one of the Northern Guardians," replied Ahnilr and put down a bag she had just lifted from the back of the wagon. "They're positioned all across the river. Mandor built them long before the Troll Wars and they've stood guard over their northern border ever since."

"That where we're supposed to meet our help?" asked Nala as she squinted and tried to make out more of the tower.

"That's the plan. We can only hope they've had enough time to get the message and gather what the council asked for," said Ahnilr.

Nala nodded and helped Ahnilr get the rest of their belongings from the wagon. After all of them had been emptied the wizard said his goodbyes and rose to the sky with the two other wagons in tow. He wanted to get a good start on his return journey before the sun set completely. He was an important figure in the elven circles of magic and he was needed back in the city as quickly as possible. That was partly the reason why he didn't fly the across the river or further.

With the three boats they found from the forest it took more than one trip to get everyone across the river, but they still had sunlight left to make it to the tower. It wasn't a large river at that spot so crossing it didn't take that much time, even if the current was fairly strong and they had to fight it to keep from drifting too far down river.

They hid the boats the best they could before heading towards the tower. The formation seemed to mould itself, with Nala and Ahnilr in the centre, the

elven warriors surrounding them and Cheid and Gareth in the lead along with Relait.

As they came closer to the tower they could see a wall surrounded it that made it look like a small fortress. They saw no gate, but they could see a road slither away from one side of the tower so they figured it to be on that side.

They saw men at the walls, some began pointing at them as they came to view. They had no reason to hide their approach and preferred it even that they were clearly seen.

As they made their way around the tower they were greeted with an open gate, even if it was blocked by a row of men with spears in hand. A single man dressed in shining plate mail stepped forward. There was a large oak engraved in his chest piece, no doubt a sign of his order. He did not wear a helmet, which left his head exposed, giving the group a good view of his brow moustache, green eyes and brow hair. He looked to be near middle age and it was clear from his presence that battles were not unknown to him. A broadsword hung at his side. Its pommel had a distinct oak shape to it as well.

“Greetings. I take it you are the group your High Council sent word of?” asked the man in a strong voice.

“We are,” replied Relait. “I am glad word reached you in time.”

“We have prepared everything that was asked for; horses, food, other supplies,” explained the man. “I am Derrick Beaster, the commander of this outpost. Please, come in. I'm happy to offer what little comfort our little garrison can offer you before you set on your journey.”

The men blocking the gate parted to allow the group in. The inner yard was dominated by the large tower, but there were stables and other buildings as well.

“We've set aside one of the barracks for you,” said Derrick and pointed to a wooden buildings that looked large enough to house forty men. “Lots of vacant space these days. They don't keep us as well equipped and manned as they used to.”

Relait thanked the commander and instructed his men to the buildings. Nala and her companions put their stuff inside and then followed Derrick inside the tower as he had invited them for a small dinner so he could brief them more

thoroughly on what they had gathered for them.

They were taken to a room with a table that had ample room for the six of them, though they were joined by another man. He was young, barely in his twenties, with sandy hair that was cut short and a boyish smile went across his face as he waved a greeting to everyone. He wore well made, but practical clothes. The only indication of any sort of battle readiness on his part was the sword fastened to his side.

“Ah, Leo, you're here. Good,” said Derrick and motioned everyone to take a seat. He sat at the end of the table while everyone else took their seats on the sides, with Leo sitting on the left from the commander.

“Everyone, this is Leo Serkin. He will be your guide into the mountains. He has been there many times and knows his way around and is aware of the dangers you will encounter.”

There was a round of introductions to get everyone acquainted. The two men were nothing but courteous to everyone.

“Will you be sending any other men with us?” asked Cheid as the introductions had been taken care of.

“No,” said Derrick and spread his hands in an apologetic manner. “As I said, we're under manned as is. We're the closest tower to the mountains and we need every man here to guard our border. It is quite often that a group of orcs or other unwelcome beings come down from the mountains to cause problems.”

The captain saw the looks of disappointment on the faces of his guests and quickly continued, “Do not take Leo lightly. Despite his young age, he is a Knight Defender. He wouldn't know the mountains as well as he does if he wasn't a tough one.”

Nala had no idea what it mean, but it seemed to impress Ahnilr and Relait as well as Cheid and Gareth so she let the matter rest. She trusted their judgement enough to leave the questions for later.

“You flatter me too much, commander,” said Leo. His voice was smooth and had a pleasantness to it that was hard to resist. He turned to talk to the rest of the group. “Rest assured, I will guide you through the mountains safely and aid you in your mission as best I can.”

Nala and the rest had hoped they would have gotten at least several more men with them, but they were willing to take what they could.

“What about the supplies?” asked Cheid.

“We have horses for each of you as well as a few extra ones to carry supplies,” replied Derrick. “Food, water, clothes for the cold mountains; everything that was asked for.”

The door opened and a young servant entered, carrying a platter filled with food. Another followed with a similar platter and another one carrying clay pots filled with drinks.

“Ah, food. Shall we eat and hash out the rest of the plan?” asked Derrick.

No one seemed to have any objections to it, especially Gareth seemed eager to dig in to the food, so they spent the rest of the evening plotting their journey and ensuring they did, indeed, have everything they needed on the trip. Leo proved his worth in the planning and offered several suggestions and bits of knowledge that proved useful and made their plan that much more solid.

By the time everyone was ready for bed, they had a plan they thought would stand up to any threat they had considered.

Chapter 20

Nisoen felt slightly uneasy as he approached the Elf Tree of the Stardancer family. The discussion he was about to enter would be a delicate one with little room for error.

He found the gate still smashed in, but at least it had been lifted to lean against the frame that had once held it in place. Two guards stood at the gate. They both looked determined to keep anyone out. The visit from Nala seemed to have lit their spirits to not fail again.

After informing the guards of his name and intentions and that the Lady of the house was waiting for him, the guards became much more friendly and one of them guided him into the garden. It was a warm, sunny day, so it wasn't that uncommon that meetings were held outside in gardens and such.

They found the Lady sitting by a small table amidst some lilacs. It was a private sort of corner in the garden as the plants created almost a room like fixture around the table. There was an extra chair for Nisoen to sit on. The guard that had guided him stepped some way away, but remained close enough for the Lady to be able to call him should the need arise.

"Captain Dawnvine, please, sit down. To what do I owe the pleasure?" asked the Lady as she sipped some honey tea from a finely crafted cup. She no longer wore the colours of mourning, but a green dress that made her look almost majestic. Her green eyes stared at Nisoen intently, making him feel almost trapped.

He took a seat opposite to her. "Thank you for seeing me, Lady Stardancer. You are likely aware of the duty the council has bestowed upon me?"

"I am," she admitted. "How goes the investigation into the actions of Inorinn? I trust she will receive proper punishment for her lies?"

"Alas, I only investigate," lamented Nisoen. "The punishment is for the council to decide, but I believe they will have little choice based on the results of my investigation."

"Good," said the Lady firmly. "I hate being used in others political games."

She poured some more tea for herself. Nisoen declined when she offered him some as well.

“But I doubt this is why you came to talk to me, dear captain,” she said. “Why don't you get to the point?”

A small smile briefly crossed Nisoen's face. “To be honest I have come to ask for your help.”

“My help?” asked the Lady, sounding surprised.

“To be more precise, the help of your daughter,” continued Nisoen. He hesitated for a moment before adding. “There has been some new information about the dealings that may have led to your sons untimely demise.”

“And how might my daughter be of help in the matter?” asked the Lady.

“She is set to likely replace Nerduin in the council, is she not?” asked Nisoen. Given what had happened it seemed an unlikely outcome for anyone observing from the outside, but the council had its own inner workings and reasons for choosing who was on it and who wasn't.

“There is the possibility,” admitted the Lady.

“I will be honest with you, Lady,” said Nisoen. “There is proof that your son had dealings with some shady figures. What is of concern is that he was not the only one in the council. He was pulled in by that person. What I need your daughters help with is to lure out that person so we can catch her and bring her before the council for judgement.”

Lady Stardancer took a moment to digest what she had been told. Of course, the fact that the council might still be compromised troubled her. After all, she was a firm believer in the rule of the council. If it was corrupt, it was of dire consequences for the elves in the long run. But more than that, someone had enticed her son to the path that had taken his life. Deep down she had know her son could not have gone down such paths on his own, but now there was an actual opportunity to reveal who it had been. She could not let that slide away.

“My daughter is still somewhat distraught over the loss of her brother,” said the Lady finally. “But I will talk with her. Come visit again tomorrow. I will have her ready to aid you by then.”

Nisoen felt relieved. Lady Stardancer had turned out a lot more sensible

than he had hoped for. "Thank you, Lady. I will make full note to the council of your willingness to help me." He began to rise from his chair, but was stopped by the Lady.

"Promise me one thing, captain," demanded the Lady in a voice that left no room to argue. "Do not let anything happen to my daughter."

"Of course. Her safety will be of utmost importance," assured Nisoen and he truly meant it.

The Lady nodded and called the guard to show Nisoen the way out. He felt pleased. The first pieces of his plan were falling into place. He hoped the young lady of the house would prove as level headed as her mother, but given what he had heard of her from Ahnilr and from other sources, he feared keeping her safe might prove a difficult task. She was not exactly known for her consideration nor calmness.

Still, out of all the choices he had, this was the only one he had any confidence in for success.



The first rays of sunshine crept beyond the horizon and hit the top of the tower. Nala was there to greet them. She leaned against the battlements, resting her chin on her hands, looking on at the sunrise. She had woken early and found herself unable to fall asleep again, so she had gone wandering and finally found herself at the top of the tower.

There was a carefully constructed pile of wood behind her, ready to be lit and convey a call for help to the towers down river. It was simple, yet effective. She could see the next tower looming in the distance.

A gust of wind made her wrap the cloak tighter around herself. The wind came from the mountains so there was a chill to it that seemed unusual even for the late summer they were in. She only hoped they'd be able to get to Moroth's Tooth and back before winter hit them. A winter in the mountains was not something she looked forward to. Then again, she wasn't sure they'd be coming back. It wasn't like they had anything with them that could prevent the seal from degrading. All they were hoping for was to ensure no one was increasing the pace

with which the seal was weakening. If they had more men with them they might have gotten away with leaving a small garrison to guard the place, but as it stood, they had too few to leave behind while some went back home, so they would probably end up spending the winter in the mountains waiting for spring and reinforcements.

Looking down, she could see some the first ones starting to wake up. The night guards were winding down and getting ready for their piece of sleep. It had been surprisingly easy to get to the top of the tower. The guards had not given her any problems, in fact, they had even given her directions and a few tips on what to look at, They had been right that the view to the mountains was a nice one. Nala feared the coming trip would do much to lessen her opinion of them.

She started to make her way down the long, winding stairs. Climbing up had served as good exercise and the way down was no different. By the time she reached the ground level almost everyone was up and about. She could smell breakfast being cooked by the kitchen staff and the young boys who were there to be trained were rushing about, getting ready to serve the food to their seniors.

She bumped into Ahnilr on her way to her room and found her direction changed towards the large dining hall where breakfast was served. She took the moment to ask a few questions that had been on her mind.

“What's a Knight Defender?” she asked from Ahnilr.

The priestess turned to look at her with a bit of surprise on her face, but soon remembered there was a lot the young elf did not know. “They're the finest warriors the kingdom of Mandor has,” she explained. “Their numbers are few; I'd be surprised if there was much more than a hundred of them, so having one with us is quite a significant gesture from Mandor.”

“Still, he's only one man,” said Nala.

“Perhaps, but you need to keep in mind that it was the Knight Defenders that turned the tide in the war against the trolls,” said Ahnilr as the two entered the dining hall. It was slowly starting to fill up. “They have more than a sword at their disposal.”

“You mean magic?” asked Nala as the two took a seat and a young boy brought them food and drink. It was a simple breakfast with a thin soup, fresh

bread and some honey and cheese.

Ahnir shrugged her shoulders. "I don't think anyone outside their order or the highest ranking members of the Mandor military know exactly what it is that they use."

She took a bite out of a piece of bread before continuing. "There are many legends of them. What is true and what is not is hard to say as an outsider, but one thing seems to be commonly accepted to be true; you do not want to face a Knight Defender in battle."

"Are they really that good?" wondered Nala as she spooned some soup into herself. It was a bit salty, but it seemed to fill her right up.

"I suppose we'll get to find out," said Ahnir with a small smile.

The answers she had gotten did not make Nala feel much better about having the young Leo as their only additional man, but she wasn't about to turn him away either. Maybe the legends Ahnir had referred to had a grain of truth to them. At the very least the man seemed to know his way about the mountains which was valuable enough on its own.

Cheid and Gareth entered the hall along with the elves. There was still plenty of room for them so they had no trouble getting their share of the food. A short hour later everyone had gathered to the courtyard with their belongings strapped on the back of their horses and the extra supplies on a few extra pack horses.

Remembering the last time she had ridden, Nala was not looking forward to the trip. She'd rather have walked, but recognized that the horses would take them to their destination much faster.

"Ah, good to see all of you are ready," said Derrick as he walked to the group with Leo in tow. The young man was dressed in well made travel clothes. The only sign of higher status was an intricate embroidery of a shield on the sleeves of his tunic. He did not seem to have anything besides his sword to fight with nor did he have any armour, which made Nala wonder what sort of a knight he was supposed to be. The horse he was leading did not seem to have anything but small supplies packed on its back. Certainly no armour there either.

"We are. Thank you for everything you have done, commander," said Relait.

"The elves will not forget the friendship you have shown."

"Friends help each other out," said the commander with a small smile. "Your patrols have saved us enough times from the creatures of the mountains that this can't even begin to repay for it."

Relait bowed slightly. "Until next time then, commander." He extended his hand and the commander gripped it strongly.

"Safe journey," said Derrick and directed the words to everyone in the group.

Without further ceremonies, they mounted their horses and rode out the gates, setting their sight on the mountains before them.

With Leo in the lead, they kept a good pace for the entire day. Seeing as there was not much to do while riding other than to enjoy the scenery and talk, Nala decided it was a good time to prod the young knight a bit and see what he really was. She increased the pace and rode up next to him.

"Mind if I join you for a bit?" she asked.

"Not at all," replied Leo. "The journey goes quicker with a bit of talk."

"So, what will we be facing once we reach the mountains?" asked Nala.

The young knight glanced at her. He wasn't overly certain what the position of the young elf maiden was, but clearly there was something special about her, the colour of her hair told as much. The others of the group had a different sort of attitude towards her. "At first our biggest worry will be the terrain and maybe a few wild animals," he began to explain. "Once we get further along the mountains and closer to Moroth's Tooth, we'll face a lot more than that."

"I've heard there are evil beings living there," said Nala.

Leo chuckled. "Evil? That's barely adequate to describe some of them."

"You've seen some of them then?"

"Some," admitted Leo. "I once led a small exploration team to the mountains. We were attacked by Silverfangs."

"Silverfangs?" asked Nala. While she had learned about many creatures under her parents guidance, those had mostly been ones she was likely to encounter in forests. She knew little of creatures of the mountains.

"Nasty creatures," said Leo. "They're man sized with silver fur. They walk

on two legs and haw long, sharp claws as hands. Their heads are like a wolves with big fangs and they hunt much like wolves; in packs.”

Nala shivered. They sounded nasty indeed.

“We lost half the expedition to them,” continued Leo. “They're so quick and strong that any man has trouble standing up to them. Even the trolls are afraid of them.”

“You'd think they weren't afraid of much of anything, seeing how quickly they heal,” said Nala.

Leo chuckled. “The problem with Silverfangs is that they eat their prey whole; skin, flesh, bones. Everything. Even a troll can't heal itself when it's being digested in small pieces in ten different stomachs.”

“I can see how that would be a problem,” said Nala, feeling a bit queasy.

“But don't you worry, we'll keep them off no problems,” said Leo confidently. “We're all fighter in this group. The expedition I led was mainly comprised of miners that had little experience in fighting.”

“I certainly have no desire to make closer contact with such creatures,” said Nala.

They rode on in silence for a bit before Nala broke it. “What exactly is a Knight Defender?” she asked.

Leo gave her a curious look.

“I grew up quite isolated,” explained Nala a bit abashed. “My parents never taught me much of the world beyond our forest.”

“Then I take it you do not know much of Mandor either?” asked Leo.

Nala shook her head.

“The backbone of Mandor is its knights,” began Leo. “There are five orders together. There is the Order of Oak, which commander Derrick is a member of. Their responsibility is guarding the northern border along the river. The border with the mountain is largely under the responsibility of the Order of Elm. The south, including the sea, is under the watchful eye of Order of Seashell. Internally, the cities and roads are guarded by the Order of Komondor.”

“That seems to leave the Knight Defenders very little to do,” said Nala.

“You'd think so, but that still leaves quite a bit for us to do,” replied Leo.

“Though we are few, we are tasked with guarding the King and Queen as well as some other important people when the need arises. We help the other Orders on occasion as well.”

“So how do you become one?” asked Nala.

“Each Order sends their best to be tested and those that are chosen undergo the needed training,” replied Leo. “There are years when no one is chosen.”

Nala watched the countryside pass by and the mountains come closer. The whole order of knights seemed overly complex to her.

“I don't see you carrying any sort of armour. Seems a bit odd for a knight, to me,” said Nala.

Leo gave her a smile. “It comes when I need it.”

“Magic?”

Leo grinned. “Something like that.” Clearly, he was not about to share the secret with Nala so she let it go. Instead she asked questions about Mandor. Leo was happy to tell of his homeland and the way he described things and talked of them made it clear he had a deep love for it.

They barely noticed the time passing by. Nala found herself telling Leo of the elves and her home forest, though she left out the dark sides of her story. She paid back the secrecy Leo had hidden behind and offered cryptic answers when the man asked why she looked so different from other elves.

They rode until there was little sunlight left. They'd reached the foot of the mountains, but needed to ride south for a while before venturing further in.

Nala had been right in fearing her muscles would not remember how to ride. She dismounted and winced as she stretched herself.

“You all right?” asked Cheid.

“First time riding in a while,” replied Nala and winced as a joint let out a popping sound when she stretched. “Takes some getting used to. Can't say I'm looking forward to it.”

“There'll be many more days of it ahead of us,” said Cheid with a small grin on his face.

“You're enjoying this, aren't you?” asked Nala and glared at the young

wizard.

“What's there not to enjoy?” asked Gareth innocently as he dismounted as well. “It's fast, the countryside offers a nice view and you don't have to strain yourself walking.” He had a similar grin on his face as Cheid.

Nala snorted and scowled at the two grinning men. This was payback for her remarks in the forest, she was certain of it.

They set up camp for the night, assigned guard duty and made some hot soup to fill their stomachs. The journey was only starting so they still had a few fresh ingredients with them to work with. In the end they'd only have dry rations to keep the hunger away unless they managed to hunt themselves some meat or forage berries from the mountains, both of which seemed an unlikely prospect.

It was early morning when they broke camp and continued riding. It was late afternoon when they broke from their southward heading and entered the rocky mountains.

Nala found herself ever more thankful that Leo had come along. She was certain that had the man not been there, they'd have had to turn back at least a few times because of a dead end or some other obstacle that blocked their way. As it stood, Leo guided them down the right paths and, more importantly, safe paths. They avoided many of the winding paths that led upwards towards the peaks and travelled mainly on the ones that remained close to the level the plains they had ridden on earlier were. They made good time and as darkness began to fall they found themselves on a wider part of the path that offered the perfect place for setting up camp.

They hadn't yet needed to climb up too high up any slope, but the air was still quite a bit more chilly than on the plains they had ridden just earlier that day. The gusts of wind that came down from the mountains brought with them clear promise of autumn.

Throughout the day they had seen little sign of life. An eagle soaring high in the sky and a few mountain goats that looked on from high up as they passed by was the most they had seen. As far as the group was concerned that was how things were welcome to go all the way to the goal of their journey.

They had trouble finding enough firewood to get a decent fire going, but in

the end they managed. Gareth got lucky and found what looked to be a stash of some sorts left by previous travellers that had passed by. There wasn't much firewood in it, but enough that they could have a fire for the night and even some left over that they could take with them. It was certain there would be less and less wood available as they ventured deeper into the mountains.

Once the wood had been found it wasn't long before they had a good fire going and some food cooking up. By the time darkness had settled everyone had their stomach full and the guards were taking their positions while the most tired ones had found their bedrolls and lied down.

Nala, Cheid, Gareth, Leo and Relait were still sitting around the fire talking when Nala heard something.

“Do you hear that?” asked Nala.

The group went silent and listened. All they heard was the crackling of the fire and the shuffling of their horses that were tied down nearby.

Gareth and Cheid shook their heads, but Ahnilr and Leo nodded. They had heard it the same as Nala.

“Listen,” said Nala to quiet everyone else again.

They listened. Then they all heard it. Something dragging against the stone. Small clinks, as if metal hitting stone. A low growl.

“Silverfangs,” said Leo quietly.

“I thought you said we shouldn't encounter them here?” demanded Nala.

“Something must have driven them here,” said Leo sounding worried. “Get everyone ready,” he said to Ahnilr. The priestess nodded and started to go around the camp, waking those who had fallen asleep and alerting others to the approaching danger. The elves were professionals and they were ready quicker than Leo had hoped for. Bows were readied and swords drawn. Just in time as the first Silverfang roared loudly and appeared in the camp fires light.

It walked like a man and stood over six feet tall. Even from under its thick fur you could see the muscles that gave the creature an even more fearsome look. Its hands ended in five claws that were like long daggers. Its yellow eyes examined the group around the fire and drool glistened on the nearly eight inch fangs that protruded from its lower jaw. The tail behind it whisked around like a

whip. They heard growls from all around the camp fire.

Gareth made the first move and rushed towards the creature with sword in hand. By the time he reached it three arrows were already sticking out of it and a mighty blow ended the creature with a yelp of pain.

Similar yelps could be heard all around as arrows flew into the darkness and found their target. The elves had no trouble fighting in the darkness, but Gareth, Cheid and Leo needed the camp fires light to have any chance.

The Silverfangs hit by arrows were happy to give them the opportunity as they rushed in to catch those who hurt them. The arrows didn't really seem to do much more than annoy them.

Leo grabbed his sword and went into the fray. He did not stop to think that they had not seen him fight yet and those that had time to see him, stopped for a moment to admire it.

As soon as his sword had been drawn, a steel like liquid flowed from the sword and wrapped around him like a second skin. It only took seconds and by then he had a shield in his other hands, made of the liquid that had turned as hard as steel. It covered him all around, leaving only his eyes, nostrils and mouth exposed, though the helmet it formed had bits that protected those areas as much as possible. He looked like a steel statue come to life.

One swing of his sword lobbed off a hand from the nearest Silverfang and his shield blocked the strike of the claws from the other. They screeched against the metal with a tooth jarring noise. A clawed hand grabbed his arm, but the armour reacted by producing sharp spikes that sunk deep into the furry hand gripping it. It let go and Leo was quick to follow it with a strike of his sword.

Cheid had no time to admire Leo or his skills. He was busy with his spells. He whipped the nearest creature with the same black energy strands he had used in the fight against Derian. The creature howled in pain and tried to get away, but the strands wrapped around it and squeezed the life out of it.

Nala had planned on using her own magic to support Cheid, but circumstances had forced her into close combat. Her two swords whirled fluidly in the air, blocking all attempt by the creature in front of her to get in a strike. The creature was taller than her with greater reach, but she was more agile and

that allowed her to hold her own. Her swords slashed at the creature, causing deep cuts and gashes that stained its silver grey fur a dark red. Finally, as the loss of blood slowed the creature down, she landed a blow in the creatures throat and finished it off. She looked around to see where she was needed.

Ahnir and Relait were teaming against one of the creatures. The sickles of the priestess were dripping with blood as was Relait's sword. They seemed to have the situation under control.

She saw one of the elves lose his footing on the stone that was made slippery by blood. A Silverfang was on him as soon as he hit the ground. Nala rushed towards the tangled couple and sunk her longer sword in the creatures side. It howled and jumped away, almost ripping the sword from Nala's hands, but she managed to hold on. Despite the wounds the Silverfang had inflicted on him, the elf on the ground managed to pull himself up and sink his sword in the creature before it could get too far away. That gave Nala the opportunity to free her sword and sink it in again. Finally, the creature slumped to the ground.

Nala breathed in heavily and looked around herself once more. She saw Gareth cut down what looked to be the last creature. Leo was walking around the camp in his fluid like armour ensuring the monsters that were down were indeed dead. It didn't seem like they had lost anyone. Nala counted at least ten dead Silverfangs.

Upon further examination of their situation they found one of their horses missing. By the trails it looked like a few of the creatures had managed to sneak away and drag the horse with them. While the loss stung it wasn't a journey ending loss.

Other than that one loss their group had gotten away with a few deeper wounds and scrapes that Ahnir was already patching up. Everyone was still fit for travel.

"Seems we got away pretty easily," said Nala as she joined Leo, Cheid, Relait and Gareth.

"A battle hardened group like this won't have problems with these creatures," said Leo as he put away his sword. The armour flowed off from him, into the scabbard of the sword. "Still it worries me. They shouldn't be this far

away from Morok's Tooth. Something has driven them off from their normal grounds.”

“What ever it is, I doubt it'll be as easy as these things were,” said Gareth. He was wiping off blood from his sword with a piece of cloth.

“We'll have to worry about that when we get there,” said Cheid. He seemed more tired than the others. Even a few spells seemed to take a larger toll than swinging a piece of metal for the same time.

“Well, we'd better drag the corpses off if we want to sleep tonight,” said Leo. Sunrise was still a long time coming and they couldn't move in the darkness.

Relait barked a few orders in elvish and the corpses were dragged a fair way into the darkness. Gareth was an immense help in accomplishing the task. They posted several more guards just in case the creatures that had fled returned.

Those that were not on guard tried to sleep, but it proved a difficult task for anyone else but the wounded who enjoyed the benefits of Ahnilr's healing powers and the sleepiness it instilled on them.

Gareth and Cheid finally fell asleep after an hour of trying as did Nala, but it wasn't long after that that she woke to noises. She immediately jumped up from under her blanket and reached for her swords, but Leo grabbed her hand and shushed.

“Quiet,” whispered the young man. “We don't want to attract their attention.”

Nala listened to the dragging voice and low growls. “What is it?” she asked quietly.

“The remaining Silverfangs,” replied Leo. “They've come to claim their food for the next few days.”

“You mean..?”

“Meat is meat to them,” said Leo grimly. “They don't care if it's their own kind.”

Nala felt a bit sick upon hearing that. What sort of lowly creature would eat its own dead?

“Look on the positive side,” said Leo cheerfully. “We won't have to smell them in the morning.”

Nala grunted. She couldn't find words to respond with. One thing she was certain about; there would be no more sleep for her tonight. She tried, but ended up only tossing around on her blanket, trying to listen out for any sounds that would tell of the return of the Silverfangs.

She wasn't the only one and as soon as the first rays of sunlight crept over the horizon the whole camp was abuzz; packing things up and cooking a quick breakfast. Where they had piled the dead Silverfangs they only found a pool of blood and drag marks telling which direction their companions had taken them. They were happy to note they were moving in the opposite direction.

Ahnir checked on the condition of those who had gotten wounds before they embarked for the day. The loss of one horse meant some redistribution of carrying supplies, but in the end it didn't slow them down at all.

They hoped what lay ahead of them wouldn't be much worse than what they had encountered during the night.



Tibiniah Stardancer looked nervous as Nisoen stepped into the room. Her mother had told her of the request made by the man and she had refused, but no one refused the Lady for long. She had made arguments that left her little room to weasel out of lest she wanted to be expunged from the family books. To say she was less than enthusiastic to take part in what ever the man had planned was an understatement. The only thing that aroused even slight interest for her was the possibility of finding out who had tempted her brother to meddle in the affairs of beings he should have killed on sight.

She had also received word that morning the she would be made a member of the High Council. She was to begin her duties today with an official ceremony following later on. Being down two members and a third under investigation put the council in a position where they felt they needed to act quickly to restore to full numbers to maintain their ability to make decisions.

It seemed the day would be a busy one for her.

“Greetings, Lady, lady Tibiniah,” said Nisoen as he took a seat.

The young woman just nodded and glanced at her mother who was sitting

next to her.

“So tells us, good captain, what is your plan?” asked her mother. She never missed a beat. Always to business, seemingly always ready for what ever was thrown at her. Tibiniah envied that side of her. The calmness and determination was something she sorely lacked on many occasion and that made her wish she was more like her mother.

“As I understand it you are to start your duties in the council today?” asked Nisoen of the young elf.

She nodded.

“I would like you to get close to Aliris Weaseed. She has been implicated as the person who introduced your brother to the mystery beings that tainted him,” said Nisoen.

“How am I to do that?” asked Tibiniah.

“Ask her for guidance,” suggested her mother. “You are, after all, new to the council. You will need someone to guide you through their routines.”

Nisoen nodded. “That's a good plan. All you need to do is get close to her and drop hints that you are interested in continuing where your brother left off.”

“What if she doesn't go for it?” asked Tibiniah. She didn't feel comfortable with her part.

“Then we'll have to think of something else,” admitted Nisoen. He hated that he could not offer another plan to them, but he didn't have enough to go after Aliris directly just yet. “Of course, we'll follow you to ensure your safety. Help will never be far away.”

“What if she notices?” asked Tibiniah.

“She won't notice. With everything that has been happening, there are guards everywhere to begin with. A few extra ones won't arouse her suspicions, especially near a new member of the council,” replied Nisoen. The council had indeed strengthened security around themselves. Partly it was because Nala had appeared. The council knew full well that her kind were always a sign of troubles to come.

“So what am I to do today?” asked Tibiniah.

“The council has summoned you to begin your work with them, have they

not?” said her mother. “You do as they instruct. If the opportunity presents itself, then try to get close to Aliris.”

Tibiniah nodded.

“Officially, I am here to escort you to the council,” said Nisoen. Despite heading an investigation he had not been relieved of his usual duties. “As soon as you are ready, we can leave.”

“I’m as ready as I’ll ever be,” said the young elf and rose from her seat.

Nisoen had to admit that she did, indeed, look ready. Her hair was arranged elaborately above her head and the mix of green and white cloth that made up her dress suited her well and gave her a look of nobility fitting for someone carrying her family name.

“In that case, if you will excuse us, Lady,” said Nisoen as he stood up and bowed slightly.

“By all means,” replied the head of the house and gave her daughter an encouraging hand squeeze as she passed by.

Nisoen led the way and as the two exited the Stardancer home tree they were joined by several guards that formed a protective wall around them. Tibiniah glanced at the guards nervously. She was not used to having so many. Usually she only had two and even then she knew them by name because they’d been with her for so long. Now, surrounded by unknown ones, she found herself missing her own guards.

They gathered a few curious looks as they walked through the elven city. It was not every day that you saw guards sporting the colours of the council escorting someone in such a manner, especially someone who, to their knowledge, was not a member of the council. Though rumours would start to fly after such an display, it would not be officially announced until the proper ceremonies had been conducted.

The young elf found her nervousness growing as the council tree came closer. Despite claiming to be ready, she felt woefully unqualified to be on the council. What did she know of the world outside? Her entire life had been spent in the elven city and a large part of that tucked away safely behind guards and the walls of their house. She saw no reason why the council would have picked

her.

Her fears seemed to calm down as they entered the councils tree and walked down the corridors that Tibiniah knew from previous visits. She regained some measure of confidence as she realized there were things she knew quite well. She knew the city, she knew her own kind. This was knowledge she could offer the council. Of course, all the members were not expected to know everything. There were so many of them so each could offer a different view on matters.

“Wait here,” said Nisoen as they reached the door to the councils chamber. “I’ll tell them you are here.” He entered the chamber and left Tibiniah waiting with the guards. He wasn’t gone long before the door opened and he motioned for the young woman to enter.

The full council was there, save for the members that had been lost or were under investigation. She knew most of them, not personally, but through gossip and general knowledge of the council.

“Ah, the young Stardancer,” greeted Lonaac as Tibiniah stepped closer. She had seen Lonaac a couple of times before, in the council chamber as well as at a couple of social events, but his age always surprised her as did the fact he apparently did not notice the age himself.

The young woman bowed slightly. “Greetings, to the council,” she said with a forced, calm voice.

“I take it you know why you are here?” asked Lonaac from his seat. The fact they skipped a lot of the usual pleasantries told volumes of their mindset.

“I do,” replied Tibiniah.

“Good, good,” the old elf nodded his head. “We must apologize that we have to take you in without the proper ceremonies and celebrations, but the times call for quick action on our part.”

“I understand,” said Tibiniah. “A lot has happened that would cause concern for all elves.”

Lonaac raised an eyebrow. “Indeed. Perhaps more than you know.”

The words sounded ominous to the young elf. It must have shown in her body language as the old elf gave her an encouraging smile.

“For today, you don't need to worry about the troubles and decision the council is facing,” said Lonaac. “You'll spend the day with one of our elder members, learning what we do and how we do it. Do you have any wish as to who you would like to guide you?”

“I would be honoured if Aliris Weaseed would see me worthy of her guidance,” said Tibiniah. The opportunity had presented itself and she had grabbed it.

Lonaac turned to one of the council member, a brown haired woman with blue eyes. It was impossible to tell how old she was, but she couldn't have been much past the middle age for an elf. She nodded and Lonaac turned back to Tibiniah.

“It seems you have your guide,” said the old elf. “We will leave you two to go through things.” The old elf stood up from his chair with the support of his wooden staff and hobbled past Tibiniah and out the door. The rest of the council followed him, save for Aliris. She looked at her young colleague with great interest.

“I must ask,” said the elder council member in a surprisingly gentle voice. “Why did you choose me?”

“My brother made mention of you at times,” said Tibiniah nervously. “He said you had been a great influence on him and of great help. I was hoping you might offer me your wisdom as you did for my brother.”

A small smile crept on the face of Aliris. “He did? That was most kind of him. It is unfortunate what happened to him.”

Tibiniah had trouble keeping a steady face. Hearing condolences from the person responsible for the whole thing did not sit well with her and she wanted to jump at her and rip her eyes out. “Thank you,” she forced herself to say in a voice that tried to sound sincere. “I hope I can be of much value to the council as he was.”

“Don't worry, Tibiniah,” said Aliris as she stood up and walked over to her. “I will ensure you fit right in and learn the ropes quickly.” The older council member placed a hand on the younger elf's shoulder. “Come, let's get started,”

She led Tibiniah to her seat and began explaining the details of her duties

and responsibilities.

Chapter 21

Nala looked around nervously at the high walls of rock that surrounded her. The small canyon forced them into single file and left them vulnerable to attacks from above. She did not like it, but they had not found any other way to move forward.

It was the groups second day in the mountains and they could now see the peak of Moroth's Tooth on occasion as they climbed through a higher point in the terrain. Since the encounter with the Silverfangs they had encountered few creatures that posed any significant threat to them. A single Rock Smasher had ran across the group on its hunting trip, but had decided it was better to run than fight.

Rock Smashers were large, grey skinned beings that got their name from the fact they used large rocks as weapons that ended up smashing most human sized victims like a boiled potato. Despite sounding fearsome, they were unlikely to cause problems unless encountering an entire clan of them or disturbing their nest.

A more sinister obstacle had been the purple ooze that had inhabited a cave they'd eyed for shelter for the night. It was sheer luck that all it had gotten was a dagger from one of the elves who, for some reason, had stumbled when entering the cave to ensure it was safe. The dagger had landed on the ooze and the following sizzling sound had alerted them of danger. Torches had been thrown in which revealed the ooze that covered the cave from floor to ceiling. Had anyone actually ventured into the cave the consequences would have been less than pleasant given the fact the dagger had begun to melt the moment it hit the ooze.

So they had spent that night on the outside. Cheid had been most eager to get a sample of the purple ooze, but Nala and Gareth had managed to talk the young wizard out of it. They'd rightly pointed out that he did not have the needed tools to retrieve a sample of it safely and that now was not the time to take undue risks. Grudgingly, the young wizard had relented and given up.

Nala sighed out of relief as she exited the canyon with her horse. The path

widened quickly and allowed the group to form up once again in a more suitable fashion. She rode up next to Leo. Gareth and Cheid were already talking with him with Ahnilr close by as well.

“How long do you suppose it'll be before we reach Moroth's Tooth?” asked Nala when the conversation between Leo, Cheid and Gareth died down. They had been talking about Leos armour, though mostly it had been Cheid asking questions, Leo dodging them the best he could and Gareth grumbling about how he had never seen the need to use armour. Of course, it was quickly pointed out to him that not everyone had the benefit of troll blood flowing in their veins.

“With luck we'll reach the base of it late tomorrow,” said Leo as he looked forward at the now visible tip of it. “I'd hate to get there right as it gets dark,” he added.

“Why is that?” asked Cheid.

“That's when the worst of the creatures come out,” replied the young knight. “I'd rather we have time to seek a proper shelter and set up camp with time.”

“Why don't we start looking for a suitable camping place after midday, set up camp there and then move on in the morning?” suggested Ahnilr. “A bit more rest before entering Moroth's Tooth would do good for all of us.”

Leo nodded. “That sounds like a reasonable plan.”

“I'll tell Relait,” volunteered Gareth and stopped his horse so the elf captain could catch up to him.

“Once we reach the base of it, then I can't really guide us much further,” said Leo. “We'll have to start relying on Nala.” He still wasn't exactly certain how the young elf could know the way, but seeing as the others seemed to place their trust in her ability to guide them properly, he went along with it.

“Are you certain you can find the right path?” asked Cheid from Nala. He saw the doubt on Leo's face and wanted to try and put it to rest.

“I have several landmarks in mind,” said Nala. “We're approaching from the right direction so we shouldn't have any problems finding them.”

“How can you know when you've never been here?” asked Leo. He had had enough of not knowing.

“One of my predecessors has been there,” replied Nala. “I have his memories.”

“How?” demanded Leo. He was determined to finally get to the bottom of what made Nala so special.

“The goddess Lorieel gave them to me,” replied Nala. It was not like they had been hiding things from Leo. He just never got to asking the right questions. She continued to explain the event to Leo in a condensed form, leaving out bits of information that weren't overly relevant to the story. They rode on and night began to set as she told the story.

Setting up camp had formed into a routine that flowed along calmly and smoothly like a river. Everyone knew what they were to do and they went about their duties quickly and efficiently.

Nala found herself wondering what had happened to the elemental spirits that had been pestering her all throughout their journey. As soon as they had entered the mountains there had been fewer and fewer of them. Today, she had not seen a single one. While she liked the fact she didn't have to deal with them, she had to wonder what had driven them away.

The night passed by without incident. They broke camp early in the morning and began travelling. It was pure luck that they avoided a large group of orcs. They were taking a lower path than they were and it looked like they were dragging with them everything they owned. They were in a hurry too. Nala and her companions watched in silence as they passed underneath before continuing their journey.

The sight did make them wonder what was going on. What were the orcs running away from? Perhaps the other creatures had done so as well. From what Leo had told they should have encountered at least something besides Silverfangs after having ventured this deep into the mountains. Something was going on and it made Nala feel nervous.

By midday they found a suitable place for a camp and they enjoyed some well deserved extra rest before the final leg of their journey. They set out early the next morning and made it to the base of Moroth's Tooth when daylight was still plentiful and they had ample time to get to where they wanted.

Nala recognized the landmark immediately. The withered down tree and the torch like shape of the rocks were unmistakable. They were getting close to the entrance to the tunnel that would lead them to Deremoth.

“We're getting close,” said Nala. “We'll need to head east for a bit from here until we come by a large boulder.”

“We should proceed with care,” said Leo. “The terrain is getting rough for the horses and we don't know if there will be others that have made it here before us.”

“How long do we have to go?” asked Cheid.

Nala had to dig through the memory before answering. “It's not long from the boulder. Maybe an hour by foot.”

“In that case we should make camp at the boulder and proceed on foot with a small group to scout,” suggested Cheid.

Gareth nodded beside him. “No reason why we should all rush forward. Caution never hurt anyone.”

“I tend to agree,” said Leo.

Nala shrugged her shoulders. She didn't really mind either way, as long as they finally got there. “Lets do it that way then.”

It didn't take the group long to reach the rock Nala had described. Nala, Leo, Cheid and Relait left the others to set up camp by the rock while they headed forward to scout. It took slightly longer than Nala had anticipated to reach where she believed the entrance to the tunnel to be, but not much.

It was pure luck that Leo noticed the watch before the group got spotted. He pulled everyone behind a bunch of rocks that hid them from view.

“There's a lookout,” he whispered to the others. “Up on that cliff to the left.”

Nala peaked above the rock and spotted the guard exactly where Leo had said he would be. He lowered herself back down and cursed. It was a human.

“We're not the first here,” she said quietly.

“The Blades?” asked Cheid.

“Most likely,” said Nala.

“I wonder how many there are,” mused Leo.

“Can we get past the guard?” asked Relait.

Nala shook her head. "He has a perfect view of the only path leading to the place. He'll spot anything approaching beyond this point."

Cheid grinned. "What if he had nothing to see?"

"What do you have planned?" asked Leo. During the trip he had talked with the young wizard enough to know he was a resourceful one.

Cheid rummaged through the pockets of his tunic and cloak. He pulled out several small vials that were tightly sealed and examined the labels. Finally he found the right one. He showed the vial to the others.

"If I drink this, I'll make me invisible for a short amount of time. Long enough to sneak past the guard and scout ahead what's there waiting for us."

"You have any more of those?" asked Leo.

"Just one more. Best save it for later if we need it to get past the guard again," replied Cheid.

"Shame," muttered Leo.

Cheid spread his hands apologetically. "Gareth and I tried our best, but there wasn't much left of the potion cabinet of Skander."

"So those were the additional supplies you two went after before we left," said Nala.

Cheid winked at her. "Figured some of the many potions he has would come in handy. There are a couple of nasty ones that'll help us should we need to fight our way to the tunnel."

"Enough talk," said Relait. "This isn't the place for it."

Cheid nodded. He broke the seal on the vial and drank the cloudy liquid inside. He shuddered at the taste of it, but forced himself to gulp it all down. At first it looked like nothing would happen, but then his form began to slowly fade away until nothing else was left but his clothes. His seemingly floating clothes were an odd sight to behold.

Nala raised an eyebrow.

"I did say it would make *me* invisible," came Cheid's voice out of nowhere as he began removing his clothes.

"Well, that's impractical," said Leo in a voice that was strained by effort not to laugh.

“Just wait here until I get back,” came Cheid's voice from next to the pile of clothes he had shed off. He did not sound amused. They heard light footsteps as he walked away down the path.

“I just hope the effect of his potion doesn't wear off while he's in the middle of their camp,” said Leo. “Though the look on their faces might be worth seeing.”

Nala and Relait stifled their laughter with their hands.

They waited in silence for the return of the young wizard. As time passed they began to get nervous. He had said the potion would last for only a small amount of time and it felt like they had waited more than a hefty amount of time already.

The first sign of Cheid's return was his trousers rising from the ground and getting pulled on. “Damn I'm cold,” he muttered and pulled on more of his clothes. His voice shivered so his complaint seemed more than valid.

“Well?” demanded Nala.

“We'd better return to the camp,” said Cheid. “We're in a bit of trouble.”

Nala felt like protesting, but when Relait and Leo just nodded and began making their way back, she had no choice but to follow. By the time they reached camp the effect of the potion had worn off and Cheid was fully visible once more.

The camp had been set up in a sheltered nook of the large rock that had guided them to where they were. The fire they had lit could barely be seen, so sheltered it was. The gusts of wind that blew by quickly dissipated any smoke from it in the opposite direction from where Nala and her companions returned.

“Well, what did you see?” asked Gareth as they approached the camp fire. Some of the elves gathered around as well. They were just as curious as Gareth.

Cheid looked for a comfortable seat before starting his report. The others followed his example, thinking it might be a long one. Cheid first explained how they'd ran into a guard before going to details on what he discovered after getting past him.

“Past the guard, the path winded down to an open area before a large tunnel opening. They've set up camp there,” said Cheid. “I'd say there's about two dozen of them.”

“Who are they?” asked Leo.

The expression on Cheid grew grim. "It's Derian and the Blades."

The mood amongst his listeners took a similar turn. They had hoped to reach the place before the Blades, but it was now clear they had failed.

"Worst part is, Derian has some wizards and priests with him on top of the raw muscle he has managed to pull together," continued Cheid. "I saw at least Brand Roamer amongst them. He's a wizard of some note from Voroth."

"Did you hear anything about what they're doing here?" asked Relait.

Cheid nodded. "The bad news is that they've found the way to where Deremoth lays. The good news is that it seems they are having trouble weakening the seal around him. "

"What about where their camp is? How hard would it be to attack it?" asked Leo.

"Very difficult," said Cheid. "There's really only one way into the camp and that's the path I took. They'll spot anyone going down it almost immediately."

"Couldn't we take out the guards?" asked Gareth. "Attack in the dark? That would give our elven friends the advantage."

Relait rubbed his chin. "Attacking in the dark might work. At least we could snipe the guards."

"What about the priests and wizards?" asked Ahnilr. "I can be of help, but Derian alone would prove an difficult adversary. If he has help.." the priestess let the words hang in the air. Those that had fought Derian once before remembered how hard it had been. Then Nala remembered something else as well.

"Did you see any Blood Reavers?" she asked from Cheid.

The shoulders of the young wizard slumped. "I had forgotten about those," he admitted. "He has at least one left, that we know, even though I did not see it."

"What are Blood Reavers?" asked Leo. Some of the elves around him looked to be as curious about it as he was. Ahnilr explained the creature to them.

"Oh," said Leo. From the description the priestess had given they sounded like something he did not want to encounter.

"I can take care of it," said Ahnilr confidently. "Especially if Nala lends me a bit of her strength like she did before."

Nala nodded. Of course she would help the priestess. The plan was starting

to take form.

“We might be able to take out the wizards and priests with a few lucky shots and some of Skanders potions,” said Cheid and rummaged through his pockets producing small vial after vial of different coloured potions. Some were thick and gooey while others looked like water. “Can your men still shoot their arrows accurately if we attach these to them?” he asked from Relait.

The elf captain picked up a vial and weighed it in his hand. “It'll be difficult,” he finally said. “But I think we can do it. Though wouldn't normal arrows do the job just as well?”

Cheid shook his head. “We're dealing with wizards and priests. They might have protections in place against arrows, but such wards usually only extend to smashing solid objects. When the vials hit the protections they will shatter and spill the liquid inside on the targets. Most protections against arrows simply do not work on liquids. That will be enough to take them out.”

From there the rest of the plan came together quickly. They tried to poke holes in it and make it fail, but eventually they had to admit it was as good as it was going to get under the circumstances. They all agreed that they could not afford not to try.

The atmosphere in the camp was nervous as they waited for the sun to travel beyond the horizon. There were preparations to be made; arrows to modify, swords to sharpen, stomachs to fill. Everyone knew it might well be the last meal they ate so extra effort was put in to make it a good one.

They departed the camp while there was still a little light left. Walking the distance would take enough time for the darkness to fall completely. The horses they decided to leave behind since they made a lot of noise with their hooves clicking against the stone. On foot they could move silently enough that the guards wouldn't hear them coming.

They didn't even get to where they had spotted the first guard during the day before Cheid motioned everyone to stop. He knelt down and examined the ground and the stone slopes nearby.

“What is it?” asked Leo as he and the other got closer.

“A trap,” said Cheid quietly and continued to examine the ground. Nala

could sense it as well. There was magic in it.

“Can you disable it?” asked Gareth.

Cheid spent a few more moments looking around and sensing what sort of a spell it was. It was Free Magic, of that he was certain, which meant it had been cast by Brand Roamer. The others he had seen in the camp could only use the elements and those were unable to construct a spell like this.

“I believe so,” said Cheid finally. It wasn't a complex spell.

“Well, get to it then,” said Leo.

The group backed off and gave the young wizard some room to work with. To most it seemed like he did nothing but stand there, but those adept at things magical could sense the work he did. It took him a while, but finally he motioned to the group that it was safe to move forward.

“We'd better be careful,” he said. “There might be more of these traps.”

They moved onward with more caution. It wasn't a long trip to where the guard had been during the day and they encountered no further magical obstacles. It was getting dark, but the keen elven eyes could still see the guard sitting high in his place. When the guard lit a torch for himself he became an easy target. A single, well aimed arrow through his throat was enough to make him slump down on the ledge without making a sound.

The group rushed on by towards the enemy camp. As they got closer they could all feel the change in the atmosphere. Those that had been with Nala during the times the goddess had made use of her found the feeling familiar, even if it was much lesser in strength. It was clear they were coming closer the Deremoth and it offered an explanation for why they had not encountered much of the horrors that had given Morok's Tooth its reputation or why the elemental spirits had left Nala alone. They had all been driven away by this new oppressing power.

They got the camp in their sight. It was down a small slope and they could freely examine it from shelter. The fires made it easy to count those who were awake and choose targets. A single guard had stood from where they were observing the camp, but an arrow took him down just as easily and quietly as his companion before.

The group spread out, each bow carrier announcing their target before departing. The priority was in getting the wizards and priests. Everyone else was a secondary target.

Cheid, Gareth, Ahnilr, Nala, Leo and Relait remained together. They'd charge down with the rest once the first volley of arrows had been released. Gareth tugged at the bag he was carrying, trying to find a comfortable place for it. There was their last hope if everything went badly.

Relait let out a bird song, signalling the start of the attack.

Some of the arrows found their target without problems, some encountered a flash of energy that shattered the small vials attached to them, some a wall of fire the heat of which consumed the arrow, but only cracked the vial attached and caused the hot liquid to fly onwards. All around, the liquid spilled on unaffected by the protections and landed on their targets. It did not take long for the effect to kick in.

By the time Nala and her companions were rushing down the small slope, one wizard had ballooned beyond recognition and finally popped as if pricked by a needle; spewing blood, gore and broken bones all around. One bone shrapnel found its way through the air and hit a guard that was rushing towards Nala. The man screamed in pain as the sharp fragment sunk into his cheek, allowing Nala to sink her sword in his gut with no resistance.

The effects of the potions were drastic and demoralizing to the Blades. One wizard had turned into an unrecognisable mass of flesh that lacked arms and legs. A priest was running around screaming as his face was melting like ice in the warmth of the spring sun. The camp was in chaos.

Nal and her companions made full use of the confusion. They hacked away mercilessly at anyone crossing their path as they rushed towards the tunnel entrance. Leo and Gareth cut a path for them like a pair of scythes would in a field of hay in the hands of skilled farmers.

A sudden ball of fire lit the darkness, making everyone blink their eyes to regain their vision. It seemed a wizard had escaped the volley of arrows. Nala and her small group ignored it. The plan was for the elves to handle the outside while the small group rushed into the tunnel to secure it and take care of anyone inside

it.

As they got closer, Nala saw familiar figures at the entrance. She saw Derian, his face twisted by rage as he saw who were coming towards him.

Gareth saw the same thing, but his attention was drawn more to Dayr, Obsidian and Carrigan who were standing next to the dark priest. He swung his large sword and swatted away a man trying to get near to him. Leo lunged forward and skewered the man with his blade. Gareth grunted approvingly. The young knight played well with him.

Relait danced in next to Leo and cut a deep wound in the side of a man trying to sneak up on him from the side. The ease and grace with which the elf captain moved would have been mesmerizing were it not so deadly.

Cheid and Ahnilr were keeping the rear, though seeing the path of death cut before them they had little work to do.

Nala saw Derian duck into the tunnel along with Dayr and the two former gladiators. She cursed. It seemed they'd be forced to encounter the most dangerous one of them all in the tunnel.

She looked around as they reached the tunnel entrance. The elves seemed to have the situation under control. It saddened her to see at least two of the elves lying on the ground in a pool of their own blood, but there were a whole lot more Blades in a similar position. Those that remained standing and fighting had trouble remaining so against the skilled elves. She spotted the wizard that had dodged the initial volley of arrows. His luck had not held for long as ten arrows stuck out of him, making him look like a porcupine. Two charred corpses laid nearby. Nala hoped they had been enemies and not friends.

“You still got it?” asked Cheid of Gareth.

The big man tapped the bag on his back. “Safe and sound.”

“Lets go then,” said Leo and pushed forward. The others followed him to the torch lit tunnel.



Tibiniah had spent the past few days getting used to her new duties and learning what he could from Aliris. The senior council member had proven to be a

good teacher and despite her misgivings against her, Tibiniah found herself falling into her new role much easier with her help.

She had tried to drop small hints to Aliris that she was open to getting in the same boat as her brother had, but so far she had barely gotten a nibble out of her. Even the faked hatred that she showed towards Nala at times did not seem to convince her. In truth, Tibiniah hoped she could meet the Guardian Spirit again and apologize for her actions.

Aliris was clearly cautious about letting anyone in on what ever she was into, though Tibiniah got hints of it from spending time with her. The opinions she raised were radical at times, to say the least. Even Tibiniah found herself a bit shocked at times.

Tibiniah picked up a book from the floor and placed it in the shelf next to the first volume in the series. The council had assigned her a chamber where she could work in peace and arrange small meeting and other things her duties required. It was the same chamber her brother had used and it still had many of his belongings in it, though much of it was in disorder after Nisoen's men had rummaged through the room looking for any clues as to who he had been working with.

As she looked around the room she saw much of her brother there. The extremely detailed map of the Great Forest that covered one of the walls had been one of his favourites. It had been a gift from his father when he had been but fifteen years old and he had spent days examining every detail of it with great enthusiasm. Even as he grew older she had caught him looking at the map many times. To her it had looked like it offered him a distraction from what ever was troubling him.

She picked up another book and placed it on the shelf. There were still many books and pieces of parchment on the floor and some of the furniture was out of place. Her only consolation was that at least they had managed not to break anything. The disarray was bad enough and would take her quite a bit of time to clean up. She did not trust the servants to do it.

A knock on the door awoke her from the tediousness of the cleaning. She opened the door and found Aliris standing in the hallway.

“May I come in?” asked the senior council member.

“Of course,” replied Tibiniah, sounding a bit startled. She had no expected her for it was supposed to be her day off from her instructing.

Aliris entered the room and looked around. Her disapproval was apparent. “They left you with quite a mess, didn't they?” she asked as she lifted a book from the floor and leafed through a few pages.

“They did,” admitted Tibiniah as she closed the door. “And I'm reluctant to allow the servants to clean it since a lot of the items here belonged to my brother. I don't want them damaged any further.”

“We'll have to talk to captain Nisoen about how his men conduct their searches,” said Aliris and set down the book on the large writing desk that took up much of the wall opposite to the door. “He might have the authority, but that doesn't mean he can just come and wreck a council members room, even if that member has passed on.”

“But that isn't what I came here to talk with you about,” continued the woman.

“What is it then, may I ask?” said Tibiniah as she removed some books from a chair and offered Aliris a seat. For herself she had the chair behind the desk that she was happy to take.

“I've found you to be much like your brother,” observed Aliris. “Though there are differences, your views are much the same. It makes me glad the council decided on you as his replacement.”

“Hearing that from you means a lot,” said Tibiniah. In her mind she was cursing the lying wench before her.

Aliris nodded to acknowledge the kind words. “I would like to introduce you to certain people, much as I did your brother.”

Tibiniah couldn't help but feel elated. Finally, things were progressing. Finally, she was getting closer to meeting those truly responsible for all the grief and pain.

“Who are these people?” asked the young elf cautiously. Playing a bit of suspicion and curiosity would make her seem more reluctant than she really was.

“It's best you meet them for yourself without any preconceptions,” said

Aliris in a reassuring tone. She even smiled, which, despite all the misgiving Tibiniah had towards her, still made her look beautiful and charming even to her. “Don't worry. I wouldn't introduce you to any danger.”

The young elf feigned the need to think about it for a bit and leaned back in her chair. A moment of silence passed between the two before she gave her answer. “All right. I'll meet them. When and where?”

“Good,” said Aliris, sounding very pleased with herself. “Are you free tonight?”

Tibiniah nodded.

“Even better. Come to my quarters for supper. We'll meet them then.”

“I'll see you then,” said Tibiniah with a small smile. She watched Aliris rise from her chair and exit the room. She sighed out of relief and slumped back in her chair the moment she was alone. She never knew faking emotions could be so straining. At the same time she could not help but feel that things were finally moving forward. Maybe she would be able to drop the acting if all went well tonight.

That reminded her that she needed to let Nisoen know of the new developments. She left the room to try and find the captain.

Chapter 22

Tibiniah found herself worrying as she walked down the corridor towards the quarters of Aliris. Nisoen had assured her that she would have people following her in case something went wrong, but she could not see anyone besides herself and the two usual guards she had tailing her where ever she went. She hoped the meeting would go well and without incident, but the fact she was going to meet people who were responsible for a lot of grief, in her life as well as many others, did not make her feel any better about it.

She had hoped it would take longer to get to where she was going, but she stood in front of the door before even realizing it. She took a deep breath and nervously knocked the door. She tugged at the sleeve of her dress to straighten out a crinkle. It was a practical dress, far from the finest she had, but it would do for the occasion.

Aliris opened the door and welcomed her in. The council member seemed relaxed and wore a dress that put the practical choice of Tibiniah to shame. The young elf found it an odd choice for a simple private occasion.

The quarters were more roomy than what Tibiniah had. While she had a single room, albeit a large room, Aliris seemed to have a whole houses worth in her use. She had entered into a room with a fireplace, a dining table and several comfortable looking chairs sprinkled around the room. Two doorways led away from the room and she could make out a study beyond the other while the other had the door closed. Perhaps it was her bedroom or maybe she had a kitchen as well?

The dining table was all set. Plates, utensils, serving platters that were covered, no doubt hiding within was their supper. What surprised her was that it was set for only two people. Wasn't she supposed to meet others? Aliris must have noticed the look she gave the table.

“Our other guests do not really eat anything,” she explained as she guided Tibiniah to the table. The young elf took a seat and found the chair surprisingly

comfortable for a dining table.

“Will they be joining us soon?” asked Tibiniah.

“We have time to eat,” replied Aliris and lifted the covers from the serving platters, revealing an assortment of foods from roasted quail and honey cakes to fresh looking dark bread.

They enjoyed their food, though Tibiniah had no appetite to quench. She nibbled on her portion sparingly and focused more on keeping the conversation going with Aliris, even if what they talked about had little meaning to her.

They finished eating, but remained seated at the table. Their guest was late and Aliris was trying to fill the waiting time with some talk about current gossip. Tibinah did her best to hide her boredom.

She was startled as a figure appeared in the chair opposite to hers. The dark hood covered its face and the long sleeves hid his hands. Its voice was dry and rasping as it spoke. “Good evening, esteemed council member.”

Tibiniah could not help but notice the tone with which the words were spoken. There was no effort to hide the amusement with which he expressed himself.

“We've been waiting for you, Vinecaster,” said Aliris. She sounded relieved that she no longer needed to drone on about the latest scandal that had rocked the gossip-mongers.

“Apologies,” replied the figure. “Certain matters had arisen that needed my attention.”

Aliris eyed the hooded creature, but let the matter slide. “This is Tibiniah Stardancer,” she introduced to the figure. “The sister of Nerduin.”

The hood shifted slightly as it turned to examine the young elf. Even though she could not see its face, she felt uncomfortable under its examination. “It is good to meet you,” she said in a voice that sounded weak even in her mind.

The hood tilted slightly. “It is indeed.”

“She had indicated willingness to follow in her brothers footsteps,” said Aliris. “We can always use new people to aid us in our goals.”

A dry laugh shook the hooded figure. “That may have been the case until now. Things have changed.”

“What do you mean?” demanded Aliris.

“Our master will soon awake and roam the world once more,” said the rasping voice. “It is time to lay the path for him.”

“You're making no sense,” said Aliris. “We have an agreement and I expect you to hold to it.”

“The agreement is of no concern any more,” said Vinecaster and stood up. A withered down hand emerged from the sleeve and pulled out the sword that had been hidden by the many fold of its robe. “The time for chaos is here.”

Quicker than Tibiniah had thought possible, the figure closed the distance to Aliris and sunk the sword through her throat. Her nearly severed head drooped forward as the sword was pulled out. The creature turned to the young elf.

“Two council members in the same room. She was of use to the last moment,” came the dry voice from under the hood.

Tibiniah told herself to move, but her body did not listen to her mind. She sat in the chair and watched the figure walk around the table. She regained control of her body just as the figure got close to her and lifted the sword to strike. She tipped the chair to the side just as the sword started to come down. The sword hit the arm of the chair with a thud as Tibiniah rolled onto the floor and screamed in pain.

She had not been quick enough. She should have let go of the chair as it began to fall. Almost in shock, she stared numbly at the stump that had once been her pinkie finger. Blood flowed from the wound. She sobbed and tried to crawl away. Why weren't the guards coming in to help her? Surely they had heard her screams.

She stumbled up on her feet and turned to see the hooded creature tugging the sword free from the chair. “Stay away from me!” she screamed and stumbled towards the door.

“Oh no,” came the dry voice once more. “I can't. You're a member of the High Council. You must die just as the others will.” Having freed the sword the robed figure began to close the distance to the young elf.

Frantically, Tibiniah looked around her, trying to find something she could use as a weapon. The best she found was the poker of the fireplace so she started

making her way towards it. She had to press her injured hand against herself to try and stem the bleeding which made it hard to move swiftly in her mindset, but she made it to the fireplace before the robed figure caught up with her. It seemed almost as if it wished for her to put up a fight.

With her good hand she grabbed the poker and turned to face her enemy. It seemed futile to try and face it with the meagre weapon, but what else was she to do?

The moment the robed figure got close enough she tried to hit it with the poker. Her strike was blocked with the sword almost arrogantly and returned with a blow that sent the piece of black iron flying from her hand. The young elf stumbled backwards, towards the door.

The figure closed the distance and raised its sword. Tibinah fell on her back. She started to back towards the door, pushing with her feet and leaning on her good hand.

The sword began to come down. The young elf was certain it would be her end, but then the door to the room slammed open. She could hear fighting come from the hallway, but she put in extra effort to make her way towards the noise. It had been enough. The sword that would have cut deep into her shoulder now instead scraped through her clothes and skin with barely its tip and left behind nothing but a shallow, red gash.

“Tibiniah!” She recognized the voice. Nisoen. She doubled her effort to get to him. A wave of relief went over her as she saw the captain armour clad feet beside her. She saw blood drip from the sword in his hand.

“Get behind me,” said the captain and prepared to face off the robed figure.

Tibiniah did as she was told and dragged herself to rest against the wall right by the door. As she peaked to the hallway she saw several elves fighting robed figures that looked much like the one in the room. There were bodies on the floor; some elves, some robed figures.

She turned away from the sight and closed her eyes. At that moment she couldn't comprehend the gravity of the situation. She breathed heavily and tried to arrange her thoughts, but found it an impossible task. When the sound of metal hitting metal came close to her she opened her eyes and saw Nisoen locked

in combat with the robed figure that had been after her. There was nothing for her to do but watch.

Nisoen was a skilled swordsman, but so was the robed creature. He was hard pressed to keep up with it. When ever his sword seemed to find a weak spot, somehow, his opponents sword found its way to block it. His only consolation was that he was making the creature move hard and its robe seemed to hamper that somewhat. More blows were exchanged, more missed strikes, more close calls. Finally Nisoen had a blow with his sword that looked like it would find its target, but to his disappointment it only ripped off the hood from the robe.

What was revealed was the dried up, grey face of a man. It looked like something you'd find in a decade old, dry grave. Still, the structure of his bones made it look like he was an elf.

“What in Loriels name are you?” asked Nisoen as he caught his breath. Losing the hood seemed to have startled the creature a bit.

A wicked grin appeared on the face of the creature. “We work for our masters glory.”

“The Blades?” demanded the elf captain.

A dry laugh came from the creature. “They are different, yet, serve the same master.”

The brief exchange of words ceased and the swords resumed their talk. Nisoen felt the burning in his muscles. He had had to fight through two such hooded figures to get to the room and now the one he was facing turned out to be quite a bit tougher than they had been. The longer the fight went on the greater the disadvantage would grow for him, he feared.

It was a small mistake that the creature of Deremoth made, but it was enough for the experienced elf captain to take advantage of. His sword found its target and sunk deep into its chest. Nisoen quickly pulled the sword out and struck a second time and a third time. Finally, satisfied that the threat was gone, he breathed in deeply and turned to Tibiniah.

The young elf still rested against the wall. She had managed to tear some cloth from her dress to wrap the bleeding stump of her finger. Her torn dress revealed more of her skin than Nisoen felt comfortable looking at so he took off

his cloak and wrapped the young woman in as he knelt down. The fighting in the hallways seemed to have ceased and as he took a glimpse he saw only his own men standing, some rushing towards the room to aid him.

“It's all right,” he said softly to Tibiniah. “They're all dead now.”

The young elf looked up to him. “What of the other members of the council?”

He shook his head. “I don't know. I have to go find out.”

Two of his men entered the room, swords in hand and ready to fight, but they quickly saw there was no need for it any more.

“Guard her,” said Nisoen and rose on his feet. “Guard her with your life. She might be one of the few of the High Council that still live. I'll send a priest this way as soon as I run into one.”

The men nodded and the other one knelt down next to the young woman to see if he could do something to help her. At the very least he could bandage the hand better than she had been able to.

Nisoen stormed out of the room and walked down the corridor with a purpose. He needed to check on the other council members. The sight he encountered in the first quarters did not give him much hope. The guards laid dead on the ground and the council member sat in his chair while his head was somewhere on the floor. Nisoen did not stop to look for it. There was nothing he could do for him now.

Similar sights greeted him where ever he went. On his way to Lonaac's quarters he finally encountered a priest and sent him to look after Tibiniah. Her importance was becoming more and more pronounced.

Nisoen's heart sank as he saw the dead guards before Lonaac's door. The story was going to be the same here as well, he feared. The door was slightly ajar as he pushed it completely open. He fully expected another body and that he got, only it was the body of a robed figure with Lonaac sitting in his chair and poking it with his wooden staff. The old elf was breathing heavily, as if he had ran from one edge of the forest to the other, but seemed to be otherwise well off.

“Are you all right?” asked Nisoen as he stepped deeper into the room.

The old elf raised his head and looked at him. “Ah, Nisoen. I'm quite all

right. Just not as young as I once was.”

“You killed it?” asked the captain. He was still having trouble believing the old elf had somehow managed it. He saw no visible wounds on the dead body.

“Don't look so surprised,” said Lonaac. “I didn't get to be my age by being helpless.”

“Do you know what it is?” Nisoen had to ask. The old man was probably the only one who might know them off hand.

“A Lost One,” replied Lonaac with a voice filled with sorrow. Nisoen had heard the name before, but had been unable to connect the myth to what he had faced.

The Lost Ones had once been elves, a long time ago. Their minds had been twisted by Deremoth, making them his servants and followers. He'd changed them, sucked out everything that made them elves and replaced it with his own vision of what they should have been. It was nothing more than a myth in the present day, a story to scare the kids with, but somehow it had become reality.

“They've attacked other members of the council as well,” said Nisoen finally.

The old elf shuddered. “Who survives?” His voice made it clear he did not expect to hear many names.

“I fear Tibiniah Stardancer might be the only one besides yourself,” said Nisoen. He had only two rooms left to check and he held no hope of finding anyone else still alive.

The news seemed to give the old elf a few extra centuries of age. He tried to get up with the help of his staff, but needed Nisoen for extra support.

“This is a grave day for us,” said Lonaac as he headed for the door with Nisoen at one arm. “Take me to the young Stardancer.”

Nisoen wanted to argue against it, but could not. Best he could do was gather guards with him as they walked through the corridors. A few he sent to check on the remaining two rooms. The news he received in return was as he feared. Every member of the council, even the imprisoned Inorinn, was dead. Two survived; the youngest and the oldest. The wound inflicted was deep and he feared what it would lead to for the elves.

They found Tibiniah in much better shape than Nisoen had left her. The

priest had managed to stop the bleeding and bandage her wounds properly, though her hand would be disfigured for life. Re-attaching a finger was beyond the priests powers.

The room and the corridor in front of it was crowded. There were dozens of guards now and the noise of their running and the earlier fighting had aroused servants, clerks and others to gather to see what was going on. The news was starting to spread. The first ones were saying they had known something bad would happen, after all, why else would the Guardian Spirit have appeared?

Lonaac poked the body of the Lost One with his staff as Nisoen explained the situation to the young elf. The news didn't seem to hit her too hard. Of course, she had already known that they had gone after the other members of the council so she'd had time to prepare herself for it. Still, part of it was masked by the simple disbelief that so many could have been killed so easily.

"What do we do now?" she asked weakly. She looked pale, probably because of the blood loss.

Lonaac turned from the body and examined the young woman. "We rebuild," he said firmly. "We still live and the people need the guidance of the council more than ever."

"But there's only two of us," said Tibiniah.

"New members will be found," replied Lonaac as he hobbled over to the young elf. He put his hand on her shoulder. "It might sound cold, but none of us is irreplaceable. As long as there are elves, there will be a High Council. That is the way of our people."

The firm squeeze of his hand seemed to give Tibiniah strength and confidence. Of course they would rebuild the council. There was no other choice. The High Council was the pillar that supported the Elven Kingdom and kept it from crumbling down.

"What do we do first?" she asked, ready to take on the challenge posed to her.



Nala had expected an earthy smell of dirt and gravel as they entered the

tunnel, but instead found herself encountering the smell of torches burning as well as the stench of sulphur. The flickering light from the torches was barely adequate to allow them to see enough not to stumble on the loose rocks that littered the floor. The further they went down the tunnel the more they felt it. The oppressing feeling that sought to stop their breathing and freeze their muscles.

Nala sought comfort from gripping her swords tighter. She dared not fully contact her parents, but she did do enough to make a brief emotional contact with them. The encouragement and love they sent her way was enough to make her go forward without trouble. She saw the others struggle more than her, but even they dug deep down in themselves and pulled out what was needed to advance.

They began to hear voices echo from ahead of them. They couldn't make out what was being said, but it was clearly a heated discussion. The tunnel began to widen and soon they found themselves in a large cavern.

The area was well lit with several torches and oil lamps, but they could still not see the ceiling. What they could see was Derian and his henchmen waiting for them, weapons in hand. However, it was not them that drew the attention of the group. It was what laid behind them. It was the dragon of Deremoth.

It was still encased in the crystal like substance that had embraced it for centuries without being harmed. The great maw was still open, as if frozen mid roar, and the yellow eyes were open, but unmoving. The wings were partly open, filling up much of the cavern. Even in its current state the sight of the creature sent shivers down everyone's spine and they could feel the overwhelming strength seep through the protective casing.

Some rocks rose up next to the dragon, allowing someone to walk up to its eye level and down along its neck towards its body. Tools could be seen scattered around the stone ledge, telling of the attempt the Blades had made in weakening the crystal like casing. It seemed they had not made much progress.

"Kill them!" shouted Derian and pointed at the group that had emerged from the tunnel. It seemed there would be no banter this time around. The Blood Reaver shimmered into view and instantly lunged towards the group. It looked like it had already suffered damage. Parts of its bones were charred and others

had visible crack on them. It had not escaped the magical explosion at the tower unscathed.

Gareth, Relait and Leo formed the first rank for the group and they clashed against the former gladiators and the few companions they had. The Blood Reaver flew right past them, its master having told it the most important target. Nala and Ahnilr stood before it, holding hands and in deep concentration. Cheid stood behind them to offer them support and right as it looked like the flying monstrosity would crash into them it bounced off from a magical shielding. Its wail echoed in the cavern, giving it an even more chilling effect than it would have otherwise had.

Nala and Ahnilr intensified their efforts as the hovering creature slammed against the shield with its own magic. The women could feel the response from their goddess as power flowed into them. The priestess began casting the spell that had defeated the Blood Reaver at the house where they had hoped to end it all.

Gareth found himself fighting Obsidian. The former gladiator looked ragged with an unshaven face and filthy clothes. It seemed they had not had much time for washing up, though the big man found it likely that he looked as ragged as his opponent. There was no banter between the two men, only the sound of metal hitting metal flowed between them.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Leo in his fluid like metal armour put down Dayr with little problems. Gareth grinned. It was a sight he would have liked to see many times over, but he had his own fight to concentrate on.

He had remembered Obsidian to be more formidable. There was little strength behind his hits and the speed was nothing he couldn't keep up with. It seemed the battle had been decided even before it started.

Gareth let out a satisfied grunt as his sword dug deep into the dark skinned man's shoulder. His sword dropped to the stone floor with a chink and he slumped down after it.

The big man pulled out his sword just in time to see Relait put down Carrigan. By the looks of it the gladiator had received the same treatment he had so loved to dish out. His clothes were all torn up from the many cuts that

brandished his corpse. He turned to look and saw Leo cut the throat of the last of the Blades.

It was then that a bright flash blinded everyone and a wave of power made everyone fall down. The spell to take out the Blood Reaver had been successful, but the effect it had was more dramatic than previously.

The wave of power slammed into the sealed away dragon.

The whole cavern shook. They could hear a loud crack and a low growl that resonated throughout their bones. It took everyone a moment to gather themselves and for the dust to settle. The sight that greeted them was not one they had hoped to see.

A piece of the crystal like casing had fallen off, exposing the neck of the dragon inside. Several cracks could be seen criss crossing what remained of the casing. Even more disturbingly the yellow eyes of the creature were wandering around, finally fixating on Nala.

Even from the distance and through the weakened seal, she could feel the hatred that burned in those eyes. It was like someone had wrapped their hands around her throat and were slowly squeezing the life out of her.

Cheid rushed to Gareth and grabbed the bag from his back.

"I'll need your help," he said to the big man as he pulled out the wooden box from the bag and grabbed the cylindrical metal object inside. He placed the liquid container inside and secured it by slightly pressing down the piston. A bit of liquid dripped from the hollow spike at the end.

"What do you need?" asked Gareth.

"We need to pry one of the scales from its neck so I can stick this thing inside it," explained Cheid.

"You're crazy," replied Gareth.

Cheid grinned. "Got a better idea?"

Gareth shook his head. By the gods he wished he had, but it seemed they were content at watching him do the craziest thing imaginable. "I'll go first," he said to Cheid and gripped his sword tightly. "You ready?"

The young wizard nodded and the two began to run towards the rocks that would take them up to the same level with the dragon. It was a rough climb and

the closer they got the more they felt the effect of the hybrid dragon-god. By the time they got within touching distance of it every step and breath had turned into a conscious struggle that drained strength from them. The task felt daunting when they got to the crack in the seal and saw the scaly neck of the creature up close. A single scale was half the size of Gareth and looked to seamlessly meld into the next one, making it difficult to see any way of ripping it off.

The large blade of Gareth was probably not the best suited for the task, but it was all they had. The big man tried to wedge its tip underneath the scale, but found it an impossible task. He hit the scale with all his strength behind it, but caused nothing more than a small scrape. He continued to work on it, expanding the scrape and furiously trying to rip the scale off or even just cause a large enough dent that Cheid could stick his device into it and reach the dragons flesh.

The efforts paid off and they finally had a gaping gash in the scale that left flesh exposed. Cheid was quick to stick the hollow tip in and push down the piston, injecting the liquid to the flesh.

The effect was immediate.

More of the seal shed off the dragon as it flexed its muscles. It was waking up and the seal had been weakened enough that it was able to chip it away bit by bit. One large wing flex and it had half of itself free.

Gareth and Cheid looked on in disbelief for a moment before turning around and running as fast as they could to get away from the waking monster and to the relative shelter of the tunnel that had led them to the cavern.

“Wasn't that thing supposed to kill it?” huffed Gareth as they ran.

“That's what Skander said,” replied Cheid. He feared his master might have over estimated the potency of his concoction.

The whole cavern shook as the dragon thrashed itself to freedom. Derian stood in the middle of it, grinning widely. Finally, his master would be free again. He forgot all about Nala and the others. In the face of the fully awakened Deremoth, they were of no consequence in his mind.

He watched as the dragon settled and folded back its wings and examined the room. It was a magnificent sight and even though the overwhelming presence had grown stronger it did not seem to affect Derian much.

His elation lost its edge as the dragons left foot gave out from under it. It tried to balance with its wings, but to no avail. It crashed down on its side and let out a deafening roar that dislodged rocks from the cavern ceiling. It tried to lift up, but found its right side to be losing strength as well.

“What's going on?” asked Leo as Gareth and Cheid came up to them. Nala, Ahnilr and Relait were equally eager to hear.

“It seems Skanders potion is starting to work,” said Cheid. A large rock came crashing down the ceiling, landing only a few feet away from the group. “I suggest we get out of here,” he added as he glanced at the writhing dragon. He saw rocks fall around Derian. He only hoped one would hit the man and crush him. “The whole cavern's going to collapse if it keeps that up.”

More rocks fell as the group started to make their way back outside. They had to shield themselves from the small bits of fine dust and rock that fell from the tunnel ceiling. Nala could only hope they had done enough to kill the wretched thing. She knew there was nothing more they could do.

They were covered in dust as they emerged from the tunnel. The ground shook and a deep rumble could be heard. Then a cloud of dust pillowed out of the tunnel along with large chunks of rock. The whole tunnel had collapsed, no doubt along with the cavern.

The elves that had been left behind rushed to the group to help them further away from the tunnel. There were still rocks rolling down the side of the mountain and there was no telling how much more rabble would come down.

“Well, that's that, I suppose,” said Cheid as he caught his breath. They were all sprawled along the ground by a camp fire.

“Deremoth's dead?” asked Relait.

“At least the dragon is. No way it survived that,” said Leo.

“Deremoth isn't dead,” said Nala. She felt the difference, perhaps because of her closeness to the goddess. Perhaps some of her emotions were seeping through to the young elf.

The group turned to look at her.

“The portion of him that was in the dragon withdrew before it died,” she explained. Memories emerged, giving her the benefit of understanding the

situation better. “He was half here, half in the plane of the gods. He was strong here, but weak in the gods realm. The fact that half of him was sealed away here made him weak over all. Now, he's fully back in the realm of gods.”

“We have failed then,” said Ahnilr. She looked more shaken up than the others.

“We did what we could,” said Nala. She stood up and brushed off dust from her clothes. “Deremoth is not free to roam this world. He lost his precious vessel. He's once more bound by the same restrictions as the other gods.”

“But he's free,” said Gareth.

Nala nodded. “His followers will gain strength. We'll just have to deal with them when the time comes.”

It was little comfort in their situation, but they had managed to avoid the worst and done their best to mitigate any damage. It did not feel like much of an victory and it showed on the faces of everyone standing in the light of the camp fires.

“So what now?” asked Relait finally to break the depressing silence that had fallen over the group.

Nala turned to the captain. She smiled a bit. “How about we go home?”

Epilogue

Skander sat behind his desk. He looked completely healed from the ordeal that had befallen him and even his quarters seemed no worse off than before. It had been a pleasant surprise for Cheid to see his master doing so well upon his return, but now, sitting across from him, he felt uneasy knowing that not everything had gone as planned on their journey. He had just finished telling about the journey to the older wizard.

“So, Deremoth is whole again,” mused Skander as he leaned back in his chair. “That'll mean a lot of work for all of us.”

Cheid nodded in agreement. “No doubt the Blades that remain are already busy gathering support and gaining favour from their patron god.”

“What of Nala?” asked Skander. “I had expected her to return with you.”

Cheid explained what had happened to the elven High Council. It had been a shock to all of them as they had returned to the lush city. “She decided to remain with the elves for a while. They were busy trying to get her to take a seat in the High Council, but she seemed less than willing.” The young wizard shrugged his shoulders. “Her plan was to help them set things up and then return to her parents forest.”

“And Gareth?”

A small smile appeared on Cheid's face. “He chose to remain with Nala to ensure her safety.”

The corners of Skander's mouth twitched in amusement. “Good. Someone needs to keep an eye on her and I trust Gareth to do just that.”

“What now?” asked Cheid. It was a question he had heard asked many times during the past month and every time the answer seemed unsatisfying to him. He hoped his master could offer a satisfying one.

“We watch,” said Skander and stood up. “We listen and we act when needed, just as we have done until now.” He turned to look out the window behind him. The sun was setting, painting the sky a combination of orange and

pink.

“It's a new era for us,” he continued. “One, I fear, will be much darker than what came before it, but we have our pillars of light around which to rally.”

The words did not make Cheid feel any easier, though he found himself agreeing with all that was said. His only hope was that the pillars would be strong enough.

“Almost forgot,” said Skander and turned around with a wicked smile on his face. “The empress expressed her wish to talk with you. In private.”

Cheid's heart sank and he sighed. He'd rather have ventured into Deremoths cavern once more than face the empress and explain everything about the past to her.

It seemed life would not be so different for him after all.