

The exciting second installment of the series: The Iluvian Cycle.

Path of Darkness

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One

Kyr Astaldereg, a man in his early twenties with chin-length, light brown hair, raced along the walkways connecting the massive trees of the Grove. He leapt down each staircase he came to, taking four or more steps at a time. Sephteria, a beautiful elf with long, flowing, chestnut-colored hair, ran behind him.

“Kyr,” her voice was not affected by the exertion of running. “You should not be doing this. You should have stayed with my father.”

“That monster is here for me, Seph. I can’t let people get hurt and not at least *try* to take responsibility for it.”

“Kyr, it is not as though you brought it here.”

She slid down the rail of the last set of stairs they would have to descend, landing behind Kyr as he leapt from the middle of the stairs.

“Well, technically...”

Kyr wasn’t given the opportunity to finish. They reached the center of the fourth level in time to see a glimmering flash of silver fly through the air, catching the Stalker in the face. Kyr skidded to a halt. Sephteria crashed into him, almost knocking them over the side of the walkway as the living shadow plummeted to the ground below.

After regaining his balance, Kyr looked over the edge to see where it landed. A group of Rangers were already surrounding the area, prodding the abomination to make certain it was dead.

“It’s too bad we didn’t get here a little sooner,” Kyr said. “I would have liked to have a go at it.”

Sephteria’s mouth was a tight line when he turned back around.

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“I do not remember you being so eager to meet it again after our escape from the Sentries’ Station.”

Kyr’s countenance darkened. Memories of pain and terror swept over him, and he wondered how he could have forgotten how terrified he’d been after meeting it the first time.

A mere nine months before, Kyr had been incarcerated under false charges in the City-State of Cairpatria. While imprisoned he had been interrogated by the featureless shadow that now lay dead on the floor of the Grove.

It has to be the same one, Kyr thought. *Stalkers can track anyone they’ve had physical contact with, and I’ve only ever met one.* The creature also had the ability to inflict some of the most intense pain Kyr had ever experienced with but the slightest of touches. Just the thought of the experience was enough to send echoes of the fear and pain he experienced through his limbs.

“You’re right, Seph. I can’t believe I forgot. Thanks again for getting me out of there.”

Kyr trembled. Sephtheria laid her hand on his shoulder. It was a small gesture, but it was enough to dispel the darkness from his mind.

“It was the least I could do, Kyr.” She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. “I am sure you would do the same for me.”

Before Kyr could answer, the sound of hurried footsteps interrupted them. When he turned to see the source, Kyr smiled. Thoma, his best friend since his first day of school, was running toward them with a long, black, metal baton in his hand.

“What in the hells is happening?” he asked.

Kyr smiled. “The Stalker from Cairpatria caught up to us.” He pointed to the place where the Elven Rangers were gathered.

“I thought we weren’t sure it was following us?”

“I guess we are now.” Sephtheria said.

Her smile did not touch her eyes. Within seconds it was replaced by a look of concern, and she leaned against the railing, looking out across the city with glazed eyes.

“What’s wrong, Seph?” Kyr took her hand and pulled her closer.

“We have never had a member of the Shadow King’s forces in the Grove before,” she said.

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“How did it get in?” Thoma asked. “I mean, the place is pretty well guarded, right? How could it have gotten past the patrols?”

“Stalkers are not only the Shadow King’s favored interrogators, Thoma, but also his greatest spies. They can inhabit even the smallest shadow, and are nearly impossible to detect. If a Stalker is set to infiltrate some place, it will only be a matter of time before it succeeds.”

“If they’re so hard to detect,” Kyr asked. “Then how did Kemenul know it made it to the Balcony?”

“Because it made the mistake of sending a message.”

Kemenul, a tall, slender elf with shoulder-length blond hair stepped up to the rail. He wore black pants and a dark green tunic, the uniform of the Rangers. The edges of his tunic were outlined in gold, a minor decoration separating him from the rest of the elves’ elite military. It was a subtle difference, but it marked him as Commander of the Rangers.

He nodded to each of them before turning his gaze below.

“When it sent its thoughts out,” he said, “our perimeter defenses detected the signal. I find it hard to believe it acted so carelessly. It must not have sensed the magical barriers around our borders.”

Kemenul watched as the Rangers hauled the remains of the Stalker out of the Grove to be burned. It was not until he was satisfied with their progress that he turned his attention to the wounded soldiers further down the platform.

“I wish I could have slain it more quickly,” Kemenul said. “We lost too many of our people.” He shook his head with a grave mien.

Sephteria placed her hand on his shoulder. “It could not have been helped. You should be thankful you managed to defeat it before we lost even more lives.”

Kemenul frowned and shook his head. “Come,” he said. “Tessia has sent for us.”

“All of us?” Thoma asked.

“Yes,” the elf spat. “Even you, human.”

“Do you know what for?” Sephteria asked.

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“I’m not certain, but I have a theory. The Stalker managed to send a message to its master, which means the Shadow King now knows where we sleep.”

Kyr felt the weight of the statement. It was obvious by their silence that the others did, too.

They worked their way through the growing crowds in silence, moving as quickly as they could against the flow of elven foot traffic. Young and old alike came to find out what had happened, their fear casting a dark ambience across the Grove. When they finally reached the uppermost level Kyr breathed with relief. With their curiosity leading them to the lower levels, there were hardly any elves to be seen besides the ever-present guards. Kyr could feel the claustrophobia of the lower levels sloughing away.

Kemenul nodded to the two, golden-armored elves standing before the great door of the Heart Tree, the largest and center-most of the massive trees comprising the elven city of The Grove. The door was three times as tall as Kyr and looked to have been carved into the side of the tree.

The guards bowed and stepped aside, allowing them entry.

Sephteria pushed the door open, revealing the main hall of her father’s home. It was magnificent. No matter how many times Kyr came here, the sight always caused him to lose his breath. The room was comprised of soft, almost non-existent, angles, leaving the impression that it had been grown rather than crafted. Several doors led out of the room, into hallways with walls as smooth and flawless as the entrance hall. A great, purple and green rug covered most of the floor, leading to a grand staircase. At the top of this staircase stood Tessia Tirias, Sephteria’s father and the eldest member of the Elven Nation.

He was tall—taller even than Kemenul, who stood a head higher than both Kyr and Thoma—with long, light brown hair tied back with a small, silver clasp. Flowing robes of white and midnight blue hung about him, and several silver bracelets glittered on his right wrist. He wore a look of patient knowing as Kyr and the others climbed the steps.

When they reached the top, Tessia turned and led them deeper into the tree. The floors were so polished Kyr could see his reflection in the dark-stained wood, and all the walls were covered in beautiful tapestries depicting some of the most important

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moments of Elven History. In the few moments Kyr had had to himself since arriving on Ayliata, this last refuge afforded to the Elves by the Shadow King, he had looked at some of them so long he felt their images were permanently embedded in his mind.

Kyr forced his attention from the wall hangings and found he had fallen behind the others. He hurried to catch up, following them up another staircase and into a large room filled with the most comfortable-looking chairs he had ever seen.

Two of the chairs were occupied by dwarves.

The first was thick-bodied with a long red beard and hair that held a single braid. This was Dauglin, son of King Thorna the Fourth, and heir to the Dwarven Throne. The second was slightly smaller with coarse, dark brown hair. His face was horribly scarred, and two black, gleaming eyes stared out from within the mass of shiny flesh. This was Belor, and he was Dauglin's man-at-arms and oldest friend.

Kyr first met them after fleeing Cairpahtria with Sephteria and Thoma. Together the five of them fought and defeated a large host of goblins that had captured the majority of Mirya-Ritaldia's—a small dwarven town on the edge of the Burning Waste—population. Kyr counted the two dwarves among his greatest friends.

Tessia motioned for them to sit. With a flick of his finger, a fire sparked in the giant hearth on the right-hand wall. Enjoying the warmth, Kyr sank into a soft, arch-backed chair between Thoma and Sephteria. Kemenul took the chair on the other side of Sephteria, and Tessia moved slowly across the room, taking rest in a large, backless chair that reminded Kyr of a moth because of its shape.

With another subtle gesture, Tessia conjured them each a glass of elven wine. It was sweet liquor, and it glowed with a soft blue iridescence. The ancient elf reached into his robes and retrieved a plain, wooden, long-stemmed pipe. Kyr drew his own—a marvelous piece given to him by the Dwarven King, Thorna, with a silver bowl and a darkly stained stem that was not quite as long as Tessia's—and packed it full of the green, crystal-covered elvish pipe weed that filled his pouch. It had a wonderful mellowing effect, and Tessia claimed it helped expand one's consciousness.

Kyr and the others watched as Tessia puffed his pipe for a moment, a look of serious contemplation etched across his brow.

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After a moment, it seemed he realized the others were there and broke from his reverie.

“Now that the Shadow King knows where we are,” he began, “we do not have many options before us.” He took another long draw from his pipe, held it in for a moment, and exhaled before continuing. “There can be no doubt that he has already begun to assemble his forces, and it will not be long before he has launched an attack against us.” He took another long puff. Kyr believed the pause was to allow the gravity of the situation to set upon them all.

“The last of our preparations are almost complete,” Tessia continued. “And we should have left the day after tomorrow. However, we cannot leave until some form of plan has been established. Kemenul, you know better than anyone the state we are currently in. What do you think?”

“The plans we made when Sephteria first arrived with Kyr are still in place. As you said our preparations are almost complete, and I don’t believe there is any need to alter them. The Rangers and the Guard are already on the alert, and if we move with haste we can have our defenses in place within the day.”

“Yes, but how long will they be able to last?” Sephteria asked.

“I believe that will depend upon what they send at us.”

Kyr noticed Tessia grow agitated.

“Think for a moment, if you will,” the ancient elf said. “Like the King of Darkness. For over twenty-five hundred years he has believed our race extinct. I know it has been one of his most cherished and comforting thoughts. Now that he has discovered we still exist, I do not doubt he will send anything but the largest force he can spare. He will be bent upon destroying us, and he will not stop until he has seen the last of our kind trampled beneath his feet.” He took a deep breath. “The Rangers and the Guard will not be enough to save our homes.” Sadness flittered across the elf’s face.

“Then what are we to do?” Sephteria’s voice wavered.

“We must evacuate.”

“But,” Kemenul said, sitting up. “Your Grace, we cannot! We cannot abandon the Grove! I refuse...”

Tessia held out his hand, and Kemenul fell silent.

“I have sat in this position before, Kemenul, long before you were born. I chose to wait then, and lost over half of our people

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because of it. I will not make the same mistake twice, not when I can save the majority of our people. I'm afraid we have no other choice. We are strong, yes, but we have not the numbers required to fight him. Not yet, anyway. We are still too weak to survive open war."

"Where then can we go?" Kemenul looked from Tessia to Sephteria, his displeasure evident. "If the Grove is not safe, none of the other communities will be either!"

"You're right, Kemenul. Nowhere on Ayliaata is safe. All of our people, not just those here in the Grove, must evacuate."

"But where are we to go?"

Dauglin grunted. It was the first time either of the dwarves made a sound since Kyr entered the room. "Well, I seem to remember something from the history books we keep in Yirthinal."

Kyr remembered the Dwarven Palace fondly. Every inch of the massive ziggurat was covered in etched runes, and frightening gargoyles stood along the edge of each level. All of the halls of the palace were sparkling gold and larger than any of the apartments Kyr had rented in Cairpahtria. He never saw it, but he had been told the library there was more impressive than any maintained by the elves.

"Yes Dauglin?" Kemenul sounded curious, but skeptical.

"Well, in the original agreements that me great-great-great-great granddad and Tessia here came to, it says that if either of our people are forced to flee their homes, they'll find refuge with the other. So, what I'm sayin' here is that ye should move yer people into the caves, towards Mirya-Teliavar. Me dad'll welcome all of ye, and the city is easily defended. Together, ye're people and mine will have a hell of a lot better chance of surviving any attack the Shadow King wants to send."

Tessia smiled, and Kyr saw some of the worry leave Kemenul's eyes. "You have guessed my plans, Master Dwarf." Tessia rose from his strange, moth-like chair and crossed to stand before the fire. "Indeed, the only chance we have is to join with the dwarves. I have to ask that you, Dauglin, be in charge of making this happen."

"Me?" Dauglin spat the word. "Why me? I thought I was going along with the rest of ye?"

"Sadly, Dauglin, things have changed. You are the only one that can handle this task. I would leave Kemenul, but I will need

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both he and Sephteria on the journey ahead. Besides, your father will view a host of elves approaching his city with much more welcome if his son is at the head of it. I'm sorry, Dauglin, but I'm afraid there is no other choice."

Dauglin looked to Belor, and then the floor. He closed his eyes and scratched his beard, mumbling. Kyr worried that he would refuse, but after a moment his face broke into a wide grin. When his eyes opened there was energy and excitement behind them.

"Aye, ye're right, of course. I'll need some help, though. Belor can help me with most things, but we need someone who's familiar with the city."

Tessia nodded. "Of course. Jennelle will be an excellent choice. Would you agree, Kemenul? Sephteria?"

Sephteria nodded at once, but Kemenul seemed to give the matter more consideration. His eyes narrowed and he looked into the fire, stroking his chin with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. "Yes. I can think of none better." He looked to Tessia. "Shall I inform her, now? She will want to begin the preparations as soon as possible."

"Aye," Dauglin grunted, "I agree. The Shadow King will have already begun, and we'll need every minute we can get." He stood and looked to Tessia, an unspoken question on his face.

"Yes, Dauglin, you must begin at once." As Belor and Kemenul rose to join Dauglin, Tessia turned his attention to Kyr, Thoma, and his daughter. "As should we. We must hasten our plans if we are to have any chance of escaping. I want the three of you to gather your things and meet me in front of the stables as soon as you can. I have a few things to which I must attend, and then I shall be along. Secure us mounts and be ready to leave the instant I arrive."

Kyr stood and headed for the door. Thoma and Sephteria were behind him, matching his pace.

"Sephteria," Tessia called from behind.

Kyr stopped to wait for her as she turned to her father.

"Could you please send Helfrin in as you leave, my dear?"

She smiled. "Of course."

Kyr saw Tessia wink at his daughter, a faint smile playing upon his lips. Sephteria turned and smiled at Kyr. They climbed down the stairs together, Kyr offering his arm for support. She took

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it with a smile and did not let go until they found Thoma waiting for them at the top of the last flight of stairs. He smiled with a look of reluctance and started down the staircase. Kyr stepped onto the stairs behind his friend, and noticed that Helfrin was waiting at the bottom.

Tessia's attendant wore plain, gray robes and had short brown hair. He was leaning against the wall with a dazed look on his face.

"Ah, Helfrin," Sephteria said. "My father has asked for you."

The elf snapped to attention and immediately moved up the stairs. "Thank you, milady." He said with a subtle nod as he swept past them.

Sephteria stopped Kyr before he stepped outside. She held his hands in hers and looked up at him.

"I will meet you at the stables," she said. "If you get there before me, have Earol start saddling the cheeram." She lifted on her toes and placed a warm, moist kiss on his cheek. Kyr held her gaze for a moment before she smiled and turned down the hall to her chambers.

Kyr turned to Thoma. "Let's go," he said.

They threw the doors open and ran into the street. Kyr heard Dauglin's voice ringing out across the city, announcing evacuation. There were other, unfamiliar voices taking up the call, and elves poured out of their homes to help with the preparations. The streets were even fuller than when they entered the Heart Tree, but Kyr and Thoma dodged the bustling elves with little effort. To them the crowd was nothing compared to the train station and markets they had grown up frequenting. Back in Cairpatria it was almost impossible to move an inch without bumping into someone.

Unless, that is, you were outside.

People avoided the out-of-doors in the Darklands, as the elves referred to the human continents. Due to severe pollution, the sun was hidden behind a perpetual cloud cover. Those same clouds showered the earth in rain so acidic it could kill in a matter of minutes. Most people lived their whole lives under the ground.

Ayliata, however, did not suffer from these same afflictions. Through powerful magic worked in correlation with the Mother, the island of Ayliata was protected from the deadly clouds circling the globe. The spells also kept the island hidden, rendering it invisible

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to all forms of detection; magical or technological. Sephteria told Kyr shortly after they arrived that only someone who knew where to look could find it, even if they flew directly overhead.

For twenty-five hundred years the elves had lived in quiet solitude. But now the last refuge of the elves had come under the eye of the Shadow King, and Kyr could see in the faces of all the elves he passed the fear that the last piece of natural beauty left in the world was soon to be destroyed.

What would happen if the Dark Army arrives and finds no one here? Kyr thought. Would they leave everything alone? The idea was attractive, but Kyr knew it was fantasy. In his bones he knew when they left the Grove in a few hours it would be for the last time. Anger welled inside him. My whole life I've dreamed of finding a place like this, and now, after only getting to have it for a few short weeks, it's going to be destroyed.

He tried to tell himself it was better to have it for a short time than never at all, but it did no good. The anger grew stronger, and Kyr reached for the Calm, a state of mind that allowed him to distance himself from his emotions. He discovered it as a child, but it was Sephteria that taught him its true potential. When his mind was at peace, he could tap into an energy that granted him special powers. He reached for it now, and as it came over him he could feel his dark emotions melt away. Kyr drifted through the crowds beside Thoma with his mind blank and his temper cold.

When the door to the flat they'd been living in since arriving with Sephteria several weeks before came into view, Kyr sighed with relief. After wading through the sea of elves it would be nice to be someplace a little less populated.

Their flat lay on the far end of the city, on the top level. It was somewhat secluded, with only one other apartment just beside it. Kyr did not believe the other flat to be occupied, as he had not seen anyone enter or leave. He wasn't sure if it was kept empty with purpose, or if its occupant was away somewhere.

Either way, he thought. It doesn't matter anymore. Soon they'll all be empty.

Thoma opened the door. It was a spacious flat, but nowhere near the size of Tessia's. The main room had a fireplace, three arched-back chairs covered in soft, green material, and a large sofa of a deep black color. A large row of bookshelves lined the wall

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opposite the fireplace, and Kyr had read as many of the books as he could. *Too bad I won't get a chance to read anymore. I just hope someone gets them out before the Shadow's forces arrive.*

Thoma entered the door in the left-hand corner. Kyr ran up the spiral staircase in the opposite corner and opened the door to his own room. For having been there only a short time, the room was very messy. He had been putting off cleaning until tomorrow, expecting to use the task as a way to combat the mounting anxiety of setting out again. Luckily, the clothes strewn across the room were clean. He stuffed them in his large leather backpack along with several books he retrieved from his nightstand. *Might as well help save a few of them.* He smiled and hoped he would find some time to read on the journey.

When he was satisfied everything he needed was packed, Kyr turned his attention to the things he would carry on him. He pulled on his belt and checked that the dagger Thorna, the Dwarven King, had given him was still there. It was firmly in place on his right side, but his sword, which hung on his left, was not there. He panicked for a second until remembering he'd hidden it in the wardrobe.

The closet door opened with a creak, and light spilled across the sword in its black and silver sheath. Kyr smiled. He took it from the closet, remembering with a grin the first time he had seen the weapon. He and Thoma had been in the Central Market of Cairpahtria, trying to take his mind off of having lost his job that morning. While there they stumbled upon an ancient building that had drawn Kyr as a moth to a bulb. He had found the sword resting in the back of the shop in a dusty glass case. The shop owner, a frail, old man named Bartlebe, sold Kyr the sword for a pittance, and Kyr had been loathe to let it out of his sight since. If not for the Elven custom of outlawing weapons in the city proper, Kyr would have worn the blade at his side through every waking moment.

He attached the sword to his belt using the thin, silver chain at the top of the scabbard. The weight felt good on his side, and he hoped no one would object to him wearing it on his way out. He hadn't even thought to ask Tessia about that. *Oh well, the worst that could happen is I'll have to take it off.*

Kyr shouldered his backpack and moved back into the main room. Thoma was waiting for him under a stack of clothes and other provisions.

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“You ready?” his voice was muffled as it traveled through the sack covering his mouth.

“As ready as I’m going to be.” He opened the door and held it for Thoma, who was having trouble moving under the weight of his belongings. “Why didn’t you put those in some kind of bag?”

Thoma grunted something he couldn’t make out and pushed past him. Kyr chuckled and shook his head, wondering what kind of logic ruled Thoma’s world. *Probably none*, he thought with another shake of his head.

There was a staircase not far from the entrance to their flat. Most of the staircases in the city only connected as many as three floors to each other, but there were three scattered about that allowed access to not only all twelve floors of the Grove, but also to the ground. Kyr took some of Thoma’s belongings and made his way down the twelve flights of steps.

The forest floor was bustling, but it was still quieter than the upper levels. Rangers were moving about, checking and double-checking defenses. Kyr couldn’t help but feel the Shadow King’s forces were already lined up outside the city as he and Thoma made their way across the soft forest floor to the stables.

As they drew nearer, Kyr could see that the large, main entrance to the stables stood open. Earol, the stable master, leaned against the doorframe, watching the Rangers that passed by. The elf’s manner changed when he registered Kyr and Thoma’s approach.

He smiled and waved as he moved to meet them. “Been an eventful day, hasn’t it?” His voice was cheerful, despite the dark look in his eye. “A minion of the Dark Lord, here, in the Grove. I never thought I’d live to see the day.” He took their belongings and stacked them on the ground just outside the door.

Kyr tried to smile, but only looked to the ground. *The elves are only in danger because of me*, he thought. *If Sephteria hadn’t brought me here, the Shadow King never would have found them.* The thought weighed on him. But if his manner changed, neither Earol nor Thoma noticed.

“How long do you think it will take?” Thoma asked.

Earol looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

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“The evacuation. How long do you think it will be before everyone is safe?”

Earol’s face darkened further. “I would say we will be out of the city by the end of the week, but whether we’ll be safe or not is anyone’s guess.” He scratched behind his ear and shrugged. “I guess we’ll be as safe as we can hope for.”

Kyr smiled, but his heart wasn’t in it. “I think your people and the dwarves together will be enough to take on the Dark Army.”

“Aye, I imagine you’re right. But, I have to say I’m not really looking forward to living underground. I’ll miss the sun and the wind. But, enough of this. We have work to do. Tessia sent word saying he wanted to leave as soon as possible, and we need to get these cheeram saddled.”

He led them into the stables, scratching his head as they went. It was dim, and the smells of hay and animal were strong. Both were new to Kyr, and he found them almost as marvelous as the whole of the Elven city.

The walls of the stables were the same smooth wood that could be found throughout the Grove, and Kyr ran his hand along them as they moved into the animal pen. Several dozen cheeram filled the room, either napping or circling the ground, sniffing as though tracking something.

The beasts never ceased to amaze Kyr. Their sleek coats caused their muscles to glisten in all but the faintest of lights, and their large yellow eyes peered out with wisdom—*or is it hunger?* Kyr thought—and could detect the subtlest of gestures. The massive felines stood thirteen hands in the air and could travel great distances at an alarming pace.

One stopped and moved towards Kyr. It was of average weight and height, when compared to the others, but was set apart by its coat. Whereas the majority of the beasts were varying shades of dark, deep-forest green, this one was blacker than the eyes of a dead man. It scratched the ground before Kyr, and seemed to nod to him.

Earol stepped beside the cheeram and scratched the back of its neck. “Noirindia likes you.” He smiled and patted the animal with obvious affection. The elf loved the creatures, and it was not hard for Kyr to see why. They were magnificent, and their physical majesty was matched only by their intelligence.

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Thoma hung at the back of the room, his kitten Sebastian clinging to his left forearm. The dusky-gray cat had been given to Thoma as a reward for helping to save the dwarven village—a feat that had seen Thoma die, only to be revived through powerful magic. There was much about the series of events Kyr still did not understand.

The kitten meowed and hissed, uneasy around the large felines. He pressed himself against Thoma, trying to cover his body—which had grown far too large to do so days ago—behind the thin limb.

Thoma took the kitten in his right hand and held him firm; rubbing him for reassurance as he moved closer to the large, black cheeram that stood before Kyr and Earol. Noirindia raised her head to the kitten and blinked. Sebastian, hesitant at first, scooted forward in Thoma's hand. He edged his face out to investigate his distant, much larger relative.

Earol gave Noirindia a final pat and said “Come on. Tessia could be here anytime.” He walked to the far end of the room and opened a wall. He removed an odd saddle and tossed it across the room to Kyr. “Here you go,” he said, “Noirindia's picked you. Saddle her up.”

Kyr nodded and strapped the saddle onto Noirindia after scratching her behind the ear again. He had spent much of his time in the Grove with Earol, learning about the cheeram. Saddling them was one of the first lessons he learned.

Kyr had wandered down late one evening to lie amongst the grass, and had found Earol leading one of the cheeram back from a ride. It was his first experience with either, and he was startled at the sight of the massive green beast. The cheeram in question was named Ryld, and he was Earol's favorite. Overcome with curiosity, Kyr barraged the elf with questions until Earol had led him into the stables and had started teaching him all he could.

Kyr admitted he still knew close to nothing, but he felt confident enough in his ability to ride that he was anticipating their approaching journey instead of dreading it like Thoma

Kyr didn't envy his friend the next few hours. The cheeram weren't easy to ride. They were fast and willful, and it was easy to lose control if you didn't know what you were doing. Despite constant warnings from himself and Sephteria, Thoma had never

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taken the chance to ride before. Instead, he had spent the last few weeks drinking and smoking. While Kyr didn't approve of this, he knew that Thoma was having a much harder time adapting to their new world than he was, especially considering the trip into death he experienced almost two months ago.

If it had been me, he thought. I'd probably spend every minute of the day drunk, too.

Kyr fastened the last strap and tugged on the saddle to make sure it was secure. Noirindia looked up at him and nuzzled his hand. He scratched her ear absent-mindedly and turned to see how Thoma was holding up when Sephteria stepped into the cheeram hold.

She was buried under twice as many bags as Kyr and Thoma had lugged through the city. When she deposited them on the ground, Kyr couldn't help but notice a slight groan of relief escape her lips. She turned to face them, tossing her hair out of her face.

"Only two have been saddled?" Sephteria asked. "What have you two been doing? Did you not hear my father when he said we were in a hurry?"

She rushed past Kyr and pulled another saddle from the storage wall. Moving to the closest cheeram, she laid the leather saddle across the creature's back and began fastening the straps. Earol was already working on another.

Kyr decided the two elves could finish saddling them before he could, and set to carrying his and Thoma's belongings in. When he had his bag strapped to the back of the saddle, he helped Thoma stuff his things into the saddlebags. By the time they were finished, Sephteria had her mount saddled and loaded down. She took the reins of her mount and two others and led them outside.

Thoma guided his own mount out of the stables with Sebastian still clinging to his shoulder. Kyr followed them, leading Noirindia through the stacks of feed.

There were even more Rangers than there had been before. The Stalker's body was burning outside the tree line, and a large group of Guards had come to help the Rangers tighten the perimeter defenses.

Kyr watched as Sephteria placed the last of her belongings on her cheeram. She fumbled through the sacks, looking as if she were checking off items on a mental list. When she was satisfied,

she sat on the ground beside her cheeram, wringing her hands in silence. Earol stepped over to her and whispered something in elvish, a language Kyr still couldn't understand. Sephteria had taught him some basics, but not enough for him to understand anything spoken in the language.

Thoma was trying to climb onto the back of his cheeram, but Sebastian was running around his shoulders, trying to stay as far away from the large feline as possible. The effect was causing Thoma great difficulty. He would almost get settled, and then the kitten would run across his chest, its claws causing him to recoil and nearly fall off.

Kyr smiled. He definitely did not envy Thoma the ride ahead.

Kemenul, followed by Tessia and Helfrin, stepped out of a crowd of Rangers. All three were burdened with sacks of supplies, but Helfrin carried the brunt. The thin elf was wrestling with several large, misshapen bags that threatened to topple him over.

Tessia greeted them as Helfrin loaded the cheeram. Kemenul packed his own mount and moved to join the rest of the group. When they were all gathered and quiet, Tessia raised his hand.

"We are about to embark on a journey that has been prophesized for as long, or longer, than most of us have been alive. I wish we were leaving under better circumstances, but the Gods rarely give us tests we find enjoyable." He smiled and turned to Kemenul. "Is everyone ready?"

The elf nodded. "Yes, Jennelle and the dwarves are well under way. I hate leaving them like this, but..."

Everyone here knew the importance of the task before them. If they didn't reach the Isle of Iluvian there would be no hope for the survival of either the Elves or Dwarves. Mankind would continue to live on in ignorant enslavement to the Shadow King.

Kyr heard a strange clattering accompanied by huffing from behind. He turned to see Dauglin running toward them.

"Good," the dwarf said. "I was afraid ye'd already left." He gripped Kyr's hand in his own, the vice-like pressure nearly causing Kyr to drop to his knees. "Ye be very careful. It's possible the Shadow King has other minions around, and we're all depending on yer success." The dwarf moved from person to person, shaking

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hands with Thoma and Kemenul, and hugging Sephteria. He stopped and bowed before Tessia. “Ye’re people will be safe with me, Tessia. I’ll have them to Mirya-Teliavar long before the Dark Army can get here.”

Tessia’s mouth turned with a faint smile, and he gripped Dauglin’s shoulder. “I have the utmost confidence in you, Dauglin. May the Mother bless you.”

“Aye, and ye as well.”

“We must go now.”

Tessia motioned for everyone to mount their cheeram. He slid into his saddle with the fluidity of a veteran rider. When everyone was settled—Thoma had to let Sebastian crawl inside the front of his shirt to keep the cat from clawing him—Kyr took a last look around. He watched the elves running about, doing everything in their power to protect their homes. He looked to Tessia, whose eyes glimmered in the flickering blue light of the torches, and Kyr thought he saw a tear break from his eye.

“Come,” the elf said; his voice a whisper.

They turned their cheeram toward the north edge of the Grove and spurred them forward. As Kyr broke into the clearing, a great sadness gripped him.

He knew he would never see the Grove again.

Two

W*hy did Father summon me?*

The servant had arrived not long before, his loud knocking jarring Jamis from sleep. The man had not said anything other than their master had sent for him. The only thing Jamis could think, though he dared not speak the wish aloud, was that his father had located Astaldereg.

Jamis hated Kyr more than anyone he had ever known. It was He that murdered Elyas, the man that had rescued Jamis from the orphanage and brought him to the Black Keep, the home of Jamis's father, the Shadow King. Elyas had been like a big brother to the pale-blonde-haired orphan; taking him under his wing and schooling him in the ways of dark magic and torture. Jamis had sworn to avenge his mentor, and he prayed his chance had finally arrived.

He turned down an empty hallway and sped up. *Two, three...* he counted the ash-gray arches as they passed. *Ah, here.* He stopped and turned to the right-hand wall. It was identical to all the other hundreds of stones he had passed, save for the tiny letter *S* carved into the center of the wall, just below waist height. He drew a deep breath, cracked his neck, and traced the small *S* with the tip of his finger. After taking another breath, he stepped into the wall.

The stone gave way to a lightless void. His heavy, black boots seemed to stand upon nothing, and there was a growing sense of nausea in his stomach. *I'll never understand why he likes this place,* he thought, swallowing to force his stomach back down.

Each step deeper into the void brought memories rushing to the front of his consciousness. His first step brought a buried memory of his mother. His second step saw her standing before him, with her back turned. By the time his third step came to rest on whatever magic it was that allowed him to walk, he no longer saw the emptiness around him.

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She was screaming, but he couldn't make out any words. They were in a kitchen that was gray and cramped. Jamis looked down and saw that his body was that of a child's. Despite this, he still did not have much room to move. Two large, black forms stepped into the room, and his mother screamed. There was no longer even a hint of words; her cry was pure terror.

The shapes moved toward her and images of seeing his mother torn to shreds by two... two... *Two of my father's Sethians*, he thought. *But that's impossible. Why would he have killed my mother?*

The memory faded, and Jamis recognized a distant glimmer in the air: his father's throne. It came more clearly into focus as Jamis continued through the strange room. It bobbed in the air, and Jamis's father, the Shadow King, sat upon it with an odd light in his eye.

Jamis had met with his father a handful of times since he came to the Black Keep, but he had never seen any real emotion in the man. He had seen anger aplenty and even an occasional smile from his sire, but there was always a layer of ice beneath these surface emotions. While the man still did not seem cheerful, Jamis could detect a spark of something he had not seen before in his father's demeanor. *Is it excitement?* He wondered.

Jamis dropped to one knee and bowed his head. "Father. You sent for me?"

Silence. Jamis gambled a look up at his father and saw a faint smile lift the corners of the stern mouth.

"Are you ready to leave?"

Jamis was taken aback. He had not expected that to be his father's opening. "Y-yes, milord. Have... have you found him?"

"Oh, I have found so much *more* than Astaldereg." Jamis must have seemed disappointed. "Don't worry, my son. Astaldereg has been located as well. He has been found among a community of elves. When you told me of the elf-witch that fought with Elyas I had not expected for them to have survived with such numbers. I am greatly intrigued by how they have managed to avoid my eye for so long. But not so curious that I want to ask them. No, it is your job to destroy the elves and Astaldereg. I want their city burnt to embers."

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Jamis nodded. *Finally*, he thought. *I get the chance to prove to him what I can do.* He smiled.

But what about the memory of your mother? A voice in his mind asked. *Don't you even want to know if he really did it?* Jamis lowered his head. Did he dare ask his father about the memory? Was it even a true memory? He wasn't sure, but his curiosity gnawed at him.

"Father, may I ask a question?"

His father stared down at him. At first Jamis wasn't sure of whether his father had understood him or not. Eventually the man nodded, the corners of his mouth still slightly raised.

"On my way to...to meet you, I saw a...well, a memory. In it, I saw my mother slaughtered by Sethians. Did that really happen? I mean, did...did you have her...?"

"Did I have your mother killed?" the smile was gone. In its place was a hard, tight line; the glimmer of excitement from only seconds before had vanished. "Tell me, Jamis, why do you want to know?"

"I, well..."

"If I were to admit to having had her killed, would it change your view of me? Would it make you wish to return to the life that awaited you before you came here?" He stood and stared down at Jamis. "Would you wish to return to the life of an ordinary orphan?"

Jamis stared into his father's ice-blue eyes, and a thought occurred to him. It *didn't* matter. How his mother died was irrelevant. The fact is she died, and Jamis was now the heir to the throne of the world. He would not have traded his newfound power and authority for anything in the world, not even his mother. "No," he said, "it wouldn't matter."

"Good." The throne vanished and the Shadow King stood beside his son. He gripped Jamis's shoulder and led him deeper into the surrounding void. "We have much work to do, and you can't afford to waste energy on such petty matters. We have a world to control, and I have become fond of you. I would hate to have to replace you."

Jamis felt a wave of cold pass through him. Fear, not of death, but of worthlessness swam through his mind, and Jamis wished he had never brought up the matter. But then another

thought struck him. “Father, I’m sorry, but I must ask one more question.”

His father stopped and turned to look him in the face. “If it will end your concerns, then ask.”

Jamis hesitated. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer to the question that had just bubbled up from his subconscious. “Thank you. It’s actually a couple of questions, but... well, this room. The first time I came here, it showed me images from my past, times in the orphanage that had haunted me for years. This time, I saw my mother. The room...it...senses your memories and then shows them to you, right?”

His father smiled. “It has taken smarter men than you much longer to realize that. That is precisely what it does.”

“But why?”

“Let me just say that it is a sort of...defense. A last line of defense, in a way.”

“I see. So, do...do you cause it to happen?”

The Dark Lord sighed. “Does it matter if I do?”

Jamis chose his words carefully. He had detected a note of something that sounded very much like impatience in his father’s tone. “Well, no, it doesn’t. But...if you *do* cause it to happen, why did you show me my mother’s death? Why now?”

“If I did cause it to happen, Jamis, can you think of no reason I would show you your mother’s death? Perhaps, if I did cause it to happen, I was attempting to learn how strong your loyalties are. Perhaps I wanted to know if you would let something small like that cloud your judgment. Does that satisfy?”

Of course, Jamis thought. *It was just a test*. He smiled and bowed his head. “Forgive my insolence, milord. You have my faith and my allegiance.”

“Good, but before you feel too comfortable, I have a bit of bad news. You remember the unfortunate incident that resulted in Elyas’s death?”

Jamis nodded. It was impossible for him to forget. His hatred for Astaldereg was born from it.

“I do.”

“Good. Then you remember your failure as well?”

“My...” Jamis stopped and chose his words with care. This had the smell of a trap, and he would be damned if he walked into it

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willingly. “I thought you had decided the fault was with Elyas and the manner in which he handled the goblins.”

“I did decide that. But after careful consideration, I realized you held a larger degree of blame than I had at first thought. You saw the flaws in Elyas’s command, but you did nothing about it. You did not try to stop him or even to contact me about it. In order to remind you of your responsibility, I have decided you are to be punished.”

Jamis’s mouth gaped. *All of this talk about me going to destroy the elves. It was all a lie!* He forced his mouth closed, not trusting himself to speak.

“I see you do not agree with me.” The King smiled. “That’s fine. I would not have expected you to be excited about being punished. Don’t worry; it’s but a small thing, meant for you to learn to work through adversity.”

“What...what do you mean?”

“Only this.” With a wave of his hand, the Shadow King lifted Jamis into the air. Holding him tight enough that Jamis found it hard to draw breath, the Dark Lord smiled. “You enjoy the powers of magic you command, no? Perhaps you rely on them too much. I think I shall take them away from you.”

Jamis spent months learning to see the currents of magic around them. He spent even longer learning to tap into them. Horrified, he now watched his father close him off to those currents, leaving him feeling like his hand had been cut off. Once they were closed, Jamis was lowered back to his feet and allowed to stand on his own.

“How do you feel, Jamis?”

Anger unlike any he had experienced coursed through his veins, and he did not even try to hide it from his father. When he looked up from the ground, he knew his hate burned out of his eyes. His father laughed at the sight, which only served to infuriate him further.

“Now, now, Jamis. Think of this as yet another test. If you succeed, I will restore your powers. If you fail, however, you won’t live long enough to miss your lost abilities. Now, come. We have much to do.”

He waved his hand absent-mindedly, and a door appeared next to them. The Shadow King turned and stepped into a chamber

Jamis had never seen before. Swallowing his anger, he followed his father.

They stepped onto a balcony looking down upon a room that stretched several thousand yards in front of them. The massive hall was nearly as wide as it was long, and was made from the same black stone as the rest of the upper levels of the Shadow King's fortress.

"What do you think of your army, my son?"

The hall was filled with beasts, some of which Jamis was familiar with, and others he was not. He counted several dozen Luperiats, large half-man half-canine beasts proficient at hunting and killing, twice as many Sethians, his father's favored assassins that were equally horrific in their twisted combination of man and serpent traits, and too many members of some unfamiliar race to be counted. They were massive, standing over eight feet tall, and looked almost like men. Their faces were twisted, deformed, and all of them stared forward with blank expressions. *I hope these things are easier to control than the Luperiats.*

Jamis's dealings with a Luperiat in the deep underground where he and Elyas had been searching for the crystal skull did not have him excited about working with them again. They were intelligent and prone to random violence. Because of these traits they were difficult to lead.

Pushing the memories of the goblins' cave out of his mind, he turned to his father. "What are they, exactly?" He asked, pointing to the strange, giant man-like creatures.

"They were once men, but through experimentation I have made them much more. I have never given them a proper name, though they have been referred to as simply Warriors by many of your predecessors. They aren't the most intelligent of beings, but they are cheaply made and have a thirst for blood I have not found an equal for. They will be the brunt of your force.

"I want you to go first with this division. Others will follow so that we may be sure of victory. This army before you should be enough to destroy the elves and their city, but I want to leave nothing to chance."

Jamis nodded. He understood and did not let the information bother him. Many might have seen a secondary force as a threat, but Jamis understood. There would be no second attempt

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at this, and if they were to rid the world of the elves they had to act quickly and decisively. “When do I leave?”

“Immediately, of course.” His father grinned and pointed to a staircase leading to the floor of the room below. “There is a small antechamber at the far end of the hall. In it you will find several people waiting for you. They will act as your captains. Examine your army, but don’t take too long. In the room with your captains is a portal. On your command it will open and take you and your army to this island the elves have managed to hide from me. Make your attack quick and deadly.” He gripped Jamis’s shoulder and turned him to stare into his eyes. The ice-blue depths seemed to glow. “Kill them all, my son, and you will forever be my right hand.”

Jamis nodded and bowed. “By sunrise, milord, they will be no more.” He turned from his father and took the stairs to the floor below. The Warriors stiffened as he passed, and the Luperiats and Sethians bowed. With each step into the ranks of his army, Jamis’s confidence mounted. These creatures were, all of them, bred for a single purpose: murder.

The elves will regret ever meeting Astaldereg.

At the far end of the room was an open archway. Standing just inside, in front of a wide, towering pillar of purplish-black smoke, were four men and a woman. None of them were much older or younger than Jamis, and he hoped they were tested in combat. It would not do for his captains to be wet behind the ears.

Without bothering with introductions Jamis barked at them. “How many of you have ever seen battle?”

Only one, the woman, raised their hand.

Jamis scowled. “You have at least trained in the arts of war, though, correct?” They all nodded. *Better. At least we won’t be walking into war with leaders that don’t know which end of a sword to hold.*

On either side of the portal were stacks of weapons, most of them blades, but there were several different types of firearms as well. Jamis had never had a use for guns. They could jam or run out of ammunition, and he had no time for weapons that might fail.

There’s no point in waiting, Jamis thought. He checked to make sure his own weapon, a beautifully crafted bastard sword whose green-tinted blade had earned it the name of the Green Bastard, was secure on his back. It never left his possession, but

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feeling the grip just behind his right shoulder boosted his confidence further.

“Come,” he whispered, “it is time to make war.”

The army behind him turned in unison, as if every one of them heard his proclamation. Jamis stepped forward into the pillar of smoke, and the army followed. One by one they stepped into the portal, and when they came out of the smoke they found themselves surrounded by trees on the elven island of Ayliaata.

Three

Elves moved about everywhere; the black and green clad Rangers left little room for movement as they prepared for the coming assault. Belor grunted with grim satisfaction at the sight. While he was not pleased the Grove had been discovered, he was at least comforted that the elves were willing—and more importantly, *capable*—of defending themselves.

Among the blue torch fires he made his way to the stables, cutting his way through the tide of elves and trying his best to keep from being swept away by their current. Long before he reached his destination, though, he saw Dauglin approaching.

The dwarf prince moved unimpeded through the lines of elves. Where Belor was forced to move around them, they made it a point to stay out of his way. There was a dark look to Dauglin this evening, but as he saw Belor his eyes lit somewhat. A lock of long, red hair had fallen before his face, clinging to his beard. The prince pushed it out of the way and nodded to his long-time friend and bodyguard. “Where’s Jennelle?”

Belor looked to the many levels of the elven city above them. “Up there,” he said pointing. “She was talking to Rommiel when I came to find ye. They were assembling the Guard.”

“Good. We’ll need every last one of ‘em.”

Dauglin scratched his chin and watched the scattered elves fill the forest floor. Something he saw must have interested him; he motioned for Belor to follow, and the two made their way through the ranks of elves. When they were out of the throngs of elves, Dauglin stopped and looked at Belor hopefully.

“Ye got any ideas fer getting us outta this?”

“Not yet. I can feel something brewing, but it hasn’t come clear to me yet.”

Dauglin nodded. They both knew when Belor could feel a plan coming on something just short of a miracle was due soon.

There had been many times the two had been up against over a hundred times their own numbers of goblins, and somehow Belor always managed to get them out alive. “Well, try to hurry; if ye can.”

Belor saw what had attracted Dauglin’s attention. A strange formation of rocks he had never noticed before stood a few hundred yards away from the eastern Watch Station. *How could I have never seen this?* The two sat on the rock, and Belor could feel a little of his tension melt away. The stone seemed to vibrate below him, and for a moment Belor thought he heard the subtle implication of a melody on the wind. “Bless the father,” he said. “I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed stone!”

Dauglin smiled and nodded. “Aye, me too.”

“What is this place, and why have I never noticed it before?”

Dauglin shook his head. “I’m not sure. The first time we came to the Grove, I felt like I was drawn to it.”

“Where was I?”

“I believe ye were drunk.”

Belor raised his eyebrows and nodded; the period of his life when he and Dauglin had first come to the elven city was covered in a cloud of drink. He still drank in a manner that some would consider heavy, though he had cut back tremendously since then. But still, why hadn’t he noticed it since their arrival a few days ago?

“We need to get started on the evacuation.” Dauglin said.

The question broke Belor from his internal debate. “Aye. The young’uns need to be on their way before daybreak. We need to get some archers along the edge o’ the first two levels, too.”

“At *least* the first two,” Dauglin agreed. “I’d like to have all of ‘em covered, but I don’t think we have that many elves.” He exhaled, puffing his cheeks as he did so. “Belor, old friend, this is going to be rough. I got a nasty feeling about this one.”

“Don’t ye worry, Dauglin. I’ll think of something.”

Dauglin nodded. “I know ye will. Come on. We got a lot to do.”

Belor nodded, hating to leave the comfort of the stone so soon. But, like the soldier he was, he knew comfort was secondary to duty. Without a word of complaint the two dwarves made their way through the flowing elves and climbed the stairs into the elven city.

After navigating through the twelve levels of the complex, Belor stepped into Tessia’s home alongside Dauglin. Jennelle, an

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almost too-thin elf with untidy, sand-blond hair, noticed their entry and nodded to them. She spoke a few final words to Rommiel, the captain of the Elven Guard, and then the two parted ways. He left to complete whatever errand she had charged him with as she greeted them.

“Rommiel will have the ground-level perimeter doubled within the hour,” she said. “By morning we should have half of our available soldiers on the line.”

“Good,” Dauglin said. “What about archers? How soon till they’re in place?”

There were few defenses as strong as a line of elven archers. Belor and Dauglin had both studied enough history to know that.

“The first level should already be stocked and ready,” she said with a small trace of satisfaction in her voice. Belor noticed that Jennelle not only did her job well because it was expected, she truly loved being on top of situations. It was a trait he admired. “We’ll have the first five levels ready by morning.”

Dauglin nodded again. “Good. We need as many Archers as we can get. I want ye to stay on top of ‘em, Jennelle. They’re yer top responsibility and I want ye to make sure they have everything they need. Belor, I’ll need ye down below, watching the perimeter with the Rangers and the Guard. I’m going to make sure we have an evacuation party set to go within the hour.”

“You’ll want to send a group of Guards with them. Just in case.”

“Aye, lass. I was thinking the same. I’m going to need to keep as many of the elders for as long as I can, though. We’ll need their spells to help in the defense.”

Jennelle nodded. “I’ll assemble as many as I can on my way to see to the Archers. We’ll want Casters on all levels. Holstaf and his Spellswords would be best on the ground.”

“Any idea where he is?” Belor asked. “I can try to round them all up on my way down.”

“Good idea,” she said. “Their training quarters are on the seventh level, on the west end. You won’t be able to miss it.”

“Good. Unless ye need me for anything else, Dauglin, I’m going to get moving. No sense in wasting time.”

“No, Belor. That’s fine. I’ll be down to check on ye as soon as I can.”

Belor nodded to both Dauglin and Jennelle then left Tessia's house through the massive wooden doors. The city was alive with activity, and it took him longer than he would have liked to make his way through the throngs of elves preparing for battle, evacuation, or both.

When he reached the west end of the seventh level, he saw Jennelle was right: there was no way he could have missed the Spellword's training barracks.

It was just like every other elven domicile, in that it existed as part of the tree that held it. However, on either side of the door was a pair of swords, enchanted to dual for eternity. The loud clanging of their endless battles carried across the level, drawing Belor straight to the barracks.

He stepped to the door, eyeing the swords with concern; on some level he worried that the blades might miss each other and slam into him. Still watching out of the corner of his eye, he knocked hard on the wooden door. Within seconds he was greeted by the oddest-looking elf he'd ever seen.

Belor noticed that the elf didn't actually stand. He was in a constant state of motion, swaying back and forth almost imperceptibly, as if floating in the air. He was short, for an elf, standing at five and a half feet tall, and was dressed in the most elaborate tunic Belor had seen on one of the woodland people. It was made of green and purple materials and fit very loosely. The sleeves bellowed out below the elbow. Black pants and dark brown boots that reached just below his knees finished off his outfit.

Belor thought the elf would look foppish in his attire if it weren't for his shaven head and face of stone. A long scar ran down the right side of the elf's face, and Belor felt an instant affinity for the strange elf. He, too, knew what it was like to live with a deformity.

Images of liquid fire filled his thoughts, and the scars covering his face ached for a brief instant. He pushed the memory away before it entirely resurfaced, like always. The strange elf with no hair and stone-gray eyes stood with crossed arms, waiting.

"Are ye Holstaf?" the dwarf asked.

"Naiya," he said, shaking his head. "Sea-iit y alla." He motioned for Belor to follow as he turned and moved into the dim hall of the barracks.

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The walls and ceiling were close, giving the impression that the passage grew smaller with each step. The only light came from torches placed at what seemed like random intervals. The walls were bare save for those, and all the doors they passed were sealed, letting neither sight nor sound of their safe keepings escape.

The elf led him to the end of the hall and through the door that waited there. Inside was a much larger room than Belor anticipated, filled on one end with weapons racks and practice dummies, and on the other by shelves filled with books. There was a desk in one corner, covered with books and papers. On a strange-looking mat in the center of the room stood an elf; contorted in the most painful-looking position Belor had ever seen. He stood tiptoe on his left foot, while his right leg was straight in the air; his knee beside his face. His left arm was held above his head, holding his right ankle, and his right arm stuck out straight. A smile crept across his face as Belor approached.

“I wondered when you would come calling,” he said. “My Spellswords are ready; we were just waiting for direction. Where shall we be allowed to stand?”

Belor was pleased to learn they were already prepared. He had been anticipating an hour gap—at least—before they would arrive on the ground. “Bottom level. First line of defense,” he said.

Holstaf smiled wider. “Good. That is where we are most effective.” He pulled a shirt very similar to the one the other elf was wearing, though black and blue where the other was green and purple, over his head. “Go and tell the others it is time, Tanis.”

The elf with the shaved head nodded and exited. Belor could hear doors opening and words spoken within seconds. Holstaf pulled on a heavy belt covered with blades of all sizes. With only a glance, Belor counted six at least, varying from tiny daggers to the scimitar hanging on the elf’s left hip. “Shall we go?”

“Ye not gonna put any armor on?” Belor asked.

Holstaf shook his head. “It is a nuisance. We don’t believe in it.”

Elves, Belor thought. *Only elves would call armor a nuisance before going into battle.* He smiled and shook his head. “If ye say so. Let’s go.”

He turned and exited the room with Holstaf in tow. By the time they exited the barracks, they had been joined by nineteen

other elves, all of them dressed in the same, flamboyant shirts. But their manner of dress and apparent athleticism was where their similarities ended. There were male and female elves mixed together, some with long hair, and others with short.

They all made their way to the ground floor in silence. Not till they stepped foot on the ground did any one say a word, and then it was Holstaf that spoke. "How do you want us positioned?"

Belor thought this would have been obvious, but perhaps the elf was waiting to be told in order to avoid the appearance of trying to take over. "Just spread out as best you can. We'll need yer spells more than anything."

"Aye," said Holstaf. "While we are all masters of the blade, our first choice is always the arcane." He turned from Belor and addressed the Spellswords with a series of gestures. They broke apart and spread along the perimeter.

The line around the grove was thirty elves thick, and Belor allowed himself to feel a modicum of confidence at that thought. He knew Jennelle would have the first three floors covered with Archers by now, and Dauglin should have the first evacuation party ready to go at any time. He informed the division commanders that he needed a few moments to plan for contingencies, and they could find him on the strange rock formation at the eastern edge of the Grove.

He settled on the stone hill and allowed his thoughts to wander across the few possibilities available to them if things should go wrong. If the line was broken, there was little hope of lasting. But unless the Shadow King sent a small, exploratory unit first, they had little chance of surviving at all. Belor hated to think such dark thoughts, but he also didn't believe in lying to himself. This was a dangerous situation they were in, and he had no idea how to get them out of it.

The stone beneath him seemed to vibrate, and a snippet of a melody filled Belor's mind. The tune was familiar; it played at the edge of his consciousness, and taunted him with recognition. The melody came much closer, but he still could not place it. *Is it...?*

"Sir!" His thoughts were broken by an approaching elf clad in the light armor of the Rangers. Belor jumped to his feet. He gripped the handles of his axes just below the heads, preparing to draw them if necessary.

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“What is it, lad?”
“They’ve arrived.”

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