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**The Sword of Völundr**

# **The Xilver Series Part 1: The Sword of Völundr**

**By Russel Zenarosa**

# **The Sword of Völundr**

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# The Sword of Völundr

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## **The Sword of Völundr**

### **Chapter 1: Xilver Green – The Assault on Brogick**

The autumn wind whistled as it flew over the colossal mountains of Brogick. Nothing else disturbed the quiet peaks, save for a mountain goat that attempted to climb a steep mountainside and the sound of a river flowing. The mountains were strewn with plant life, but on the foot of them—namely the valley—was a rocky, and somewhat bumpy terrain. There was also the river that supported the habitats of many mountain and forest dwelling creatures.

On the side of one particular mountain, several trees hid a rather small house built mainly with wood and rocks. It may not be too stable or large, but it was adequate enough for one person to live in comfortably. This was the home of Xilver Green, a lone mortal in his late teen years. The youth had moderately lengthy black hair, which hung to the side of his face as he read a book on a wooden table. He wore a brown cloak over his slim body, along with a scarf to protect him from the cold conditions.

Xilver shifted his eyes from the compelling book, a book that imparted magical wisdom. He was trying to learn the arts of magic, with some success, though he found himself unable to focus as well as he usually did.

Yawning, his eyes darted from left to right, observing the miniature house he had built himself. It was about five paces in length and width and a short hop tall. There were only three pieces of furniture: a table on which he read the book, a chair on which he sat, and a small weapon rack that held his bow and quiver, which was full of decently fletched arrows. All three furniture were crudely built with wood from the mountain trees, but despite their rawness, they still had their uses.

Xilver walked out of his house and the autumn wind brushed past his hair, a cooling sensation that always soothed him. A small clearing was present in front of his shack. This clearing and his house were hidden well by the pine trees and shrubs that surrounded it.

He was on a mountain on the west side of the Törpe Valley, which can be seen down below. He was high enough on the mountain to see one league to the south, as well as the north end of the valley.

The valley itself starts north of Talonne, an abandoned city on the Mortyre Province, and reaches a large metal gate on the north end of the valley, the main entrance to the Dwarven tunnels. The valley provided a highly efficient path for travelling north without having to circumnavigate the mountains.

The Clawtooth River started from the south of the mountainous province and snaked up north before turning towards the ocean to the west.

When Xilver had first arrived on Brogick Mountains two and a half years ago, he had met the Dwarves. Xilver, who had fled from the

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Mortyre Province in an attempt to escape the king's wrath, made a request to reside on the mountains of Brogick. The Dwarves had appeared slightly hesitant, but they eventually allowed the youth to take residence on their mountains. Since then, he lived alone, living off on any fruit-bearing trees he could find and the occasional deer that he managed to track down and kill.

Sure, he would frequently spot a Dwarf sentry, but he saw the race as mysterious as the dark side of the moon, so fond of death; he would avoid sparking a conversation with them, if possible. They were creepy, no doubt, but he was always curious to learn about the life of the Dwarves.

Xilver took the time to breathe in the fresh mountain air, revitalizing his body and mind. He looked around and examined his surroundings.

The foreboding darkness of the twilight coated the large mountains. The only movement he could detect was the mountain goat, which still made its enduring climb up a rocky mountain on the other side of the valley, an arrow's flight away. He also saw a Dwarf sentry not far from the mountain goat. Though a normal human would not be able to see something from such a distance in the midst of the night, his eyesight was much better in the dark than most.

The autumn air was as sweet as the night was dark, soothing Xilver's mind-numbness that he had attained after cleaving a book for so long.

At that moment, he noticed an ominous yellow glow to the south, just barely visible. Turning towards it, he squinted to get a better focus on what exactly he was looking at, with little success. The light suddenly disappeared.

With an unwanted feeling that something was wrong, Xilver went back inside his mini-house and fetched a tiny, circular crystal. He held it with his left hand and aimed it at the direction of where he saw the glow earlier. The crystal magnified the spot, partially hidden by darkness.

Xilver's heart sank as he saw a large army, barely visible due to the cover of the darkness. It consisted of several hundred men, marching up north through the Törpe Valley.

*Why haven't the Dwarf sentries alerted the rest of Brogick by blowing the Horn of Vérontás yet?* he wondered.

The Horn of Vérontás, or the Horn of Bloodshed, was the Dwarves' method of signalling an upcoming battle. Each Dwarf sentry, stationed strategically on either side of the valley, had one in his possession.

Xilver's question was answered when he saw a Dwarf sentry on the other side of the valley killed by a knife-wielder. A gasp escaped his lips as the killer silently dumped the body behind a bush and vanished from view. *They're killing the Dwarf sentries before the army could be spotted! They are going to enter the tunnels undetected!*

He wasted no more time. Xilver, while still hidden within the trees,

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called out to the Dwarf sentry near the mountain goat, “Hey! You!”

The Dwarf jumped. Xilver also saw few other Dwarves to the north take notice of his call.

“Use the Horn!” he yelled to the Dwarf.

The Dwarf appeared confused, unaware of the source of the warnings, but Xilver didn’t want to risk running out of the glade and exposing himself to unseen enemies. He kept repeating the command, trying his best to alert the sentry of the approaching battalion, but to no avail.

Frustrated, Xilver strode to the very edge of the clearing. While making sure he was still hidden, he raised his left hand and yelled, “*Luzoub!*”

A silver orb shot out of Xilver’s palm and floated in place, casting a pale glow on the area, like a fire of hopeful faith in the midst of the darkness of despair. He winced as the magical orb drained the life force out of him, but he took the risk.

By simply moving his hand, he directed the ball of light down the valley with magic, towards the soldiers, the brilliant radiance eliminating the darkness that surrounded it. Xilver saw the eyes of the Dwarf follow the lustrous orb as it descended down towards and along the valley.

Finally, it stopped above the stunned army, the light revealing their position. Xilver only held the orb in place for only a few more seconds before finally releasing the magic. He wanted to save his energy for later.

Xilver’s action was rewarded by a loud, deep sound, produced by one of the Horn of Vérontás. It took the opposing army a moment to recover from their exposure before they shouted a battle cry as they ran towards the large metal gate at the end of the valley, the entrance to the Dwarven cities down below. Swords, spears and battleaxes were raised and banners flailed as the soldiers charged.

The army must be a force sent by the king of Mortyre to take over the Dwarves, possibly to increase his own power so that he could dominate the war that was currently raging across Solumithia. The province of Mortyre was fighting against the provinces of Dragott, Nordeste, and Corren.

To Xilver’s surprise, the metal gates on the north end of the valley already opened and an army of Dwarves charged, crying, “For Málfar!”

*They prepare for battle pretty fast*, thought Xilver as he went back into his house and removed his bow and full quiver from the rack. He equipped the quiver, making sure it was secured and walked back out to the clearing.

He watched as the Dwarves and Inferus’ soldiers, both still screaming war cries, collided with one another right at the foot of Xilver’s mountain. The air was suddenly filled with the sounds of steel scraping steel, swords clashing with shields, and screams of pain.

Xilver peered down below and saw that while the Dwarves were



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outnumbered, they still prevented the army from advancing any further. *A little projectile support couldn't hurt*, Xilver suggested to himself.

He nocked an arrow and, using his sharp eyesight, aimed for the chest of a soldier. Although he was high up on the mountain, he was a master archer with eagle-precise eyes. He released the arrow and it pierced the soldier's chainmail. The soldier screamed in anguish as his blood painted his steel armour red. He was dispatched with a blow to the head from the hammer of a Dwarf. Xilver fired three more arrows, each one fatally crippling a soldier before a Dwarf sent him to the afterlife.

Xilver took a moment to examine the battlefield. One by one, each soldier was annihilated by a swift attack from a Dwarf. They were weak in combative styles and so their numbers diminished relatively fast. Xilver noticed the dark clouds on the sky shift, revealing the pale moon, lighting up the valley, its glow replacing the darkness that used to be.

Just behind the squad of Dwarves, a hidden tunnel door opened and a figure emerged. Xilver quickly realized that it was not a Dwarf, and that it was a female. Her attention seemed to be on the other two figures emerging from the tunnel and she didn't seem to notice a large beast approach her from behind.

This being was a creature Xilver had never witnessed before in his life. The creature, he assumed by comparing its size with the human-shaped female, was about twelve feet high. It had the head and tail of an ox, the head fully covered by a black head mask. However, it had a thick body of a strong, muscular young man, its torso revealed in the colour of midnight blue.

The giant creature held a colossal throwing axe on its left hand, an impressive sight sure to strike fear into one's heart. To his utter dread, Xilver came to comprehend what the creature was.

*That's not possible!* It was the Usirtaur, a mysterious creature supposedly imprisoned in the Usirn Ruins, a complex labyrinth said to contain a treasure of some sort. *But how could Inferus have possibly bent the behemoth to do its bidding?*

The Usirtaur loomed over the female, who was still unaware of its presence. The other two figures, another female and the other a male, seemed to notice the brute, but they appeared to be paralysed with fear. Without a second thought, Xilver launched an arrow. The dart flew across the moonlight, soared down and landed on the back of the Usirtaur.

But to his surprise, the projectile seemed to barely even pierce the animal's thick skin, or maybe it had, but it just didn't seem like it did—he was too far away to determine.

The Usirtaur turned to search for the source of the dart, letting loose an angered bellow, which shook the valley below and the heavens above. Xilver saw the three human shape figures—still right behind the giant

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bull—cover their ears in pain. Then, the Usirtaur swung its enormous, heavy battleaxe down on them. In a blink of an eye, they evaded the attack with such swiftness and elegance that Xilver began to question himself whether or not they were human.

The next thing he saw was a legion of animals, ranging from squirrels to rabbits and even to snakes and cats, jump out from the forest and attack the Usirtaur. The bulky beast thrashed about, in a futile attempt to clear his space from the berserk animals.

The three human-like figures took the opportunity to flee, jumping from mountain ledge to mountain ledge with extraordinarily agile movements. When they were high enough over the valley, they ran north in a graceful, mesmerizing quickness, leaving the battlefield behind them. Once they were lost in view, the attacking animals ceased their assault on the Usirtaur and ran back towards the mountains, away from the valley. The ox-headed beast chased after them, disappearing from view.

*What in the world is going on?* Xilver's head buzzed with questions. He pushed his curiosity away for now, hoping to get answers once the battle was finished.

The Dwarves and soldiers were still engaged in combat, but Xilver noticed the soldiers begin to take a defensive formation, like a frightened turtle withdrawing back into its shell before a terrifying force. No doubt that the soldiers now feared the Dwarves. The floor of the valley was soaked with dark red blood that reflected the moonlight.

Just as Xilver nocked another arrow, the valley was filled with the sound of loud howls. The noise sent chills down his spine, freezing him in spot and unable to fire the arrow.

A creature came into view as it jumped from the eastern mountains and landed behind the squad of soldiers. It was tall, covered with brown, shaggy fur. Below its long snout, lines of sharp teeth exposed themselves as the creature barked at the Dwarves. Several more similar creatures came into view. Xilver couldn't believe it.

Formed in a tight herd behind the soldiers were Werewolves, snarling and howling at the moon.

Xilver watched with an astonished look on his face as the Werewolves hopped over the soldiers and plunged themselves towards the Dwarves with hungry looks on their faces. The short warriors soon broke formation as the Werewolves clawed and snapped their jaws at them, hoping to devour some flesh. Xilver aimed at a Werewolf and launched an arrow, but the beast, having sharp senses and excellent reflexes, caught the arrow with its claws and snapped it like a twig. *Blast it all!*

The man-wolf, like the Usirtaur, made to scan the mountains, trying to identify who shot the arrow. But its search was interrupted by another oncoming projectile, one that had been shot from the other side of the

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valley.

Xilver looked up. Several men took up positions on the mountains on the other side of the valley and fired arrows and crossbow bolts at the Werewolves and soldiers. A barrage of darts rained down on the invading army. Soldiers ducked under their shields and Werewolves dodged or caught the arrows.

Xilver didn't know where these men came from, but they were clearly not enemies of the Dwarves. He added his own arrows to the curtain of fire, catching several men off guard since his projectiles would come from the west side, while the soldiers' focus was on the archers to the east. Arrow after arrow, shaft after shaft, Xilver relentlessly released his ammo onto the army, determined to cripple them while the Dwarves recollected themselves and regained formation.

Then, the most unexpected thing happened. A loud explosion rang across the valley. Xilver felt the source of the blast come from behind him. The force sent him toppling over, and at the same time, the noise shattered his eardrums. He fell past the trees that hid him, and those down on the valley, as well as the archers, could now see him.

Xilver staggered upright, trying to maintain his balance and waiting for his senses to return. He turned around and saw that the explosion had torn his house apart. A thick cloud of smoke drifted over his house, but it soon began to fade. Some of the pine trees that had concealed his house and were unfortunate enough to be struck by the remains of his house had been bent over, the roots exposed. Debris fell off the ledge, rolling down the mountainside with many clatters and scrapes. The smoke had just cleared up enough for his house, or what remained of it, to come into view.

It was reduced to four low walls and a pile of wreckage of burnt wood and rocks, covered in soot. Small fires crackled, effectively consuming whatever flammable objects were left in his house.

Then he saw a person: a robed woman stood at the spot where the doorway once was.

Her face, which carried a mischievous look, was framed by moderately dark green hair, which then flowed down her arms and ending just above her elbows. Her eyes were the darkest shade of black Xilver had ever seen, filled with utmost dread. Her black robe was lined with jewels and had a green trim. He felt a powerful, evil aura emanate from her, in spite of her beautiful, yet terrifying face.

He stood there, perplexed at both the woman's elegance and prevailing wickedness. With her pale right hand, she drew a sword from its sheath as quickly as lightning strikes and charged at him.

Having absolutely no time to dodge or block, the flat side of the green blade struck Xilver's head from his right side. A loud *crack!* filled his ears as he fell to his left side, excruciating pain engulfing his head. His

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vision blackened and he heard only a loud ringing sound, yet he remained conscious.

He knelt at that spot, using his left hand to support his weight and his right hand to apply pressure on his bleeding head. Realizing he had dropped his bow, he used his left hand to retrieve it. Without his vision, his hand simply groped around blindly on the rough, rocky surface.

He continued like that for another while, knelt down, his hand scrambling aimlessly for his only weapon and his mind completely absent. He felt nothing. He saw only blackness. He heard only a loud, high-pitched noise coming from within his ears. He smelt only the stench of his own blood that ran down his face. And his head throbbed with unbearable pain.

Eventually, his vision started to restore and he began to hear the distorted cries of the fighters below. When the pounding pain in his head had weakened enough, Xilver made to stand upright, swaying from side to side as he did so. He looked over to the woman that had demolished his house. She was standing right at the edge of the mountain ledge, casting magic spells that erupted out of her raised palm in the form of shining, green light, dropping down to the fight below. Every time she launched a spell, Xilver felt an ominous force tugging at his soul, a most unpleasant feeling. Then it struck to him that she was a Sorceress, a magician that practices in the darkest magical arts.

She did not seem to notice his recovery. He picked up his bow hastily and silently prepared an arrow, aimed at the Sorceress' head. But just as he released it, another explosion rocked the valley. Xilver felt the ground shake and a crumbling noise that increased in volume. His arrow just missed the emerald-haired woman, flying over her right shoulder. He staggered, the quake shaking his balance, but his agility skills allowed him to remain standing upright, although the movement did make his aching head ring with pain.

The Sorceress, who noticed the attempt to shoot her, faced him and aimed her right palm at him, prepared to cast a harmful spell.

"Your existence shall no longer be sustained," she hissed in a clear, menacing tone before casting the spell.

No sooner had the first syllable of her incantation escaped her lips did the ground below her collapse. The malicious magician uttered a cry of surprise as she joined the rocks that tumbled down the mountainside.

She was gone, just as she was about to kill him. Slightly relieved, Xilver looked down to where she had fallen. There were no signs of her, only the rubble from his shack and the broken mountain ledge.

He looked over to the battle between the Dwarves and soldiers. And he gasped in apprehension.

Nearly all of the Dwarves have been defeated, either kneeling down before a soldier, who pointed the sharp end of their weapons at them, or

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lying down on the valley floor, dead. Several Werewolves were combating the few remaining Dwarves that made a last stand. Blood was all over the valley floor, as well as leaking into Clawtooth River. The archers that had appeared on the eastern mountains were gone. *The Sorceress must have killed many of the Dwarves while I was knocked down!*

Panic overtook every other emotion in Xilver. He had to flee the Brogick land, else he risked falling under the rule of King Inferus. Surely, he would be interrogated as to why a human was living alone on the Dwarven Mountains. But where would he go? He breathed hard and deep and his heart pumped rapidly. Quickly, he thought of a place. He decided to go to Medientre, as it was the only region in which he could probably journey to safely. He could go to Corren, but the mountains to the north had many tunnels leading to the Dwarf cities below; soldiers could ambush him. Not to mention that the mountains were too craggy, making it almost impossible to pass through.

Xilver ran into what remained of his house and rummaged through the debris. After a while, he had packed two items into a small bag: the book—which he was thankful that it hadn't been too damaged—and a sheathed dagger. He took a coil of long, thin, and light, but powerful rope and hung on his shoulder.

Making his way back to the edge of the ledge, he tied the rope securely onto an arrow, using magic to shrink the rope a bit—but still maintaining its strength—since it was too thick to easily tie around an arrow. He took a second to examine the battlefield once again. All of the Dwarves have fallen and were being led to the metal gates to the north, no doubt to be led inside so that the soldiers can seize control of their king.

Xilver took the roped arrow and adjusted it onto his bow. He looked over to the other side of the valley, looking for a tree that could be sturdy enough to support his weight. As he scanned the mountain range, he spotted the mountain goat he saw earlier. The goat had gained quite a height since before the battle. Beside it, Xilver saw a thick, healthy pine tree, which he shot at. The roped arrow managed to travel all the way across the valley and, as if the tree reached out and grabbed it, became wedged between two thick branches. He tugged at the rope to ensure that it was stable.

Satisfied that it can withstand his full weight, he took the other end of the rope and wrapped it around one of the pine trees that had not been knocked over by the explosion earlier. He succeeded in setting up a tightrope connecting the two sides of the valley together.

The youth unstrung his bow and placed the bowstring in his bag, which was fastened around his weight. Xilver took the wooden body part of the bow, held it over the stretch of rope and took a deep breath. *Here goes nothing*, he thought to himself as he leapt off the mountain ledge.

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Howling wind caused his hair to flail about as he glided across the valley under the tightrope, a feeling of weightlessness lifting him up. His scarf loosened itself and it fell down onto the valley.

More of Inferus' soldiers marched up the valley from the south, obviously reinforcements sent to assist in subduing the Dwarf king into the king's control.

After a couple more seconds of gliding over the lowland, the wood snapped, but not before Xilver reached the other side, landing on his feet, but also nearly falling off the perilous mountainside.

The goat, which had jumped in surprise, cried out a "Baa!" before resuming its difficult climb, its hooves clattering on the rocky mountainside.

Xilver stored the broken remains of his bow—he disliked throwing away things, even if it seems almost useless—into his bag.

The moonlight faded away behind the dark clouds, casting the land back into darkness and covering up the blood and gore that tainted the land, as if the battle had never even happened.

Silence.

A soft breeze was felt.

Stars twinkled.

It was odd. All of the sudden, all was well. The night was peaceful once more.

However, the obstructing nature still did not hide the approaching army, and Xilver was snapped back into reality. He turned and made to distance himself from the valley, heading to the northeast, his head still bleeding and aching, and his mind full of questions, which he tried to push it away.

*Hopefully, in the future, I'll find out the reasons for tonight's events.*

As he climbed down the mountain away from the valley, he heard the howls of the Werewolves once more.

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## Chapter 2: Escape from Brogick

Thin rays of sunlight streamed through the branches of the trees and fell upon Xilver's relaxed face. He was sleeping on a tall, flat rock, exhausted from the events of last night. With a silent grunt, the youth rolled over and ended up falling off the rock, landing on the damp forest grass. He woke up with a startle, thinking someone had attacked him. After realizing what had just happened, he calmed down and made his way to a nearby pool of water.

The trip to the bottom of the mountain last night was difficult and tiring. After cutting the rope to avoid leaving behind anything that someone can use to track him down, Xilver had circled the mountain he was on, descending down whenever possible, until the Törpe Valley could no longer be seen. Then, from there, he had climbed down the steep mountainside and then travelled northeast, to the province of Medientre.

Xilver looked around him. The forest was quiet, giving off a sense of peacefulness. Trees waved their branches, leaves rustling, as the wind blew by. Squirrels and other small mammals scurried through the forest grass and gathered food. Beams of light rained down, slipping past leaves and branches. Overall, the forest radiated with beauty and gave off a comforting feeling.

Xilver used the water from the pond to wash off the dried blood that caked his face. His head began to throb, like loud war drums pounding within his brain. He had quickly come to despise the Sorceress from last night. He didn't mind her destroying of his home, as he would have had to forsake it anyways. No, it was because she had given him a fatal injury that most likely needed medical attention, which Xilver could not be provided with, thus bringing excruciating pain.

He thought about her for a moment: her evilness, the twisted expression on her face, and what he felt just by being near her. *It was as if a demon was attempting to consume my soul while it is still bound to my body...*

When he saw her casting spells aimed down at the valley, she was probably killing off the Dwarves, which was probably why the Dwarves lost the battle. So, it must be obvious that King Inferus also sent her.

*But why?* thought Xilver. *Why would King Inferus suddenly decide to attack the Dwarves? The Dwarves had done nothing, and by attacking them without reason, Inferus has given them reason to oppose him.*

Five years ago, King Inferus sent a group of excavators, archaeologists, and magicians to Phoenix Peak, which was on the southeast part of the Nordeste Province. From what Xilver knew, they were apparently sent to organize a 'secret' excavation. They managed to find what they were looking for and they brought the artifact to Inferus. However, Queen Angela, the ruler of the Nordeste, discovered about the

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dig and sent a message to Inferus that, because the artifact was found on her land, it should be the property of Nordeste. Inferus refused and Angela continued to hassle the stubborn king, noting several other issues, such as how Inferus did not have permission to organize a dig on her land. The two rulers argued until it led to a war.

Because it was geographically between Nordeste and Mortyre, the province of Dragott had gotten tied into the fight. Eventually, King Thoss, ruler of Corren, decided to assist Angela. Since then, Thoss, Angela and Queen Tria, ruler of Dragott, had been at war against Inferus. It was not the first time Xilver had asked himself what the big deal was with the artifact that would lead to such a conflict. *Maybe the artifact is highly valuable and Inferus is just greedy and abusing his power.*

The neutral provinces were Focienne, the forest of Elves, Medientre, the “centre land,” and Draconic Lands, the land of Dragons. Inferus has now probably seized control of Brogick. Xilver was unsure of Twiland, however. There is no king or queen in Twiland, since it was merely the dark lands where creatures such as Werewolves dwelled. Yes, it is home to dark creatures and also the Usirtaur, or the “Bull of Usirn.” Xilver knew few about the Usirtaur, only that it is kept inside the Usirn Ruins, but he knew not of how it could have been manipulated to follow orders and serve in Inferus’ army.

These thoughts persisted as Xilver travelled northeast, bothering his mind like pests in his garden of consciousness. He stayed hidden within the forest that covered the foot of the mountains, trying to use the peacefulness of the tranquility of nature to calm him after the exhilarating events of last night.

Then, he realized that he was hungry, having not eaten for nearly twenty hours. He scanned the area for any fruit-bearing plants and spotted a blueberry bush. Gathering them, Xilver loaded his bag and ate his fill, savouring the sweet taste. Once satisfied, he pressed on forward, carrying the bag, which contained his book, dagger, a bowstring, and the blueberries. He had the dagger, which had a sapphire edge on it. He kept it with him in case he needed to defend himself, since he had no other weapon, as his bow had broken. The dagger had also been given to him by a friend in Talonne, and it held some memories of his life back then.

The book also contained sentimental values. His father had given the book to him back in Talonne before his untimely death. He had wanted Xilver to learn magic because “it is a skill that I guarantee you will need in the future.”

Xilver missed his life in Talonne ever since the soldiers ravaged it. Sometime after the war started, his parents started a rebel group fixed on overthrowing Inferus and bringing the battles to an end. With many people believing that the purpose of the war was ridiculous—the fight over the ancient artifact—the group instantly became well known. It was



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planned that the clan would expand in secret throughout Mortyre until it grew so large that King Inferus would have to put an end to all the madness.

Unfortunately, someone had let slip the intentions of the citizens of Talonne, and the news reached Inferus' ears before the group had even expanded to another city. The immoral king attacked a city in his own land, and with such a force that the city had been completely pounded into the ground and abandoned ever since. It was the same attack that killed his parents. He even remembers a distorted image of an average-looking man with messy, blond hair killing his mother with magic. He had always done his best to remember the man, hoping to encounter him in the future, fixated on bringing about his doom.

The sunlight started to turn to an orange glow as it shone through the trees from the horizon. Sunset was coming and some of the stars became visible. The air had also begun to cool down slightly, a change in temperature that was comforting to Xilver, as he was hot and tired from non-stop travelling. Soft wind brushed Xilver's face, carrying the scent of autumn leaves. More animal cries could be heard in addition to the sound of leaves crunching under Xilver's steps. *It's so peaceful, so serene, so relaxing... I wish I could just stay here.*

By the time darkness engulfed the land, a series of muffled clattering sounds were heard. It became louder and louder until it came to Xilver that it was the sound of horses. He turned, only to see movement beyond the plants. Quickly, he ducked behind a series of trees, hoping that it would be enough to hide him. The silhouette of three men on horseback came into view and halted right at the spot where Xilver had been standing no more than a few seconds ago.

He remained still and tried to suppress his tired, heavy breathing. He wondered if these were the archers that attacked Inferus' army last night or actually men of Inferus, tracking down the archers. The horses neighed and one of the men spoke.

"We should wait for them," said one of them, in a loud, terrified voice.

"No!" whispered another urgently, in a much quieter voice. "Keep your voice down, as well. We might not be alone."

"Pace yourself, Damien. The soldiers couldn't have gone this far already," replied another. "They were entering the tunnels when we left them."

"I don't want to take the risk, Valeer," the one named Damien replied. "Remember the Sorceress on that mountain? She could catch up with us in a heartbeat. Not only that, but I could have sworn that there were scouts that just missed us back there."

"Well, maybe Wyvern is right. Perhaps we should wait for them."

"Yes. We need to wait for the rest of our men," whispered Wyvern, in a much calmer voice. "We can't risk letting them caught and being

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exposed. If that happens, Inferus will definitely attack Medientre.”

“I’m well aware of that,” said Damien irritatingly. “But, we must follow Thir’s orders. We’ll wait for the others once we get out of this Dwarven land. Going back is out of the question. Trust me on this. They’ll be fine.”

There was a long pause. Xilver was listening with extreme interest and relief. He contemplated about exposing himself to these strangers, for they could be the ones who attacked Inferus’ soldiers. But, he wondered what he would say if he did reveal himself. He could try explaining who he was and why he was going to Medientre. However, they might think that he was lying and really be a scout of Inferus. Xilver decided against it and remained hidden. Finally, after the long silence, the one named Wyvern spoke.

“Fine. We’ll wait in Oer town, just like planned. It still seems wrong to leave them behind.”

“Don’t worry,” assured Valeer. “They should be able to escape with ease.”

He turned his view into the direction of Xilver’s hiding spot, staring down at it with prying interest. *Does he know that I’m here?*

“Let’s go, then.”

And with that, they rode away, headed in the same direction Xilver was going. He sighed with relief, glad that Valeer stopped the burning stare. Xilver considered what he had just heard.

*Oer town... he thought. Maybe I should go there, as well. Maybe I can confront them if I see them there and then I can know more about what happened yesterday.* It seemed perfectly sane, as it wouldn’t seem unusual meeting someone within a town, as opposed to jumping from the shadows in the middle of the forest during nighttime. Besides, he needed to stay somewhere, and Xilver knew not of any other places to go to. He had no maps, except for the detailed map of the Brogick Province, which was back in his house, probably burnt to ashes.

What Xilver didn’t get, though, was why Thir would send warriors to assist the Dwarves against the army. Xilver deduced that Thir must have now been helping Angela, Tria, and Thoss, having moved out of the neutral position.

Xilver hiked for another two hours, traversing through the thick woods before finally stopping. Owls hooted and crickets chirped as the darkness deepened and the clouds up high blocked the shining stars. Before long, he became too tired to carry on. He found a small hole, big enough for a person to sleep comfortably in. Xilver slowly drifted into the dream world as images of the events of last night kept flashing back into his mind: the evil Sorceress, the intimidating Werewolves and the large Usirtaur.

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The next day, Xilver woke up near noon. He ate some more of the blueberries he gathered yesterday, which was still perfectly ripe, and kept moving on through the Brogick Province. The forest floor was damp as dew droplets were strewn across the fallen twigs and leaves.

Before long, he once again heard the sounds of hoofs buffeting the forest floor, which interrupting his trance-like state. He searched for a place to hide, but couldn't find any. There were few plants where he was. If it were darker, he would have been able to hide pretty easily.

The galloping horses neared. He turned to run in the opposite direction he was heading, but he knew that he would still be in clear view of whoever was approaching.

Just as he darted away, however, he tripped over a pile of large branches, stacked high enough to hide him if he crouched. He must've not noticed when he was lost in deep thought. It blended in with the surroundings, but only from several feet away. The trotting sound then became dangerously close. Xilver dove behind the pile of branches, as he had no other options.

Five men on horses came into view—Xilver peered from the pile of branches. They wore steel mails and red cloaks. Xilver immediately recognized them as soldiers of Inferus. The men rode onwards, not stopping as they passed him, without a clue of his presence within the pile of wood. They seemed to be heading southwards, possibly tracking down the warriors that escaped, such as the mysterious trio Xilver saw last night.

When no more sounds could be heard except for the twitters of bird and the rustling leaves, he emerged out of his hiding spot. *That was close. Good thing the pile of branches was here.*

He did find it odd, however than such an arrangement was present here. It was clearly man-made, but he could not understand what it could be used for, or who made it.

Pushing his curiosity aside, Xilver continued his journey, more tentatively after the narrow escape. Eventually, the trees lessened and wild animals became more and more scarce. Bright light flowed in and he saw the edge of the forest, leading out into the open.

He broke into a run, his feet pounding on the soft soil, and stopped as he saw the vast, open space. Grass covered the land and wind blew across the land. Horseback riders rode over the plains a distance away. Sun was now a clear view up on the cloudless sky, casting a warm light down onto the land. He had reached the border of the Brogick Province to Medientre.

For two and a half years, Xilver was used to high mountains and thick forests. Now, he felt exposed to danger, having no geographical defences, but it was a feeling he enjoyed. Looking over to the north-eastern direction, Xilver's eye caught the small town of Oer, less than

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half a league away. He made his way out into the open plains, towards the site of civilization, the feeling of the warmth from the rays of light more intense compared to within the forest. A feeling of perpetual relief took over him as he neared the small town of Oer.

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## **Chapter 3: Lysandra Lucianna Lynn**

Xilver approached the boundaries of Oer, which was occupied by roaming guards clad in thick leather armour and what looked a bit like bascinet helms. They were armed with daggers and swords.

Xilver joined the small group of travellers and, judging by the contents of their wagons, merchants, who also made their way into the town. The guards allowed them all to pass, although they would occasionally stop a suspicious-looking character and interrogate them as well as inspect the contents of their bags, but they were all found to be clean.

He acted casual, putting up his hood to hide the wound, afflicted by the Sorceress, for the guards might not believe him if they asked him how he had attained the serious head injury. Even Xilver himself doubted some part of the story as he thought about it, even trying to make sense of it. He avoided the eyes of the guards, while still trying to remain calm and appearing guilt-free.

Completely by accident, Xilver made a brief eye contact with a rather heavy guard, who, in turn, shot him a wide-eyed suspicious look. He quickly turned his head and nearly made it into the town before the guard shouted, "Halt!"

Xilver froze on the spot, now stricken with terror as he turned to see the guard approach him. His face was stern, filled with seriousness.

He was a brutally large man, casting a shadow down onto Xilver, and he looked powerful enough to lift another human being with one arm. Xilver made sure that his hood covered his bruised skull.

"Who might you be?" demanded the guard.

"Xilver," he responded bluntly, his voice more shaky than he had expected.

"What businesses have you here at Oer?"

Xilver thought about whether he should tell the truth or lie to him. After a short contemplation, he decided to tell the truth, but keep from telling him of the battle he had witnessed and took part in.

"I'm simply here to find a place to stay," said Xilver calmly.

"Where did you come from?"

"The mountains."

The guard leaned closer. "What were you doing there?"

Xilver paused, trying to think of an alibi. He shifted his bag full of blueberries, which hung on his left shoulder, in discomfort. Then, he suddenly came up with the perfect story. "I was picking blueberries. I ran out of money a few days ago, you see, so I needed to find some food."

The guard held out his hand toward the bag and requested to search it. Xilver handed him the container with a confident look on his face as the looming guard loosened the rope that shut the mouth of the bag. Sure enough, there was a pile of blueberries that are still in good condition to eat.

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The guard was apparently still not convinced; he dipped his hand into the bag and rummaged through the contents. After a while, he withdrew the book, the sheathed dagger, the bowstring, and the two halves of his longbow. He held out the items to Xilver and demanded, "What of these? Why do you have them?"

Dauntlessly, Xilver said, "The book I have because I like reading and am trying to learn how to use magic. As with the dagger, I need a weapon to defend myself with, just like you guards do. These are mad times, you know, what with the war going on."

"What about this broken bow? It looks as if it was burnt at the middle and then snapped."

"I accidentally left the bow near the smouldering remains of a fire."

The doubtful guard narrowed his gaze on Xilver. "You do not seem to have any materials to be able to start a fire."

"I have my ways of surviving in the wilderness."

The guard looked at him tensely for about a minute. Xilver was unsure if he believed him or if he would or would not find him trustworthy enough to stay within the town. Finally, he loosened his expression and said, "I'm not sure about you... but I suppose it's safe to assume that you are harmless. You may go."

The guard deposited the contents back into the container. Taking his bag back with a sigh of relief, Xilver made his way into the town of Oer.

The streets were filled with market stalls, which sold items such as fruit, vegetables, trinkets, but mostly coal and metal items, such as daggers or armour. The scent of dirt and coal filled the air, prevailing over the faint smell of fresh fruit. After speaking with a metallurgist, Xilver learned that Oer town is built near one of the main sources of minerals in Solumithia, and there was a mining site near the south entrance of Oer.

After several minutes of wandering, it had occurred to Xilver that he really was broke, having no money on him whatsoever. He came across a pub with the name "Theo's Tavern," which had a help wanted sign on it. Xilver decided to try for a job here, as he had nothing to lose.

Upon entering the tavern, a thick, intoxicating odour jabbed into his nostrils like bitter knives. He looked at everyone else, who were drinking and chatting like normal. They sat on benches with tables or stools by the counter, where the bartender served them. The only light that illuminated the room was from four dimly lit candles on each corner of the tavern, giving an unfriendly mood.

Xilver then realized that it was the smell of alcohol that filled the air. He suppressed the urge to hurl, and he began to have second thoughts about going for a job here; Xilver could not imagine having to work in such an environment. He unattractive scent added more pain to this excruciating headache.

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*I suppose I can get used to this.* He had never drunk before, and he could not imagine himself trying to, not that he had anything against such beverages.

Xilver approached the bartender, who had dark skin, almost no hair, and was piling up dishes. Their gazes met each other. "Hello. You must be Theo," greeted Xilver.

"Aye," said Theo. "What would you like to drink?"

"Actually, sir, I am interested in working for you. You see, I just came into town, and I have no money. I saw your help wanted sign and decided to try it."

Theo tilted his head, as if Xilver had just said something intriguing. Xilver, however, half-expected this, as he did look younger than he really was. "How old are you?" said Theo in a low voice.

"I am almost eighteen, if truth be told. I know I am younger than I look."

"Do you have any experience in working in a tavern?"

"No, actually," answered Xilver. He wanted to avoid mentioning living away from civilization.

Theo stared at him for bit before saying, "Can you brew?"

"No," mumbled Xilver.

"Are you familiar with different kinds of alcohol?"

"No."

"Can you cook?"

"...No." Xilver began to lose hope.

Theo sighed in exasperation. "Is there anything you can do?"

Xilver pondered at it for a moment, and then he responded with, "I can deliver if you want."

Theo lowered his head and chuckled. "This is a tavern. We don't deliver to people. They come here."

"What about making shipments to other places? You know, you sell beer to other pubs so that it can also be sold there. Do you not have some sort of secret recipes?"

The bartender narrowed his eyes and thought for a moment. "Yes, as a matter of fact. The recipe for the Strength Stout, that only my family knows. I send them to other pubs all over Mediente so that all can enjoy my wonderful concoction." He grinned.

"There! I can do that. I like to travel." That was only half-true.

Theo paused for a moment. Xilver hoped that he would be convinced as to let him do so. "Very well, Xilver. I guess having you deliver them will give me more time to brew larger quantities. Come back tomorrow. I'll have a cargo for you to deliver to a small village south of here. You may use my horse and wagon, but trust in my words, if you do any damage to them, I will have you more than just fired, you hear?"

Not really fazed by this potential threat, Xilver nodded, trying to hide

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the fact that he still had one problem: he wouldn't get paid until he made the deliver the next day, but he needed the money right now to stay at an inn. He thanked the bartender and left the tavern, the clean air a heavenly lungful after being inside the tavern. *At least I won't be spending time in the alcoholic environment.*

He made his way deeper into the town until he came across the town central. A circular fountain stood at the middle of the abundance of commotion. This section of Oer seemed a bit more populated than the rest; people were buying all sorts of knickknacks and trinkets.

His head suddenly swirled with pain. Staggering, he leaned on a nearby stall as his head injury blurred his vision. He waited for the throbbing to subside, but he really wished he could do something about it rather than let time work its magic.

When his sight returned and his headache temporarily left, he found himself leaning on an interesting long stall that sold many interesting items. Walking up along it, he saw what appeared to be small objects—a label claimed that they were coins—in weird shapes and colours scattered all over the stall, along with several objects that looked like candles, differing in colour. He examined the queer objects; they were quite odd.

He touched one of the candles and, almost immediately, it lit up a small, red fire. Xilver jumped back in surprise, almost yelping. As soon as his hand came off contact with the candle, the fire extinguished. The owner of the stall, a rather aged man, whose face bore many wrinkles, noticed Xilver.

“Ah, I see you took interest in the Creature Chaser Candle,” rasped the old man in barely more than a whisper, yet it cut through the clamour of the crowd.

Xilver raised an eyebrow in confusion. “Creature Chaser Candle?”

“Yes. If you need to find a creature, whether it be—” the elderly man coughed twice “—a horse that you have lost, or even a magnificent Unicorn.” He gazed into the sky, lost in a trance.

Xilver waited uncomfortably as the man just stood there, staring off into space. Eventually, he lost patience and asked, “How does it work?”

The old man snapped out of his trance. Then he said in his rough voice, “You hold it in your hand and focus your heart’s—*cough*—desire for the creature. *Hak!*” The man scratched at his throat vigorously. “Ahem... Once the—*cough*—candle has located—*cough*—the creature, its flame size will—*cough*—increase as you get closer or smaller as you—*cough*—go further.” He covered his mouth as he coughed violently two more times.

“Ah, I see,” said Xilver, but he was focused on the man’s health. Does he not require medical attention? The man simply moved along his lengthy stall, and with his thing, long fingers, began arranging the other



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items that were on sale.

Xilver had just noticed that the only other person that seemed interested at the elder's wares was a woman that stood a few feet away from him, her attention on the odd pieces of "coins." She was slightly taller than Xilver and she had blond, wavy hair that ran down her side and reached below her ribs. She wore a dark-gold robe, adorned with several of the coins that, judging from their physical properties, were bought from the strange stall.

"How much is this?" she said, waving one of the coins in front of her, its shiny surface reflecting the sunlight.

She spoke in an ethereal, delicate, and somewhat lyrical voice, which Xilver found both spine tingling and somewhat soothing.

The elderly man answered, "That silver coin happens—*cough*—to be a Viking's. You can see the picture of Mjölnir etched onto it. *Cough! Cough!* It was probably left behind when Vikings left Solu—*cough*—mithia over three hundred years ago. *Cough!* I'll probably let it go for about five silver coins."

Xilver found the offer quite unfair, but the woman, without hesitation, reached into her robe pocket and withdrew not five, but a rather random amount of coins—at least eight—and placed them onto the counter. She then began to examine the Viking coin. The stall owner hastily gathered the silver coins she had paid with and deposited them in a small pouch. Xilver looked at the woman as if she was crazy.

After a while, she looked back at him questioningly with eyes that were enigmatic; she seemed to stare off into space. Xilver stirred and said, "You know, you probably just got conned. And why pay more than you need to?"

She didn't seem bothered by his sudden rudeness. In fact, she actually smiled. "Money is no object when it comes to such unique valuables."

"It probably isn't even from Vikings. He may have just said that so he can get an easy sale."

"It does have Thor's Hammer on it, so the coin must be of Viking origin of some sort. Even if it isn't, I can tell that this coin is very old and that it might be the only one of its kind in Solumithia."

"Well, aren't Vikings still roaming the seas... somewhere? There's still probably a coin like that somewhere in the world."

"Maybe," she said. "But I like to collect things like this, so I don't mind paying extra. You know what they say, 'Money can't buy happiness.'"

"Yes... That's true, although money is an essentiality in living."

"Hmm." She focused her attention on the coin again. Xilver's head started to pound again as the injury from two nights ago returned. He swayed and pressed his hand against the side of his head, but he tried not to make it noticeable. However, the woman still noticed and asked,

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“What’s wrong?”

“Oh... nothing,” mumbled Xilver, but the woman’s eyes still gleamed with curiosity. Xilver did nothing as she lifted part of his hood, exposing the dried blood. Her eyes widened for a brief moment, then returned to their bored-like state. Xilver reeled back, hiding his fracture once more. The golden-haired female scratched her cheek.

“Would you like me to heal that for you?”

Xilver was surprised at her willingness to help a total stranger, partly because of the fact that it would require a very experienced magician to perfect a healing spell, and partly because he half-expected her to pry him with questions and ask how he had gotten the injury.

“Err... sure,” answered Xilver somewhat reluctantly. “Are you able to?”

She smiled. “I wouldn’t offer if I knew that I couldn’t. Follow me.”

He followed the strange woman through the town, dodging past merchants and salesmen. He found stores and booths that displayed shiny gems that so reflected light in such a brilliant manner.

As he followed her, Xilver noticed blue smoke hovering over the air. He tracked the source of the smoke and saw a person performing magical arts as a way of entertaining the people. His acts included lighting himself on fire without being burnt and creating fireworks display, despite the fact that the sun was still shining up above.

Laughter and screams of joy were heard. This place is truly lively and, surprisingly, Xilver did not feel alienated from the community here. He assumed that it was probably because of this female who treated him with such puzzling helpfulness.

Eventually, as he followed the strange woman, less and less buildings and stalls became present. He found that the people not within the marketplace were partaking in recreational activities, such as playing musical instruments and training in archery.

She led him down the path, further and further from the marketplace, until the streets became devoid of human presence and buildings were scarce. Those that were present were abandoned. Xilver had just begun to acquire a feeling of insecurity and fear before the woman stopped before an odd-shaped house and said, “Here we are.”

They were standing in front of a building that seemed to be made out of many wooden, life-sized sculptures of birds, mainly ravens. The sculptures were carved in an array of poses, such as a falcon and an eagle gliding, both of them with their wings stretched out to its maximum wingspan. They were also painted so as to look as much as the real things, with outstanding success; at first, Xilver thought he was looking at a murder of crows and aerie of eagles diving towards him in an act of aggression. Despite the house being so weirdly shaped, it was truly a work of art and Xilver stood there, perplexed at its amazing attention to

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detail.

“Did you do all this?” he managed to ask.

“Yes, yes. It was actually quite enjoyable to sculpt and paint the birds perfectly, with some magical assistance. After I had about a few hundred, I arranged them to create a house. Did you know ravens are very, very intelligent creatures?”

“No, I...” stammered Xilver, speechless before the incredible building, “...did not... actually.” Once again, his head began to hurt. The female stepped into the doorway and gestured for Xilver to follow.

“Please step inside,” she invited kindly.

Xilver accepted and walked into the unique structure. It felt like he was going inside a cave full of birds. Once he was inside, he was just as astounded with the interior of the house as he was with the exterior. The inside walls were pretty much identical to the outside, but several of the bird sculptures supported wooden shelves with their beaks or talons. Sitting on the shelves on one side of the house were many strange looking objects Xilver saw, namely assorted coins, Creature Chaser Candles, strange works of art, and crystal balls of varying sizes and colours. On the other side of the room, the shelves held what looked like potions, herbs, and ingredients such as feathers from a raven and even a horn from a Unicorn. Opposite the entrance, there were two bookshelves that held many books, new and old. A fireplace was present between the two bookshelves. Finally, a large, square table with Dragons painted on it stood on a rug that seemed to be made out of rough, leafless vines, and it covered nearly the whole floor.

A sweet fragrance filled the air, most likely from the small flowers that grew near the fireplace. Xilver found her house strange, yet somehow tasteful. The woman faced Xilver and smiled at him.

“Have a seat,” she said, as she waved a hand over the vine-rug. The vines suddenly sprung to life and they slithered and twisted together to form a beautiful chair.

Xilver was astounded; this house, like the owner, seemed to have no limit when it comes to surprises. He sat down on the chair, relieving his sore legs, as he had just remembered that he had travelled a far distance today.

“My name is Xilver Green, by the way.”

“I’m Lysandra Lucianna Lynn. People call me Lysandra, but you can use my middle or last name if it suits you.” Lysandra rummaged through the potions shelf. “Ahhhh, here we go.”

She withdrew a small vial filled with a reddish liquid and held the container to Xilver, who then drank it. It tasted almost like water, but as the magical liquid ran down his throat, he could already feel the pain in his head rapidly subsiding. Before long, his wound has sealed itself up and he had felt better than he had in ages.

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“Wow!” He felt absolutely rejuvenated. “That worked like a charm! Thank you.”

Lysandra returned a smile and took back the empty vial and placed it back on the shelf. She once again began to run her hands through the contents of the shelf, glass bottles and vials clanging at each other and herbs rustling, and took out several items.

Held in her hands were about three different herbs, a teapot, a kettle, and several spices. “So what brings you Oer town?” she chimed as she organized the items on the table.

It took a while for Xilver to grasp what she had just asked. Should he tell the truth or lie as he did with the guard? “Well, actually, I came here because my house was... unsuitable.”

“*Arqua*,” whispered Lysandra, focusing on the empty kettle. As if by command, the kettle quickly filled up with water that just seemed to come from thin air. She returned her attention to Xilver. “Oh. What happened?”

*I guess I should tell her the truth. I mean, what harm could it do? It doesn't seem like she's a particularly dangerous person. Besides, she really has treated me with such hospitality.* “I came from the Brogick Mountains,” muttered Xilver.

Lysandra took the water-filled kettle and hung it over the fireplace. She then whispered “*Feldr*,” and the fireplace ignited, heating up the kettle. “The Dwarven lands?”

“Yes. As a matter of fact, I’ve had been living there for about two and a half years.”

Lysandra dropped two of the three herbs into the water-filled kettle and she made to sit down across Xilver. “Interesting. Why did you leave?”

Xilver hesitated for a moment and took a deep breath. “I was minding my own business when I saw an army marching up the Törpe Valley,” he started. And so he explained, with sparse detail, the events of the night before, of the battle between the Dwarves, the three human figures, the raging Usirtaur, and the snarling, nimble Werewolves. Throughout his tale, Lysandra listened with interest, only interrupting to check up on the concoction she was brewing, adding bits of spices and stirring every now and then, and even so, her attention was still on Xilver.

He found talking to her a relief from the burden that he had been carrying; he was sure that if anyone could shed some light on the subject with ease, it was this otherworldly woman. When he had just gotten to the part when the Sorceress devastated his house, Lysandra stopped him.

“Hold that thought.” She pointed to the steaming kettle. “It’s finished.”

Lysandra waved her hand towards the fireplace and the flames died out. Then, she motioned her hand for the kettle to levitate and pour the liquid into the teapot. The mixture was a dark-brown colour, like fired mud, and it flowed like water; it seemed to not even carry a scent.

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Lysandra murmured some magic words as she stirred it. At once, a ghastly smell was produced from the liquid she was brewing. *What is she making?* Xilver wondered.

“So then what happened?” urged Lysandra.

Xilver continued his story with his encounter with the Sorceress, how she maimed him, her massacre on the Dwarves, and how Xilver nearly planted an arrow on her head, if not for the explosion that knocked him out of balance and sent her tumbling down the mountain.

He concluded his narration with creating the tightrope to reach the other side of the valley and his eluding of the soldiers.

“Riveting tale,” proclaimed Lysandra. “Does else know about it?”

Xilver shook his head. “I haven’t heard a word about an attack from the denizens here. I’m sure that if they knew, they’d be talking about it. I guess Inferus doesn’t want anyone else to know about it.”

Lysandra poured some of the foul-looking liquid into a couple of teacups. She held out one to Xilver, who began to decline, but decided to accept, as to refrain from appearing rude. He held the teacup in his hands, the sickly-dark liquid an unappealing sight.

“Try it,” suggested Lysandra.

They both drank the liquid at the same time. Xilver nearly gagged as the extremely bitter-sour liquid drained down his throat. The repulsive taste was not made any better by its burning temperature, for it blistered his tongue and throat, sending hot waves of pain down into his innards. This abomination was the most unpleasant thing he had ever drank in his life; he struggled to prevent his facial expression from revealing his distaste towards the disgusting drink.

After just a tiny sip, he gasped and placed the teacup back on the table. Lysandra was staring back at him with a smile, a smile of amusement.

“No need to hide your expression,” she hummed.

“What exactly is that?” demanded Xilver, trying to sound as polite as he can.

“Flavour Changing Tea,” answered Lysandra, sounding surprisingly calm. “First sip tastes terrible, second sip is bland, and the third onwards is adjusted to satisfy your sense of taste.”

Xilver blinked, both from the drink and what Lysandra had just said. “So it gets better?”

She nodded and took another sip. “A newly brewed batch will usually need to become familiar with what one desires in terms of flavour.”

Xilver slowly picked up the teacup and reluctantly drank it again. Lysandra wasn’t lying: the tea’s flavour changed to that of water’s. He took another sip and, this time, he tasted the most delicious mixture of flavours he had ever tasted. He couldn’t quite determine the actual taste; the tea’s unusual properties hid its true flavour, as it could have been sweet, sour, spicy, bitter, or a perfect combination of them. What ever it

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was, it was heavenly, and he couldn't help but gulp down another mouthful.

"Amazing!" was all he could say.

"I'm glad you liked it," said Lysandra. "Most people feel woozy the first time they even smell its wretched pungency, and some have even fainted after drinking it, and are too afraid to try it again. Oh, how much they are missing," she sighed. She took another sip before asking: "So, you came to Oer for safety?"

Xilver had nearly forgotten what they were talking about. "Yes, but I am not so sure if the soldiers won't attack this place."

"Oh, no, they won't," assured Lysandra. "The province of Medientre is protected by a magical barrier, and each city is protected by an even stronger force. King Thrir, the ruler of Medientre, ordered for the barriers to be set up."

"Wait. If it really is that well protected, then how did I manage to cross the border from Brogick?"

"The barrier is enchanted in such a way that only those who are innocent and do not have any intention on bringing chaos to the impartial province can pass. That's you," she added, taking down another gulp of the tea.

"How do you know all this?" asked Xilver.

"I don't. I'm just assuming that's how they work."

"Well, why don't the other kings and queens do the same, so as to prevent soldiers from entering their land?"

"Oh, they do. But the barriers could be destroyed by a strong enough force. It's mainly used to block out intrusive magic, not blocking out physical entities."

"But doesn't that mean that Inferus could just as easily attack Medientre by destroying them?"

"No, I don't think he would do that. He's probably used up much of his troops to maintain his control over the Dwarves. He probably doesn't want to risk giving Thrir a reason to oppose him."

A silent pause lifted the air as they both finished the remainder of their drinks. "So how exactly is the battle between Inferus and the northern provinces faring?"

"It seems that the Celestial Alliance—Nordeste, Corren, and Dragott—are more than capable of preventing Inferus' forces from invading them."

"How, exactly?"

She stood up and grabbed a large sheet of paper off the bookshelf and unfolded it on the table. Xilver found himself looking at a map of Solumithia. Focienne was a cluster of trees between Corren and Nordeste. Corren looked like it was stuck in a corner, the mountains occupying most of the shore. Mortyre was a very large province on the southern part of Solumithia, only challenged in size by the Draconic

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Lands.

Lysandra pointed at a spot between Seliene Lake and the Draconic Lands. “This narrow piece of land is the only way Inferus’ forces can reach the northern lands. However, by what you described earlier, Inferus must be trying to reach Corren through Brogick. But I wouldn’t worry too much. The mountains north of the valley are almost obstructed and provide no safe route. They may be able to access Corren from underground, but I am not too sure.”

“I have a question... about Thrir.” Xilver paused for a moment. “You said that King Thrir is impartial, that he isn’t taking either sides. Well, the story I told you, about how the soldiers defeated the Dwarves, and how there were archer on the other side of the valley... they were sent by Thrir.”

Lysandra’s eyes widened with interest. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I even saw them on horseback, fleeing towards this very town. They specifically said that they couldn’t stay behind because it would be disobeying Thrir’s orders.”

“Now this is interesting. Perhaps Thrir has plans to join the Alliance?”

“I thought that, too. But, would we not have heard of it by now?”

“Maybe it’s supposed to be a secret,” she gasped enthusiastically, smiling like a small child. “After all, Thrir’s men did witness the attack, and they should be in this town by now. Since no one else still knows, they must have been told to keep the event a secret.”

“But if that’s true, then, if Inferus finds out, wouldn’t he have reason to attack Medientre?”

“Hmm, possibly.”

“Just when I thought it would be safe here...” mumbled Xilver to himself, making sure that Lysandra couldn’t hear him.

She doesn’t even seem to be fazed from the sudden revelation that Medientre could possibly lose its position as a safe haven from the war. Lysandra poured herself another cup of the odd tea. She offered Xilver some more, but he politely declined. His attention was on the possibility that a squad of soldiers could possibly attack Oer.

One thing that intrigued him was how Thrir could have known that an attack was to take place within Brogick that very night. What if Thrir is truly allied with Inferus? Maybe Inferus told Thrir of his plan to attack the Dwarves so that Thrir can send his own soldiers to “assist” the Dwarves, but really be just trying to earn the false trust of the Celestial Alliance? In an attempt to free his mind of worries, he asked Lysandra, “What exactly is the artifact that started the war?”

Lysandra put down her teacup. “I’m not so sure. Although, it probably is of great importance, for no ruler would risk losing his status as king or queen, unless he or she found a way to secure his or her power. Then again, things such as vengeance, desire for utmost power, greed and

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many, many more can easily corrupt humans.”

“So you’re saying that Inferus has been succumbed by insanity?”

“I wouldn’t say insanity. For a simple item that can throw a wonderful land like Solumithia into a storm of utter chaos and warfare, there must be good reason for his actions. Or, at least, a sensible reason.”

Xilver cringed, slightly frightened at what abomination could cause such a catastrophe.

“I can feel your fear, Xilver,” whispered Lysandra. “But I wouldn’t worry if I were you.”

“Why not?”

“Because you shouldn’t fear Inferus. The only ones you should fear are those who are capable of taking away everything that matters to you. And Inferus never leaves his throne. Even the soldiers can’t possibly take away everything that you hold dear.”

Xilver took a moment in speechlessness to marvel at her words of wisdom. He glanced around the house, seeing birds that seemed to soar weightlessly no matter where he looked. In an attempt to lighten the mood, he asked: “So, you seem to like birds, do you?”

Lysandra’s expression changed from ambiguous to excitement, but she still spoke ever so calmly in her chiming tone. “Oh, yes! I love avian creatures. How they soar above us through the air, flying on wings of hope and freedom. Have you heard of Phoenixes?”

“Indeed, I have,” began Xilver slowly. Everyone knew about the fabled Phoenixes, of their bold flamboyancy and their renowned ability to spread peace like a sweeping contagious virus.

“Fiery birds that blaze with the brightness of a thousand suns. I have spent many of my time searching for this wonder.”

“Any luck?” Xilver decided to go along. She was very helpful to him and she had mended his head injury that might have taken ages to recover from. Although he didn’t totally believe in the existence of Phoenixes, he found nothing odd of her having faith in them, which was stranger still because he only knew her for only a few hours, yet it was as if they were long-time friends.

“No, unfortunately. But that’s okay. It’s much fun searching for them. Did you know that Phoenixes are a perfect example of the circle of life?”

“The circle of life?” repeated Xilver.

“Yes. When Phoenixes die, or are close to, they can be cremated. In doing so, they are revived to full health.”

“If they are that immortal, then why is it that no one can find them?”

“Well, I’ve heard that the cremation requires a special type of wood. I’m not sure what it is, but I can guess that such a tree is scarcely found, else Phoenixes wouldn’t be as hard to find.”

Xilver shuffled in his seat in discomfort. “Has anyone ever helped you look for said birds?” he asked tentatively.



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“No. Many people don’t believe me. But, I always say: ‘Anything can exist as long as there are those who keep their faith in them.’”

“And what are their feelings towards that?”

“They call me names such as ‘Lysandra *Lunatic Ludicrous* Lynn,’ the ‘Psychotic Phoenix Person,’ or just address me as the crazy Witch.”

Xilver felt a twinge of sympathy for her. Although Lysandra seems perfectly fine and pays no heed of what others think of her, Xilver regretted his boorish behaviour when he spoke to her before in an unmannered tone about something as insignificant as a Viking coin. As if she had felt his emotions, Lysandra spoke.

“It’s quite all right. I find it rather humorous, actually. Besides, you can’t change other people’s feelings towards certain people or things.”

A screech from a hawk resonated throughout the room, which startled Xilver. He turned to the source of the sound. Perched above the doorway was a hawk flapping its wings and screeching once more. Then, it became still as it reverted back to its wooden form, holding its wingspan out gracefully. “Wow, it’s already nightfall?” said Lysandra.

“Really?” croaked Xilver, unable to find his voice after such an unexpected occurrence.

“Definitely. I set that eagle to alert me when it is about eight hours past noon.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s when they come out. You know, Bunyips. Their rare tusks are used for very special potions.”

“Excuse me, but umm... What are Bunyips?”

“They are creatures with dog-like faces, slender horse’s body, dark fur, flippers and, of course, long tusks. They live near water, such as swamps, you see, and there just so happens to be one just west of here.”

*She believes in everything*, thought Xilver. He admired her for that. “So I guess I should be going, then.”

“If you please. I’ll see you tomorrow, then, I suppose. Ooh, by the way, if you’re looking for an inn, go to the Moonlit Night sky Inn near Theo’s Tavern. Here.” She removed about six gold coins from her pocket and handed them to Xilver. “This can get you about five night’s stay there.”

Xilver was surprised. “How did—”

“I know that you needed money?” she interrupted. “Lucky guess.”

Xilver hesitantly accepted the money, bewildered at her kindness once more. He made his way out of the house, leaving Lysandra packing several items for a trip to the swamp.

As he retraced his steps back to Theo’s, he kept thinking of his encounter with Lysandra. How could people mistake her for a crazy person when she’s that nice? Then again, humans tend to judge others before getting to know them. But he would agree with the group of

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people who see her as demented. She does believe in myths and even spends time looking for such creatures and she happens to have weird tastes in trinkets and decoration.

Xilver spotted the Moonlit Nightsky Inn. He also saw that very few people were present at the marketplace, and those that did stay were merely engaged in deep conversation and playing games such as chess.

The whole town was blanketed in a soft, bluish light, and the skies shone with the many emerging stars. Orange glows of light shone through the windows of houses, adding to the tranquility of the town.

Upon entering the inn, he went over to the check-in desk and ordered a room. After receiving the key, he went up to his room.

The room was quite large. In it was a bed, a desk, a couple of wooden chairs, and a cupboard, which contained several fruits. Xilver washed up using the water-filled rock basin.

Cleaned and groomed, he dropped his bag on the desk. He lay down on the bed, a very comfortable fluffiness, but he found himself unable to sleep, possibly because he couldn't accept the fact that he was now safe from the war. His discussion with Lysandra made him worry. What if Thir really is going to take sides with the Celestial Alliance? Will Inferus attack this town once he finds out?

In an attempt to free his mind from these thoughts, he sat down on the chair in front of the desk. Removing his book from the bag, as well as emptying the blueberries, which had begun to lose its ripeness, he read and indulged his thirst for relaxation by taking in all the knowledge of magic the tome had to offer.

A fantasy adventure story for all ages, especially teenagers.

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