



CHRISTOPHER
LAPIDES

IDENTITY

HERITAGE LOST
BOOK I

“What’s going on?” Jonas asked with concern. He took a few steps back. “Who are you people and who was that man that violated these books?”

Mileena calmly approached him and she briefly told him about their past, who they were and who the man might be. Jonas’s face changed from concern to outright fear. Evil tyrants? Cursed barbarians? It was interesting to say the least, but he didn’t want it to threaten his library.

“Could that man still be here?” he asked, eyes suddenly searching the shadows.

“I doubt it,” Mileena said. “He’s probably far from here.” That seemed to calm the man slightly. Mileena then gently put her hands on his shoulders.

“I think he wiped your memory. He didn’t want you to remember he was here.” She looked at Callobus. “He knew we were coming.”

Just then, Callobus took a step back. In one swift motion, he withdrew Dragonsbane and readied the large sword.

“What’s happening?” Jonas shouted. His fear turned to terror.

“Get between us!” Mileena said, pushing the man back. Callobus had sensed something and she knew to react without question. Then the lights went out and the room was cast into darkness. Mileena quickly cast a spell and the gem on her staff burst into light.

It was dead silent with hundreds of shadows cast on the walls by the furniture and bookcases. Then, the shadows started to move.

BOOKS BY CHRISTOPHER LAPIDES

THE SLAYER SERIES

Dragons Plight

Town Shadows

Kingdoms Peril

HERITAGE LOST

Identity

Lineage

March 2012

Destiny

November 2012

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For the fans.
Thank you for taking a chance on me.
Hope you enjoy the ride.

PROLOGUE

The wind howled, blowing snow and ice into his eyes despite the hood pulled tight around his face. He squinted against the wind, wiped the freezing spray away and continued. He took another step forward and, as before, his foot sunk into the snow. Though he was dressed head to toe in wolf and deer hide, the cold easily penetrated the thick clothing. The barbarian shook off the feeling and kept walking, for to stop was to die. The White Rock Mountains did not care who or what you were. They did not forgive weakness nor did they pity the tired. Those without sufficient strength perished on the rocky slopes. That will not be me, the large man promised. I will not die to become some creature's meal. So regardless of the freezing pain and stinging bite of the wind, he trudged onward up the mountain.

Steep inclines, rocky slopes and treacherous paths made up much of the White Rock Mountains. There were a few trails that had been used many generations ago, but those had long ago been lost to time or, at the moment, were covered with snow. Those that chose to make their way through the mountains were either foolish or courageous and many died, discounting the latter. Black rock peaked through deep snowbanks but most of the mountains were nothing but walls of white. Only during the summer season, when the snow fell lightly, could one tell where the rock ended and the sky began. As the lone barbarian worked through the snow, the hazards of scaling the mountains were apparent and with a snowstorm raging, the danger increased tenfold.

He did what he could to keep the wind from blinding him, but it was like trying to shoot an arrow with no bow. Though he had scaled these mountains many times, never had he done so when nature was so angry. It seemed the gods themselves were trying to push him back down to the Crystal Plains, the

place that had been his home for many years. But he could not go back to that land. He could not go back to his people. He was an outcast and the mountains were the only place he could dwell.

He paused as he reached another plateau and looked back the way he had come. A curtain of white prevented him from seeing anything. The indentions he left in the snow filled as soon as he moved. He looked up toward to sky, but could see nothing but snow and ice. There could be no other place in Terrial that was more desolate then where he stood now. The barbarian pulled his cloak tighter, turned and moved on.

The snowstorm sent a sudden gust of wind from over the next hill. He heard it coming but could do nothing but brace himself. It slammed into him with the force of charging stag, sending him tumbling down the way he had come. A shout of frustration escaped his lips. He slammed into rocks and stones, rolled over a small mound and fell into a shallow hole. Pain in his leg told him that he might have broken something. For a split second, he considered turning around and finding refuge closer to the plains, but shook the thought away. The mountains would provide shelter and a better chance of survival than the openness of the plains, where other tribes and vile creatures roamed freely. There was no going back. He had been banished and would never be welcomed near the tribe again.

The snow quickly accumulated on his body, so he sat up and brushed himself off. Of all the times to be banished, he thought to himself, it had to be during one of the worst snowstorms he had ever seen. He would rather be sitting by a fire, with the men of his tribe, sharing stories of conquest and glory. How he longed to be sharing mead with his tribesmen, toasting to a successful kill. He remembered the wind in his hair as he ran across the Crystal Plains, chasing the large stags during the Great Hunt. The thrill of bringing one of those magnificent beasts down and celebrating with his fellow hunters was something he would never forget. But those days were gone, taken from him because of what he had become.

He picked himself up and shook those memories from his mind. To dwell on what used to be was foolish. Now was the time to focus on the present, to come to terms with his fate and find a new destiny. But what destiny could he have, when he could not even control himself?

He took a step forward and almost collapsed when pain rushed up his leg. The fall had done more damage then he had originally thought. He leaned back and saw a shard of stone sticking into his thigh. With a grimace, he yanked it out and did his best to stem the flood of blood. Wind rushed into the tear in his pants and the cold clung to his skin and spread to his lower extremities. The

entire side of his pants was coated in blood. The scent would bring unwanted attention and now that he was wounded, his chances of survival had lessened. Creatures that made their home in the mountains made short work of wounded animals.

The man took a deep breath. The cold air stung his lungs. He took the large sword from around his back and leaned on it like a crutch. He leaned back. A gleam then caught his eye, turning his head toward the long blade, a blade almost as tall as he was.

For just a brief moment, he considered taking Goldedge, the sword that he had used to kill countless creatures—man and monster alike—and ending his life. It would be quick, he said to himself. The magical greatsword would easily slice through his flesh. The thin layer of gold that lined the edge of the blade made it incredibly sharp. He would hardly have to apply any pressure to open his throat.

No! he thought to himself, shoving away the disgraceful image of the blade cutting through his chest. Dying in battle was the way of his people, the way of the tribes. To take one's life was dishonorable. Bond, the god of war, would never accept him in the afterlife. His soul would fade away into nothingness. But he was not one of the tribe anymore. Would Bond take him anyway?

“This is all your fault!” he yelled into the wind, frustration and anger clear in his deep voice. “Damn sorceress wench!”

His anger built at the thought of what the woman had done to him. Then he felt something creeping around the corners of his mind, something struggling to take hold. He quickly calmed himself and after a few moments, the feeling went away. The man realized that cursing the woman that had brought about his current predicament would do nothing to heal his leg and only make the situation worse. To survive and carry on, he would have to calm himself and think clearly.

He placed Goldedge on the ground and searched through his pack. He pulled out two torches and went to work, carving them into thick boards that could brace his leg. Because of the cold, he could not adequately get to the wound, so he just wrapped bandages around the bloody area. Then he took rope and managed to splint his leg with the wood from the torches. After testing his leg's strength, he managed to climb out of the hole and continued up the mountain.

Blood continued to seep through his clothes. He could feel it start to leak into the bandages. The pain also became worse. How ironic, he thought to himself. He had been wounded by dragons and lived, yet a simple injury from a few rocks could bring him down for he was not in the proper environment to

tend to the wound. He needed to find shelter from the cold.

After many pain-filled climbs, he came to a large opening in the mountain surface. He was so relieved to find a cave that he never checked to see if it was inhabited. He just went in and collapsed to the ground in exhaustion.

Sleep crept into the edges of his mind but he knew he had to tend to his wound if he wanted to see another day. The man set his pack on the ground and went to work.

Every child born into the harsh wilds of the plains quickly learned to take care of their injuries. Though the tribes took care of their own, hunters were often away for days and had to rely on their skills and prowess to survive the environment. The barbarian knew well enough how to take care of himself. It was just being able to take the time to do so that was the problem. In the heat of battle or in the midst of a snowstorm, one pause could be fatal. Now that he had shelter, it should not be a problem, but nature had other plans.

As he tore his pants to get to the wound, he heard shuffling deeper in the cave. He quickly realized that something else had already claimed this place. He tried to work fast but the noise was coming closer. He grabbed hold of the wall and pulled himself up. Pain coursed through his leg as he put weight on it. He looked down and saw the puncture was deeper than he thought, but he could no longer worry about the injury.

Goldedge came up. The barbarian did his best to stay balanced but it was difficult with only one good leg. If he would die, then so be it, but he would do so on his feet. Regardless of his banishment, Bond would see he had fought like a warrior and welcome his soul into the heavens.

A small formed appeared from around the corner. It was about three feet tall, with white hair covering its entire body. It walked on two legs, much like a human, and had two arms. Its hands, both of which gripped the wall in uncertainty, ended in short black claws. Black eyes stared at the large man in front of it, studying the unfamiliar form. It sniffed the air and opened its mouth in what the man could only call a yawn. He saw sharp teeth in that mouth and gripped his sword tightly.

The young yeti took another step forward. The barbarian readied his sword, intent on cutting the small creature down. He had killed many of the wicked beasts and knew well enough that where there was one, there would be others. He had to kill this one quickly and prepare for any more that may be about.

As the creature took another step, the warrior readied to spring, but the pain in his leg held him steady. He would have to wait for the thing to come to him, but as he prepared to end its life, a feeling of guilt suddenly surged through him and curled around his heart.

The creature was just a child. Wasn't killing the young the reason he was where he was now? What would happen to him if he repeated mistakes of the past? The young yeti wasn't even threatening violence. It was just curious.

No! he screamed in his head as the yeti came even closer, now just a few paces from him. This thing will grow. It will become an adult. It could kill some of your tribe! Better to kill it now and end the threat.

The barbarian's arms shook as he struggled with this decision. Every bone in his body yelled at him to swing, to end the life of this creature before it became a threat. But fear, a sensation he had not felt in a long time, entered his heart and held him steady. What is wrong with me?! he screamed in his mind. You have killed dozens of these foul beasts. The creature was so close now it could reach out and touch him. The barbarian silently cursed himself for being a coward.

Goldedge slowly came down. The yeti sprang back, but did not run. The barbarian held his hand out in a friendly gesture. The creature came forward and sniffed his hand. Then it licked him. He drew his hand back, but stopped and raised it over the yeti's head. The creature did not run. Then the barbarian—a man who had slayed countless monsters, men and woman, giants and dragons—petted the yeti as he would a dog.

The hair was soft, softer than a wolf's coat. It also felt warm. The yeti actually leaned into the man's hand, rubbing its head back and forth. The noise that came from the thing then wasn't a malicious growl, but a noise that indicated comfort. A smile suddenly came to the man's face.

A low growl broke the joyous moment. The barbarian looked up and saw an adult yeti, all eight feet of it, peering at him from around the corner. He quickly took his hand away and gripped Goldedge in both hands. The young yeti shied away and ran back toward the adult. The large yeti then shoved it around the corner and out of sight. Then it took a threatening step forward.

"I want no quarrel with you," the barbarian said. Truly he didn't. Just a few weeks ago, he would have charged the creature, letting out a mighty war cry as he cut it down. Now he wanted to just rest, to be left alone to regain his strength and think on the uncertainty that had become his life.

His voice seemed to only anger the yeti. It growled louder and shook its head, a gesture that the barbarian knew meant it was growing aggressive. It also showed its teeth, displaying sharp canines that could easily slice through flesh. He backed up a step but grimaced as he put his full weight on his wounded leg. More blood flowed down his leg and pooled around his foot. The yeti growled again, this time eyeing the small bloody pool in hunger. It took another step forward. The barbarian readied himself for the inevitable. His seven and a half

foot frame was more than a match for this opponent and with his battle skills he knew he could kill it quickly. Then three more of the large beasts appeared from around the corner.

The barbarian did not want this fight. He only wanted to tend to his wound, rest and be gone, but the fates had decided differently. He would have to fight, and when that happened, he knew he would once again lose control.

“Please,” he managed to say, fearing what he was about to do.

The first creature lunged, three inch claws extended to slice into human flesh. The barbarian reacted on instinct and turned to the side, but pain raced through his leg, making him slow. Luck managed to be with him for the creature’s claws just missed. Goldedge came out and around, opening a large wound on the yeti’s back, spilling blood and causing it to recoil.

“Stop this,” the barbarian pleaded, but already he felt the adrenaline pumping through his veins, dulling the pain in his leg.

“Go! Leave me be!” But the yetis were not listening. The three at the other end of the cave charged.

The barbarian shouted in anger and braced himself, for the wound in his leg did not allow him to move quickly. The first one that reached him went for his face. He leaned back and swung up, almost taking the creature’s arm. Instead, the delayed swing sliced into its shoulder. It howled in agony but turned for another go. The barbarian tried to move back to avoid the others but could not. They slammed into him, driving him back toward the cave’s opening.

He hit the ground, banging his head against the stone. His vision swam but then it suddenly cleared as sharp claws dug into his side. He grunted in pain and heaved with all his might. His large muscles bugled and one of the creatures was thrown to the side. The other continued to claw and bite at him. He tried to use Goldedge but they were too close and he lost his grip. Anger flooded his mind.

“NO!” he screamed. The yetis thought his scream was because of what they were doing to him, but this was a shout of anguish. This was a shout of fear and heartache for the man was quickly changing.

He growled like a wild animal as his vision was suddenly bathed in red. His muscles bulged as blood and adrenaline flooded his veins. He grew in size and bulk, becoming stronger. The clothes he wore expanded to the point of tearing. All thought and feeling left his mind. The pain in his leg no longer bothered him. The wound in his side no longer mattered. All he wanted was the blood of the creatures around him. He was a machine and killing was his job.

Claws racked his chest but failed to penetrate the thick armor he wore

underneath his clothes. He roared like an ice lion and rammed his head into the face of one of the yetis that came forward to bite him. The creature's face shattered, spraying blood all over. Its head snapped back and it rolled to the side. The barbarian then reached and grabbed the arm of another whose claws had cut him. He squeezed and felt his hand collapse the bone in the yeti's arm. It yelped and went to get off him, but he held on and twisted. The hairy forearm popped out of joint and the beast howled in pain. With only one left on top of him, the barbarian heaved. The creature flew into the wall with such force, the stone behind it cracked. It fell to the ground, struggling to breathe.

The first yeti that attacked was slowly creeping back into battle, behind the barbarian who was raising to his feet, showing no indication that he was wounded. Before it reached its intended target, the man turned and charged, screaming in anger. He slammed into the beast, lifting it from its feet and sending both flying into the snow outside the cave. The yeti screamed in pain as rock cut into its back when they hit the ground. The barbarian answered with a shout of his own and started pounding on the yeti's head. In just a few hits, the creature's head was nothing but a bloody mess of bone and brain matter. Its arms hung limp at its side.

The barbarian then turned to see the other two yetis charging him—the first one he had wounded in the back and the other with the dislocated arm. He met them with bloodied fists.

The three behemoths collided in a thunderous boom, shaking the very ground at their feet. The yetis had hoped to force their prey to the ground, but moving the enraged barbarian was like trying to move a wall of stone. Unfortunate for them, this wall of stone was mobile.

With a shout of pure rage, the barbarian wrapped his large arms around each beast, grabbed hold of the white, shaggy hair and lifted the over four hundred pound creatures from their feet. The air was blasted from their lungs as they were carried back into the cave and slammed to the ground. One of them managed to dig its claws into the barbarian's back, but the man didn't even notice. He just rose up, lifted both fists and slammed them into each creature's chest. There was a resounding crack and one of the creatures spit blood. He then rolled to the side as the other one tried to bring its claws down on his chest. As he rolled, he moved over something hard and cold. When he turned his head, he saw it was Goldedge. One of the yetis saw this and tried to leap at the man, to stop him from regaining the dangerous weapon. The beast wasn't even close.

With impossible speed, the barbarian scooped up his sword and rammed it into the leaping creature. The blade tore through the yeti's chest, showering

the ground with hot, steaming blood. The creature managed a single croak then slid off the sword. Its body hit with a thud, landing next to the yeti whose face had been destroyed earlier in the battle. The barbarian looked down and saw that it still lived, holding its face and writhing in pain. One quick swing ended its suffering for good.

Seeing its companions run through, the remaining yeti wanted no more of the battle. Holding its dislocated arm, it went to retreat, but the large man would not let his prey leave. Nothing would escape his wrath. He wanted blood. He wanted death!

He screamed in rage and leaped at the creature. It was caught off guard by the sudden burst of speed and sound and stumbled in panic. The barbarian thrust his weapon forward so hard that the yeti was lifted off the ground and slammed into the wall. Goldedge went through easily, but the barbarian continued to lean in, regardless of the rock wall at the yeti's back. The blade slammed into the stone and, despite its craftsmanship and strength, snapped as if it was made of wood. The yeti cried out in pain and fear. It held on for a few breaths then the barbarian tore what was left of his weapon up and out, tearing the yeti's chest to pieces and showering him in gore. The body dropped to the floor.

The man turned, searching for other prey, but there was nothing else. They were all dead. Then his anger slowly started to flow from his body. He felt his heart slow to normal and the adrenaline leave his veins, but suddenly, he felt a tingling on the back of his neck. Something was coming up from behind him. The special ability to sense danger had saved his life so many times in the past that even through his rage he knew to heed the warning.

Adrenaline shot into his veins in one final surge of strength and anger. He twisted and swung his broken sword around. The snapped end met resistance and he heard a yelp of pain. Blood splattered on the wall. He steadied himself and prepared to attack again, but the small amount of sanity that remained in his mind registered the small form in front of him.

The young yeti, the one he had patted on the head, the one that had actually warmed up to him, stood in silent shock. Its arms tried to rise to clutch at the wound in its neck, but had no strength. Blood flooded down its chest and turned its white fur crimson. It managed only a gurgle then collapsed to the ground.

The anger and rage suddenly snapped from his mind and body. His muscles shrank and his mind came back to him. Then the exhaustion set in. He tried to take a step forward, to cradle the small creature, but he only collapsed to the cold, hard ground.

Sweat and blood covered him, most of it from the yetis. He took in deep gulps of air, trying to get his body to heal. It felt like a mountain had fallen on him. Never had he felt so completely drained. All he wanted to do was fall into sleep, then wake up from this terrible nightmare. He could hardly lift his arms, but he managed to turn his head and look at the small creature. Its neck was sliced open and its dead, black eyes stared at him in horror and fear. The guilt and shame he felt was like nothing he had ever experienced, and it crushed him.

“What have I done?” he whispered to himself. “Damn you,” he said, referring to both himself and the woman that had cursed him. I am a monster. He turned his head and saw his sword.

The blade had snapped cleanly, as if it was sheared by the gods themselves. Goldedge had been his weapon since he was nine, barely a man. It had served him well and saved his life on many occasions. He just lay still in shock for he did not think it was possible to break the weapon. The runes etched into the blade and the grip was supposed to make it indestructible. But his anger had broken the blade, destroying the last thing that still connected him to his tribe and to his past. Now he was truly an outcast. He closed his eyes and waited for sleep and, hopefully, death to take him. He could no longer live with what he was.

Thron.

His eyes snapped open. He looked all around but saw that he was alone. Painfully, he leaned up and looked outside. Only the wind blew by the cave’s entrance. Not a soul was near.

Thron.

The word echoed in his head. This time he realized it was spoken in his mind and not from someone near him. Have I lost my mind as well? he thought.

No, came the voice again, answering his question.

He was startled by the response and fell back to the ground. Pain racked his head as he bumped it on the stone. His body was cold, and getting colder. He realized that if he did not get up, bind his wounds and start a fire, he would die. But did he really want to survive?

You must, said the voice again.

“Who are you?” Thron asked, speaking aloud.

Come to me, barbarian. You are summoned.

Thron’s eyes widened. He now recognized the voice. Even if he hadn’t, there was only one being that summoned the barbarians and a summons was not to be ignored by any in the tribe. They would stop battles, cancel hunts and stall celebrations if she called to them. That was the way it had been in the

tribes for generations. But he was not of the tribes anymore. Could he still go to the Mystic?

Yes, the voiced replied. Heal, Thron. Then come to me.

For some reason, Thron knew the connection was closed. He lay on the ground for many moments afterwards, wondering why the Mystic would summon him.

The Mystic was an ancient being that lived on Blade Peak, the highest point of the White Rock Mountains, about a day's journey from where he was now. The storm must have messed with his sense of direction because he had not even realized he was so close to where she resided. He had actually hoped to avoid the area completely, but some twist of fate had intervened. Any barbarians of the tribes who sought knowledge, had questions or needed guidance went to see the Mystic, but they had to survive the journey first. If successful, they returned to the tribes surer of themselves and stronger in soul and spirit. If they failed, they were never seen again. Once a year, before the Great Hunt, leaders from each tribe would visit her, hoping to gain assurance that the hunt would be successful. Those journeys were always made on the onset of summer, assuring success. Thron was a part of those journeys in the past, so he knew where he had to go, but he wasn't sure he could make it, but he had to try. The Mystic had summoned him, a rare occasion. Usually she sent messengers in the form of an animal, but to be personally summoned?! Thron had never heard of such a thing and he was not about to ignore her. Now the only question he had was why.

After what seemed like hours and after his exhaustion had worn off, he picked himself off the ground and went about mending his wounds. His fingers hurt and his muscles still throbbed, but he managed to eat, which helped build his strength. As night fell, he had regained enough strength to build a fire.

The stench of the dead yetis filled his nostrils soon after the flames had started. He piled the bodies together and started to skin them, for he knew he would need the thick fur where he was going. The young yeti he separated from the group. He actually managed to gather enough stones to bury the poor creature. He stood over the grave for many moments, regretting what he had done. Nothing can change it, he told himself after a short time. After that, he lay down near the fire and lost himself in sleep.

His dreams were troubling that night. He kept seeing the young yeti's horrified face as he sliced through its neck. Then the face changed to one of his tribe. It kept changing all night long, to different tribesmen. He awoke with a shout, clutching at his throat when the face turned into his own, as the sword sliced through his neck. He managed to fall back asleep, but it was restless.

The storm disappeared with the rising sun. Thron set out just after sunrise and made his way across the mountains. It was slow going for his wounds still hurt and every step brought a stab of pain to his muscles, but he went on, determined to find out if the Mystic would bring him hope or despair.

If anyone could cure him of his ailment, it was the Mystic. She had been alive for centuries, was all knowing and almost as wise as the gods themselves. He held hope that she had summoned him to cure his curse and send him back to his people to seek greater glory and conquest. After his return, he would bare no ill will toward his tribe for turning him away. He probably would have done the same to anyone afflicted as he was. It was too dangerous to have him around, but he hoped the Mystic would right the situation. The Wyrms Fists were the strongest of the tribes when he was chieftain and would be so again when he returned.

But what if she had summoned him for punishment? Could he be walking to his death or something worse? Whatever it was, he was ready. He would either die like a man, on his feet and facing his destiny, or return to his tribe to bring them to greater glory.

The journey took longer than he expected and Thron had to scramble to find shelter as night fell. He managed to locate a shallow cave and took cover for the night. If not for the furs of the yetis, he probably would have frozen to death. The nightmares had lessened but he still had little rest. As the sun rose, he took to the mountain again. It was only an hour before he saw Blade Peak.

It rose from the mountain like a blade bursting through flesh. The stone at the base of the peak jutted up and out, standing in what looked like a frozen explosion. The peak itself ended in a sharp point, looking like the end of a narrow sword. Snow covered every inch of the peak and continued to fall, gathering at the base in large mounds. Thron was always amazed at the sight, thinking that nothing in nature could have caused such a wonder. Some ancient god of the earth had to have thrust his sword through the world, aiming for the heavens. And near the very top sat a large cave: the home of the Mystic.

Thron stared at the opening, just barely a speck from this distance, for many moments before moving on. What would become of him? Why was he summoned? Can I be cured? Each step brought another question to his mind. By the time he reached the bottom of Blade Peak, he had so many questions rolling around in his mind he had forgotten about the pain in his body. It was so cold at this height that the chill had all but numbed him.

He began his ascent up the steep slope. It was harder and more exhausting than he remembered and he almost fell on more than one occasion. You are already growing soft, he told himself. Being away from the tribe is making

you weak.

He growled a deep throaty growl and pulled himself higher, determined to prove to himself that he was not weak. No matter where he was, he was still strong. He was a leader and chieftain among men, a warrior who had killed dragons, arctic worms and other creatures that would make normal men run in terror. He had looked death straight in the eye and not blinked. Nothing could break him, not even the curse that threatened to consume his mind.

His hand found flat ground and he pulled himself up. Warm air drifted against his skin as he faced the large opening. He stood at the entrance and peered inside.

It was dark, darker and more foreboding than he remembered. He took a few steps forward to have his eyes adjust to the darkness. A shudder ran through him as warm air pushed the cold from his bones. It was as if a wall kept the cold air and wind from entering the cave. He actually warmed so quickly that he had to shed the yeti furs and a few layers of clothing. Another shiver went through him involuntarily because he knew he had entered a lair thick with magic. Though his people did not look favorably upon magic or spells, even shunned those outsiders that used them, this was the one place that it was tolerated. Whatever enchantment had pushed away the cold was also tolerated, and welcomed. The Mystic was the only being in all the surrounding lands that used the mystical arts. Since Thron had been cursed by a being of magic, perhaps another could undo what had been done.

He left what clothing he shed in a pile just inside the cave and made his way forward. The walls were rough and uncut, but he saw a few places where it looked like someone had started to chisel out small alcoves but stopped for some unknown reason. The floors were in much the same condition but were a little smoother. Thron looked up and noticed the ceiling was fifteen to twenty feet high but looked like it sloped down as he moved further in.

The path curved up ahead and he saw a low, orange light, like the flickering of flames. He heard the crackling of a fire, confirming his thoughts. You've done this a dozen times, he told himself. Why so cautious? Thron was unsure why he was full of trepidation. He had visited the Mystic many times when he was chieftain but he had never been as worried as he was now. He felt like a child, going out for the hunt for the first time. He took a deep breath to calm himself and peered around the corner.

It was a large circular chamber. In the very center of the floor was a wide fire pit, full of wood and black rock. The fire that burned was low but filled the room with light and warmth. Small rocks, medium-size boulders and even bones littered the ground. A pile of the black rock lay to Thron's right, along

with a pile of wood. Next to that was an opening that continued further into the cave. On the other side was a stone shelf carved directly from the wall. On it sat many glass jars filled with strange colored liquids. Odd colored stones, clay bowls filled with mystical powders and a few weird objects that he could not identify also decorated the shelf. Below that, near the floor, were alcoves filled with odd trinkets and small statues. Some of the figurines were made of normal stone while others were made of a white, red or black rock. In the wall near the shelf were two large openings, going back into the cave. There was a fire burning down one of the passages, in another room, but he was too far to see if anyone resided within.

He looked towards the ceiling, about thirty feet above, and saw dozens of stalactites. Many hung over ten feet from the ceiling, but most were small. He looked closer and saw dozens of small alcoves in the side of the large stones. Small creatures, many with glowing eyes, peered at him over the tiny edges, but shuffled back to their homes when he looked their way. His skin crawled at the sight of the strange creatures, so he surveyed the other areas of the room.

There was nothing odd about the rest of the chamber. He had long become accustomed to the strange environment. He well remembered the strange sights, smells and sounds of the Mystic's home. Then his eyes fell on something he did not remember.

A human-sized statue of a man stood directly across from him, on the other side of the fire. He was dressed in elegant red robes, shiny chainmail and held a golden staff topped with a blue sapphire out in front of him. Long, golden hair hung down to his chest. The golden skin of the statue sparkled in the fire light and its orange eyes seemed to peer into Thron's soul. Thron wanted to look away but the gaze held him. Then he saw the pointy ears.

The statue was not of a human. This was...what was the race? Thron had heard of the odd race of pointy-eared humanoids before but could not remember the term. They lived much longer than humans do and usually dwell in the forests.

Welcome.

The voice snapped Thron's eyes away from the statue. He looked around but saw no one. The Mystic, though absent, knew he was here, so he stepped into the light and squared his shoulders, determined to meet whatever fate she had prepared for him. He would not be afraid nor would he retreat in the face of uncertainty. He walked toward the fire. As he neared, a form rose from the other side of the flames.

She was wrapped in a fur blanket, standing just a little over five feet. Despite the dingy home, she was clean and well groomed. Her curly brown

hair hung loose, falling well past her shoulders. A single streak of gray marred the otherwise colorful sheen of her hair. Her face held a few wrinkles yet her skin looked smooth and soft. High cheekbones complimented her slim nose and narrow chin. She looked to be only thirty or forty winters old, but Thron knew that she was well over two hundred. This woman had given guidance to his father, and his father before him. How she lived for so long, he did not know. Perhaps magic kept her young. Then her lustrous green eyes met his and all thoughts left his mind.

“Welcome, barbarian of the Fists.”

The voice seemed to carry too much power and strength to come from such a petite frame. It also carried a mystical energy that Thron could not explain. Then she took a step toward him. The fur blanket opened and Thron noticed she was completely nude underneath. Her body looked to belong to one much younger than she for it was shapely, well toned and showed little signs of age. Her skin was dark, almost amber—an unusual skin tone for one who lived in a land of snow and ice.

Usually nudity was a part of everyday life in the tribe. While in private, the women of the barbarian tribes of the Crystal Plains went nude inside their tents or during sleep. The Mystic also usually wore little clothing when meeting with the tribe leaders. But now, with his future in her hands, Thron looked away from the woman and felt his cheeks warm.

“Be at ease,” she said as she moved closer. He breathed in and raised his eyes to meet hers.

He saw no malice, anger or shame in those eyes. He saw the same unbiased, impartial look he was used to when visiting the Mystic. She had never judged or taken sides during intertribal warfare, which there had been plenty of over the years. Her role was to advise on what she thought was best for the tribes and on what would ensure that her people survived and endured over the centuries.

So why am I here? Thron asked himself. Surly my leaving the tribes was the best decision to ensure they thrived. A mindless beast would only put his people in danger.

“You have questions,” the Mystic said, as if hearing his thoughts. She led him over to where she had been sitting when he first came in and stopped. She turned to face him.

“Yes,” he said, perhaps with a bit too much hope.

“Some will be answered,” she replied. “Others you will have to find the answers to. But now, you must sit.”

Thron did as he was told and sat in front of the fire. The Mystic stayed standing and turned to face the fire. Then she began to chant.

Words that Thron did not understand poured from her lips. He just stayed silent, watching in wonder at the spectacle before him. The Mystic then began to sway, falling deeper and deeper into the chant. She sang the ancient words, filling the room with magic and energy. Thron felt it cover his body and sink into his skin. At first, it was uncomfortable and worried him for he did not like magic. A small amount of fear took hold of his heart, but then he relaxed, sensing that no harm would befall him. He lost himself in the ritual. The Mystic's voice became louder and she moved faster as the rhythm sped up. The blanket fell from her shoulders and Thron saw she was covered in a layer of sweat. Her naked body seemed to glow and regardless of the situation, he found that he could not look away. She bent over, arms spread out in front of her. Then she rose up suddenly, shouting out to some unseen spirit. She flung her hands out and golden powder flew from her fingers, flying into the fire. The flames suddenly grew in size and filled the room with blinding light. Thron fell back at the sudden surge of heat and light, but quickly righted his self. He had to shield his eyes and wanted to back away but knew he must remain where he sat. To do otherwise would be disrespectful.

Then the light died down and all was quiet. Thron looked back to the fire and saw that it had returned to normal. The Mystic was kneeling in front of him, with her back turned. She was covered in sweat and he could see she was breathing hard. Her hair was matted to the sides of her head and she was shivering despite the warmth. He went to grab the blanket, to cover and warm her, but a voice stopped him cold.

“Do not!”

It did not come from the Mystic. Thron jumped to his feet and whirled around. He was so shocked and engrossed in the ritual that he did not even realize that his wounds were healed. Goldedge came out of his scabbard all the same. The broken blade looked poor indeed but it was all he had at the moment. His eyes searched everywhere but there was no one. Then the statue of the humanoid moved.

Thron backed away in shock, but his instincts kicked in and he readied for an attack. The humanoid took a step forward but did not make a threatening gesture.

“She will recover,” he said. His voice was smooth, yet carried strength and confidence, perhaps a little too much.

Thron did not take his eyes off the strange man. Then a smooth, gentle hand slowly pushed his arms down. He looked into the eyes of the Mystic. He quickly noticed that she wore the blanket again and did not look as exhausted.

“Calm,” was all she said and moved back to the fire. “Tilaar is just here to

protect me.”

Thron eyed the man. “From what?”

The Mystic turned her eyes on Thron. “You.”

That statement shocked Thron to the core. He would never do anything to harm the Mystic. To do so would be the ultimate betrayal. Most tribesmen would rather take their own life than harm her. Then he realized that if he lost himself, he might do so without even knowing. The full weight of what he had become came crashing down. He truly was a monster.

Goldedge clattered to the ground and he dropped to his knees. What has she done to me! he screamed in his mind. I cannot go on living! He looked at the Mystic.

“Help me!” he pleaded, feeling helpless. A barbarian did not beg. A barbarian did not plead, but he could no longer accept what he was. “I cannot live like this.”

“Well?” said the strange man. He took another step forward, looking at the Mystic. This time, there was definite aggression in his body language. Thron did not care anymore.

The Mystic shook her head.

“Are you certain?” he replied.

“Yes. He is to go on.”

Thron looked from the Mystic to the man, wondering what had just happened. The man took a step back, turned and went down one of the passages. He disappeared from sight. Thron looked back to the Mystic.

“Cure me! I know you can. I do not deserve this fate. Do not let me die in disgrace.”

The Mystic stood before him, a flat look on her face. “I cannot cure you.”

“Then end me!” he said, rather loudly.

“That is not your fate,” she replied calmly.

“Damn the fates!” he yelled, jumping to his feet. Anger crept into his body. He felt rage start to curl around his mind and steal his sanity. He squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself to calm down. He struggled for many moments and even fell back to the ground holding his head. Through it all, the Mystic just stood motionless. When he opened his eyes, the rage was gone.

It came on so fast, he realized a second later. Is it getting stronger? Will I eventually lose myself forever?

“Yes,” came a reply from above.

Thron looked up into the eyes of the Mystic. For the first time since entering her domain, he saw genuine compassion in those eyes. He slowly stood and faced her. He also noticed that the man had returned to the room. He

stood only a few feet behind the Mystic and held something wrapped in cloth. It was sword shaped but Thron could not make out any details.

“This curse will eventually consume you,” the Mystic said, bringing Thron’s attention back to her. “It will only be a matter of weeks before it takes hold forever and transforms your mind. Then the man known as Thron will cease to exist.”

“Then help me!” Thron said. “Why would you let one of your people be destroyed by a curse from an outsider?”

“You brought this on yourself,” she said without emotion.

“What?” Thron said in shock. His anger slowly started to rise again.

“Instead of love and compassion, you chose hate and anger. You could have started something that would have changed the tribes forever. Instead, you let your distrust blind you and your anger control you.”

“So you have condemned me to death, to die a mindless beast!” Thron said in anger. The rage came creeping back, but this time, he did not care. This woman, a woman that was supposed to guide him and help him was turning him away.

“Calm yourself,” the man behind the Mystic said. He readied his staff.

“Who are you to order me around?” Thron exclaimed. “You are no tribesman! You do not belong here!” He took a threatening step towards the man. He did not have a weapon but thought he would not need one to deal with this man.

“Your anger,” the Mystic said, “will destroy you.” Then she placed a glowing hand on Thron’s shoulder. He froze in mid-step and cried out in anguish. All anger was sapped from his mind, as was his strength. He collapsed to the ground. The Mystic leaned over him, a look of sympathy painted her face.

“You must control your anger.”

Thron looked at her with sadness. “I cannot. I never could. Please destroy me before I kill everyone. I do not wish to live.” The Mystic gently put her hand under his chin and angled his face to hers.

“You must and you must survive.”

“How can I?” he asked.

“Though I cannot cure you,” the Mystic said, “I can help you.”

A small amount of hope blossomed in his chest. Never had he heard of the Mystic helping one of the tribesmen so. Usually she just gave advice. Whatever the person did with that advice was up to them. But to intervene? That was unheard of.

“Why?” he asked. The Mystic smiled.

“A question that cannot be answered, but know this; you must face this burden. You must control your anger. You cannot run from it. You cannot hide from it. It will be with you until you find control.”

She turned from him and walked to Tilaar. The man held out the large bundle and she took it from his hand. Then she came to Thron, who was now standing and ready to accept whatever the Mystic was going to give him.

“All ties to the tribes have been destroyed,” she said. Thron looked over to Goldedge and knew he would never carry the weapon again. He truly was no longer a barbarian of the Crystal Pains. He was now just a man.

“You are no longer a part of the tribes,” the Mystic continued. “You can never return here, for your future lies elsewhere. Take this and find your destiny.”

Thron took the bundle, which was longer than the Mystic was tall, and threw back the cloth. He was bathed in a low blue light. A sword as magnificent as he had ever seen lay in his arms. It even put Goldedge to shame.

Though the fire was low, the blade seemed to glow like a thousand candles in the light. It looked sharp enough to shear through stone, perhaps even steel and was made of a metal so pure that Thron had no doubts that it was magical. His eyes followed along its length and came to odd-looking symbols chiseled directly into the metal, glowing blue with power. He did not know what they meant but he could feel their strength just gazing at the weapon. The guard was in the form of golden dragon wings pointed down toward the hilt and held small gemstones that looked to be worth a king’s ransom. It was a similar design to Goldedge’s hilt, except the wings on his old weapon’s guard were folded in toward the base of the grip, instead of out as this one was. The grip of this hilt was made of bright gold and leather, which was pulled tight in certain places. A solid strip of gold flowed up the hilt and held tiny blue stones that shimmered in the light. The pommel was triangular and held a red gem. The center was made to look like two dragon’s heads, each facing a separate direction.

Something flashed into Thron’s eyes. He looked closer and saw that inside the grip was a hollow glass tube, filled with a glowing blue mist. The mist danced and moved as if being affected by some unseen wind. It mesmerized and hypnotized him. He could not believe that the Mystic would give him such a gift.

“Why give me such a weapon?” he asked. “I am dangerous enough.”

“Guard well this sword,” she replied. “It will assist you in dealing with your curse, for the magic that is imbued in this weapon will help keep the rage at bay, but it will take time. It must stay with you at all times so the magic can

saturate you to help with your rage.

“But beware,” she said in a serious voice. “The protection of the sword is not absolute. Great anger will still bring your curse to life, regardless of the weapon. If you part with it, the curse will rise back to power as well.”

Thron looked at the weapon with amazement. Truly, magic is not as wicked as he originally thought. As if sensing his thoughts, the Mystic smiled.

“The magic of the high elves is wondrous indeed.”

Thron tore his eyes away from the sword and looked to Tilaar. Elf. That was the name of the race of strange beings. Clearly, they are powerful to create such a weapon.

“It will never dull,” she said. “This weapon should last for centuries, so guard it well and it will guard you.”

Thron lowered the sword and looked at the Mystic and to the elf Tilaar. Though the curse would be with him forever, perhaps now he could survive it and hold on to his sanity.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Go now,” the Mystic said. “You have all that I can provide. Find your destiny and perhaps one day, you will return, in one form or another.”

Without another word, Thron left the cave, never looking back. He threw the yeti furs back on and stood at the exit to the large cave, enjoying the warm for the last time.

Where now? he asked himself. I cannot go back. I am no longer part of the tribe. Maybe I can start my own tribe, in another land. The Mystic certainly made that once impossible thought a reality. If the sword could truly hold his curse at bay, he had a chance at a normal life again. He had only one way to find out.

With hope in his heart, the barbarian once again took to the treacherous slopes, but this time he headed down the mountain, away from the Crystal Plains.



Tilaar watched the large man disappear in the snow. Even his elven eyes could not penetrate the thick curtain of ice. He heard the Mystic walk up behind him.

“You should have let me kill him. He is too dangerous to unleash upon the world.”

“Perhaps,” she replied, “but that is not what the fates decreed. I first thought he was to die, but that is not his destiny.”

“You never told him about the healing properties of the sword.”

“I have hope that he will never need them,” she said, referring to the blue mist that would heal the barbarian if he were ever injured while enraged. She knew it would also prevent him from being exhausted after the curse left his body. She held hope that the warrior would never discover those properties.

She turned to go back into her home. Tilaar followed, a question forming on his lips.

“If you thought he was suppose to die, why have me craft the sword?”

The Mystic smiled. “Fate changes every moment. Nothing is set in stone.”

“Why spare him? What is so special about a single barbarian?”

“I have foreseen,” she replied, “that years from now, perhaps many hundred, that man’s kin will save our people from annihilation.”

“Or assure it,” the high elf said, turning her words back at her.

“Perhaps,” she said with a raised eyebrow. “But the offspring of Thron Swordstar will return to us either way, as our destructor or as our savior.”

CHAPTER 1

A warm breeze flowed through the trees, indicating that they had reached the edge of the forest. Though they would miss the magnificent beauty of the Oakcrest Forest and the hospitality of the elves of Elvradar, it was good to be moving on. They had a long road ahead of them and many stops along the way.

Mileena Spellstorm guided Swiftfoot, her horse, along the narrow trail that headed out of the forest and into the plains. She was looking forward to being out in the open again, running her mount hard and fast, feeling the wind fly through her hair and flow over her skin. It was impossible to do so in the forest for the vegetation made moving faster than a light trot very difficult. A part of her did not want to leave. She loved the trees, animals and overall mystic feel of the woods. Being a sorceress, she was attuned to the magical energies of the world and could feel the magic and wonder inside the woods. Since she had spent most of her life in a desert, living underground, she relished every second she has to spend in any place not covered with sand and stone. Long would she remember the fascinating sites, sounds and smells of the forest. It was a remarkable land and one she would miss dearly. She glanced behind her to the man she loved. The look on his face told her that he would miss it as well.

Callobus Swordstar followed his love out of the woods and into the open country. He took in a deep breath of fresh air and held his face up toward Solaris to bask in the sun's shining light. The air was warm and he enjoyed the sensation. His horse, which he had not yet named, stamped on the ground as if sensing his happiness. He patted the beast on the side and looked to his right, at the woman he loved.

Her curly, auburn hair shifted in the gentle breeze and seemed to glow in the light. She turned her head toward the sun to feel its heat and warm her muscles. Her eyes, eyes as green as emeralds, sparkled in the bright light and a rosy hue quickly filled her cheeks. She stifled a yawn and raised her arms above her head, stretching and working out the soreness of the road. Swiftfoot responded in a similar manner, stomping on the ground with all four hooves, loosening his muscles. When both mount and rider settled, Mileena turned to regard Callobus, who she caught staring at her out of the corner of her eye.

“It’s quite rude to stare,” she said playfully. Her voice filled him with joy and elation. Would that feeling ever stop when she looked at him? He hoped not.

“Can’t help it,” he replied with a smile. He knew that she didn’t mind, even secretly made little gestures to make him look at her from time to time.

There was a time when even he did not like to stare for the scar over his left eye—a mark left by the dragon Cindermane—usually put off most people. The lack of color in that one eyeball also made him look odd, almost demonic, but he knew that Mileena had long ago become accustomed to the scar. She had calmed his fears and loved him unconditionally, regardless of his eye. Still, the old battle wound made him self-conscious and he was glad he had a helmet to hide the blemish at times.

But today he rode with his helm off. He wanted to feel the wind and heat against his skin. He wanted to look upon the land and his love without an impediment. In fact, he had not donned his helmet since leaving Starfall.

It had been very difficult leaving the kingdom, and his family, behind. Mileena saw the pain and hurt on his face every day since leaving but assured him that he was doing the right thing. His mother and sister, the queen of Starfall, understood as well. Chandel and Katrina assured him that he had a place in the kingdom if he were to return. Callobus vowed that he would return one day, but not before he found what he was searching for—a cure.

Though he had not even felt the curse that plagued him since he defeated Bazmal, he knew that it was always there, always waiting to take control. He could not live his life, truly live freely, until he was certain that the rage was gone for good. The fear that he may one day kill someone he loved scared him more than death itself and he vowed that he would never let the rage take hold again. Death was preferable to losing his mind.

There was a time when he wanted to isolate himself from everyone, to never again get close to anyone for fear of hurting them. After Bytia’s death, he thought he could never feel love towards another woman, indeed, never wanted to for fear of what he could do to her. It seemed that the rage had

assured he would die alone. But that all changed when he met Mileena.

The woman had brought out feelings in him that he had never experienced before. He felt a connection to her immediately and was now glad that he had acted upon those feelings instead of fearing them. When he had first found out that she was a sorceress, he shunned her, for it was a sorceress that had cursed his ancestor. A few words of advice from a friend helped alleviate those fears and he acted upon his feelings.

Now the rage had all but disappeared, vanished from his mind because she was with him. Something about her kept it at bay. He knew that the mystical connection he had felt when first seeing her had something to do with it, but now the bond was just an added benefit of his relationship with her. He loved her unconditionally, no matter what she was.

But regardless of Mileena's presence and the absence of the rage, he knew his curse always sat on the edges of his mind. It would never be completely gone until he was cured. They were on their way now to find that cure.

After they had left Starfall, the couple headed south, to where they hoped to find answers. Orin, their very knowledgeable friend, had learned that many of the barbarian tribes that Callobus could be descended from made their homes in the frozen plains of the south. If anyone had answers, they would, but it was a long journey and they passed many familiar places on the way.

Their first stop was Amith, the last city in the kingdom of Starfall before the Oakcrest Forest. The city had recovered fairly well after the defeat of Bazmal and his armies, but the population had been cut by a fourth. Since Amith was positioned near the home of the elves, many of the city's influential citizens had been killed and replaced with changelings—creatures that could take the shape and mind of any they came in contact with. Bazmal wanted to keep a close eye on the boundaries of the kingdom, especially near the elves. Now, with all his minions dead or chased off, those that remained had to rebuild.

The new mayor, appointed just recently by the queen, was a strong and sturdy man by the name of Rallos Blackwand. He was no stranger to hard work and was a wizard of some repute. Under his leadership, the city quickly recovered and was well on its way to its former glory.

Callobus and Mileena were personally welcomed by the man and treated like royalty. He was no doubt informed of their impending arrival by Katrina though most in the kingdom knew how Callobus and the others had liberated them from an evil tyrant, another fact spread quickly by his sister and her slowly reforming army of wizards. They enjoyed the mayor's hospitality thoroughly but left only after a day.

They then traveled through the Oakcrest Forest. Callobus recommended

going around but Mileena wanted to ride through. She was hoping that the elves of Elvradar would spot them and invite them to their city. After all, they had helped to uncover the devious plot of two elven lords that threatened the elves very existence. Sure enough, three days into the forest, a group of elves had spotted them.

After the battle of Starfall, Katrina and the elves had come to an agreement that allowed the citizens of the kingdom to travel through the forest without hassle. Callobus and Mileena were greeted with smiles and soon brought to the city, but only after Mileena had mentioned who they were. Within an hour, they stood before Faemil Evergreen, one of the counsellors of Elvradar. Although Faemil was thankful and happy to see them again, she quickly sensed the couple's urgency to be on their way, so she briefly explained what had been going on in her home since Bazmal's defeat.

Though the elves looked to be recovering graciously from the fight that had raged throughout their city after Bazmal's underlings had suddenly revealed themselves, the couple knew that what Belemil and Vaellos—the two elven lords that had betrayed their kind—still stung the elegant people deeply. Their betrayal had shaken the very foundation and belief system of the elven people. It was already widely being referred to as the Great Betrayal. Faemil assured them that her people would recover but they saw the uncertainty in her eyes. It would be many years, perhaps hundreds, before the elves returned to their ancient ways.

“Perhaps it is time for a change,” she had told them.

The thought of changing everything you were used to was both frightening and exciting at the same time. Callobus and Mileena then decided to stay a day or two to help where they could. The counsellor was grateful. Callobus had helped in rebuilding some of the stone structures while Mileena used her magic where needed. In return, Faemil, after learning what the couple were searching for, allowed the two to search the libraries of the city, something that non-elves were usually not permitted to do.

They found nothing regarding barbarians for most of the lore in the city was about elven history. A majority of the books were also written in Elvish, a language in which Callobus was familiar, but not fluent. Mileena helped translate some but they did not have the time to look through them all. After an extensive search and finding nothing helpful, the two said their goodbyes and left the city. The couple had made many new friends and left knowing that they had the honor and respect of the elves.

Because the elven city was located on the northern end of the forest, the couple knew they still had a long journey. Faemil suggested they stop by

Drasador, the other city in the forest, if they needed to rest. Unlike Elvradar, Drasador was filled with all races, but elves still dominated the city. Callobus wanted no more delays and since they were unfamiliar with that city, they decided to avoid it.

It took about two weeks to get all the way through the Oakcrest Forest but it seemed to take much longer. The thick canopy allowed in little sunlight so they had to be content with the few rays that managed to break through. Now that they were finally away from Starfall and the forest kingdom, they could continue without delay. They came out many miles west of the nearest city, which was Ralidor, a small town just outside of the forest. They had plenty of supplies to bypass the city and make the next one, but Callobus was not sure that was a good idea. Hostile creatures still roamed the land and they would be much safer if they joined a caravan, but Mileena had others plans.

“Are you ready?” she asked with a glint in her eye. Callobus turned to regard her. He was unsure what she spoke of, but then he saw that frisky smirk on her face. Last time she wore that expression was just outside the gates of Starfall.

Living in a desert for most of her life, Mileena had never ridden a horse, but she learned very quickly. It soon became second nature to her. Callobus had been riding for about as long as she had and was still considered a novice at best, but Mileena was already riding like a veteran. He suspected she used magic in some way to heighten her skills, perhaps the magical necklace she had taken from the Ruins of Galador. He knew it augmented her abilities in some way. As they traveled away from the kingdom, she had challenged him to a race. He had only wanted to enjoy the open road, not rush over it, but she would not be denied. The race almost killed him. Now, out in the open once more, she wanted to experience everything Swiftfoot had to offer once again. The horse had indeed earned its name.

Callobus tilted his head in playful irritation. “Can’t we just—”

He was cut off as Mileena dug in a snapped her reins. Swiftfoot took off like a bolt from a crossbow, shooting across the plains.

“Here we go again,” Callobus said to his horse, who at the moment he considered naming Chaser for they always seemed to be chasing after Mileena lately. I guess I’ll be sore again tonight, he thought to himself as he spurred Chaser forward.

They went at full gallop for many minutes. The land became a blur as the wind rushed over him. It flowed through his hair and over his skin. Though warm, there was a slight chill to the air that caused small bumps to form on his skin. The feeling was wonderful. He had been cooped up in cities with

high walls, underground tunnels of deserts and mountains and stone rooms too small for his liking. Though he was free in all those situations, he felt confined, almost imprisoned. Now he truly felt unrestrained with nothing but open land all around him. He wanted to throw his hands in the air, to feel the wind flow through his fingers and hit him in the chest, but he dare not let go. Chaser was going full speed and the impact from a fall would be fatal, so Callobus held on, leaned forward and urged his mount on.

He quickly caught up with Mileena but he knew that she let him. He came up beside her and saw a smile as wide as the horizon on her face. She looked over at him and blew him a kiss. She mouthed something but Callobus could not make out what it was. Then he realized she wasn't talking to him, but casting a spell. Her hands glowed orange and she raised one in his direction. She winked and released her magic.

Callobus was almost jerked from his saddle as Chaser bolted forward in a sudden burst of speed. The land became nothing but a mix of colors and light as it flew by him. He glanced over at Mileena and noticed she was right with him, but while he held on for dear life, she looked completely at ease. She even smiled and shouted in delight as the wind whipped through her hair. She even took one hand off the reins to pat her horse on the side, urging him faster. Swiftfoot heeded her call and surged forward, slowly outdistancing Callobus. Callobus let her go and tightened his grip. His only concern was falling.

The magic lasted for a short period of time, maybe ten minutes, but it felt like a few hours to Callobus. When the horses finally slowed and came to a trot, they found they had traveled many more miles than they would have without Mileena's spell. They brought the horses to a stop and camped for the night. Mileena set up wards that would alert them if anything approached, as she always did, but the night was calm and peaceful.

They set out just after sunset. The air was warm but not hot, a sure sign that summer was almost upon them. It would be a few weeks before the real heat began and the humidity would surly make traveling less pleasant. Callobus was looking forward to the journey regardless of the weather. He had no schedule, no enemies chasing him and no urgent reason to rush. He was just happy to spend time out in the open, next to the woman he loved.

"A fitting name," Mileena said, referring to Callobus's horse. "You were the one that chased me in the end, weren't you?"

Callobus couldn't suppress a smile. "I suppose."

"So, where exactly are we heading?" she asked after a short pause.

Callobus had not given a lot of thought to an exact location. He only knew what Orin had told him, that the barbarian tribes that he may have descended

from made their homes in the far south. Most of them could be extinct for no one seemed to know anything about them. Could they all be gone? All he knew was that he had to locate someone or something that contained knowledge of what could have happened to the tribes or if they still existed.

“I’m not sure,” he said truthfully. “No one seems to know anything about what we are searching for. We need old knowledge.”

“Perhaps we should have stopped by Drasador,” Mileena replied. “If the city is home to multiple races, that means they would have other histories besides that of just the elves.”

“True,” Callobus said. “But we are too far to turn around now. Perhaps...”

“What?” Mileena asked after Callobus paused.

“Faragard,” he said. Mileena thought for a second, for she had heard that name before.

“Silverleaf’s home?”

Faragard was a city located in the Aspenwood, the forest near Denwald. It had a large population of elves but it was also home to an abundant number of humans. Many of Faragard’s residents are druids, people who usually shunned modern cities and chose to live in the wild. Druids also possess strange magic that allows them to turn into animals and communicate with nature. Halinair Silverleaf, Callobus’s friend, came from the city. Callobus was well known and should not have a problem gaining entrance, especially considering one of Silverleaf’s most trusted friends was a counsellor. Shasralthas Silvergleam was the one who had searched for Katrina and Chandel when Callobus and the others had come to Faragard to share information they had on Druzeel. She was very wise and if anyone had knowledge that could help in their quest, it was her.

“Yes,” Callobus said. “We’re less than a week from the Aspenwood. We’ll have to go through the Darewell Mountains to save time, but I think that is the best place to go at the moment.”

The thought of seeing the Darewell Mountains both thrilled and bothered Callobus. In an odd way, he felt that his life had both ended and started with those mountains. Cindermane had lived there and had killed his father, shattering everything he knew and destroying his innocence. The young, naïve Callobus had died that day. Only after killing the dragon did Callobus realize that he had changed into something else—a warrior and to some, a hero. Regardless of what they symbolized, he no longer feared them. He would face them without angst. Mileena saw the apprehension on his face. She knew the story of his past and knew what he was feeling.

One thing that did worry Callobus was the state of Faragard after the

betrayal of Belemil and Vaellos. After all, the two elven lords had actually *been* on the council of Faragard. He knew the elves were strong, but something as shocking as their betrayal was sure to have profound effects for years to come.

After another three-day ride, quickened by Mileena's magic, the Darewell Mountains could be seen in the distance.

They were just as he remembered—rocky, sharp and foreboding. Though summer was on its way, snow still topped the highest peaks. He vividly remembered the cold one experienced while climbing through that terrain and it brought an involuntary shiver. Thankfully, they were going to cross at a lower section and the extreme cold would not reach them.

They made excellent time and by the middle of the fourth day, they reached the base. They climbed as fast as they could without being reckless. Luckily, the trails were smooth enough that the horses walked without difficulty. They camped when night fell and woke as they sun rose. It took a few days to make it to the other side and the most dangerous thing they encountered was a few mountain goats. Other than that, the trip was uneventful. They reached the final ridge and at the top, could see the Aspenwood.

The forest spread out before them for many miles. The tops of the trees reached high into the sky, so high it seemed they were almost eye level with Callobus and Mileena. The two marveled at the bright greens and yellows. All of the trees had bloomed and the scent of pine baking in the sunshine permeated the air. Mileena's eyes were wide in wonder for she had never been so high above the world before. It astounded her.

"Where is it?" she asked, scanning the forest for the tallest trees. Callobus had told her about his stay in the forest city and she remembered him saying that he had been above the normal tree line at one point, but as far as she could tell, everything before her was the same height.

"You won't be able to see it," he answered. "It is hidden by magic, much like Elvradar. We'll have to hope we find a way to let them know we are here in order to get to the city."

"Do you think Silverleaf will be here?" she asked.

"Probably not. He was going to stay in Starfall for a few days and stop by Elvradar before he headed home. He may be on his way by now but I think we'll be gone by the time he gets back."

"Shame," she said. "It would have been nice to get a personal tour."

"Don't worry," Callobus said. "Shasralthas is an excellent host."

Mileena smiled in anticipation and the two made their way down the mountain and into the Aspenwood.

It was very similar to the Oakcrest Forest. The trees grew tall and wide, some wider than many homes she had seen. Rich brown bark decorated every tree and it appeared that they had a slight shine to them. Many were separated by tens of feet while others grew so close there was hardly room to squeeze through. Lush vegetation, large bushes and emerald green grass grew everywhere. The ground was thick with grass this time of year. Plenty of light filtered through the canopy above, but Mileena could tell that in the spring, hardly any sunshine would come through. Even this close to the mountains, forest creatures made their way through the brush. Hundreds of birds perched high above, chirping and singing to each other. The smell of pine was thick in the air and Mileena inhaled deeply, taking in the sweet scent.

“Wonderful,” she said. Callobus only smiled.

It took a few days to make it to the area that Callobus thought Faragard was located. As they came closer, he could feel the environment change around him, confirming that he was heading in the right direction. Mileena saw the change as well.

Everything shined with unnatural light, making the environment glow like it was bathed in moonlight. Mileena could feel the magic and energy in the air. It made her skin tingle. It was a wonderful sensation. She looked all around her, noticing that the wildlife was much more active, not running or retreating as they approached. It was as if the animals knew that the strange travelers meant no harm. A feeling of peace and tranquility settled over her, calming and exciting her at the same time.

“Are we here?” she asked with enthusiasm. Callobus looked around.

“Not sure,” he said. “Silverleaf actually led us here the first time, blindfolded. I don’t know if there is a portal, a door or something else.”

“Nothing so apparent,” came a voice from behind the couple. They turned to look upon a female elf, one in which Callobus was familiar with.

Shasralthas Silvergleam stood before them. She wore a dark green dress, accented with brown and gold trim. A silver pattern that looked like vines curling around flowers decorated the bottom half while a silver bodice adorned the top. Small green gems dotted the bodice while tiny yellow studs ran along the edges. Elegant, platinum jewelry hung from her ears and around her neck while a few golden ringers adorned her fingers. A white circlet sat on her forehead, holding back her long, platinum hair.

She held a simple staff made of wood that was topped with a large green jewel. Neither Callobus nor Mileena doubted that the staff was anything but simple. The counsellor’s bright blue eyes sparkled when she looked upon the couple and a smile came to her face.

“Welcome back,” she said with happiness. “It is good to see you again, Callobus. I see that you were successful.”

“In more ways than one,” Callobus answered, smiling at Mileena. Then he noticed a shocked expression on her face. He turned to see what she was looking at and saw that not only was Shasralthas in front of them, but also the city of Faragard. He could have sworn that it hadn’t been there before. It had appeared out of nowhere. The large clearing that Callobus had seen when he first came to Faragard sat right behind Shasralthas. Mileena actually walked right by the elven counsellor, mouth hanging open in amazement, eyes wide in wonder.

She looked at the large grove in front of her and at the hundreds of trees that made up the city. Her attention was held for a long time by the mystical blue light that glowed in and around the base of the trees. She seemed to be trying to figure out exactly where it came from. Then she saw the four large streams that flowed from the center of the grove and into the forest. The water was clearer than any she had ever seen. The bushes, flowers and other vegetation were more colorful and vibrant as well. Her eyes then moved up into the trees, to the structures, stairways and bridges that were either grown out of the trees or made from their parts. She was a child again, discovering things for the very first time.

“She’s enthusiastic,” Shasralthas said. Callobus smiled and the two followed after Mileena.

“Mileena has been kept away from places like this for a long time,” he said.

“Now, because of you, she can experience them all,” Shasralthas replied, showing another smile. Callobus looked at her quizzically.

“You knew we were coming,” he stated. Shasralthas only smiled. “What else do you know?”

“I knew the moment you entered the forest, as well as some of your exploits. A friend contacted me and let me know that you were headed in this direction. I had a feeling you may be stopping by.”

“Silverleaf?” he asked, but before she could answer, Mileena ran back up to them.

“Amazing!” she exclaimed. “It is more wondrous than I could have ever imagined. Your stories did not do it justice,” she said to Callobus. Then she noticed Shasralthas standing next to him.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said quickly. “How rude of me.”

“Quite all right,” Shasralthas said. “I’m just glad there are those in Terrial that are still amazed by our home.”

“It is amazing,” Mileena replied. “My name is Mileena Spellstorm, from Shadowspar...I mean Swordstar, in the Kilmor Desert.”

“Swordstar?” Shasralthas asked. “You have been busy,” she said to Callobus.

The trio walked further into the city, drawing a few stares from the elves and humans that were out. Callobus looked at faces, recognizing some but seeing many more he was unfamiliar with. The city seemed to be doing well after the betrayal of two of their counsellors, but for some reason, Callobus felt trepidation in the air. Though those that found his eyes seemed content, he saw a sense of sadness everywhere he looked.

“How is everything going?” he asked. Shasralthas took a deep breath and looked at him.

“Let’s go to my home to talk. I am sure you have questions but many of them would be better answered in private. I would like to know more of your journey as well.”

Shasralthas led the two through the city and up into the trees. Mileena looked at everything, examining every detail and taking in all the magic and wonder that was Faragard. She ran her hand over the bark of the trees as they walked up the stairs and smiled as she felt the magic within the ancient wood. As they went higher, her fascination only increased as she looked over the city. Then her eyes fell on the GoldenOak, the large golden tree that grew in the center of the city. It took her breath away. Callobus actually had to urge her forward for she had stopped to admire the sacred monument. They continued up two more levels and finally came to Shasralthas’s home.

It rose about thirty feet in the air and ended in two spires covered with golden leaves. It was a small tower more than a traditional home and was made from a large, hollowed out tree. On the outside, it looked rather small, but Callobus knew that the counsellor’s home was larger on the inside. Shasralthas opened the large wooden door and the trio went inside.

Mileena was taken aback by such a large interior. She knew immediately there was magic involved. She had seen small magical items that could hold more than what their physical appearance suggested but never thought that could be applied to something so large. She took a few moments to look at the elegant furniture and stunning décor. A large fire burned in a hearth across the room that warmed the entire room nicely. Shasralthas walked in, leaned her staff against the wall and prepared some elven tea. Callobus sat down on one of the large, plush couches while Mileena studied a small, silver statue on one of the tables. It was of an elven female, dressed in a gown of leaves.

“A gift from my father,” Shasralthas said as she walked over and handed a

delicate cup and saucer to Mileena. She took it and sipped the amber colored liquid. It was sweet, with a hint of mint.

“Delicious,” she said. Shasralthas offered a cup to Callobus but he declined. The counsellor then took a seat across from him. Mileena sat down on a large, cushioned chair. She sank into the soft fabric and let herself relax.

“It is good to see you again,” Shasralthas said, “at to meet you, Lady Spellstorm. As Callobus has told you, my name is Shasralthas Silvergleam and I am one of the counsellors of Faragard. I help to govern our city and make it, as well as the surrounding lands, a safer place. Usually there are ten on the council, but as you both know, that number has been reduced to eight.”

“They have not found replacements yet?” Callobus asked. He knew it was a sensitive area, but he wanted to know what was going on in the druid city since the betrayal.

“Not yet,” Shasralthas said. “It can take many weeks, sometimes months, to choose a successor to a single seat, let alone two. There are also those who wish to look into every aspect of the past of those who seek a seat on the council. Our people have become a little less trusting since the Great Betrayal.”

Mileena placed her empty cup on the table in front of her and looked at Shasralthas with genuine concern.

“How does the city fare?”

“Well,” she said with hesitation, “I will not embellish the truth. What Belemil and Vaellos did has shaken the foundation of our people. The effects are being felt in every elven society, even ones thousands of miles away.

“At first, infighting was rampant. Many were accused of betrayal while others outright attacked their rivals. The citizens managed to handle those situations for the council, of all elven cities, soon became the most distrusted entity. Many will no longer listen to counsellors or openly chastise their opinions. We have worked hard to restore the honor and trust of the council, but it has been difficult. We have a lot of work left but I have faith we will prevail.”

“Things will return to normal,” Callobus assured her.

“I hope so,” she responded, “but I know that they will never be the same.”

“Sometimes change can be a good thing.”

“It can,” she replied, “but we must be cautious or we risk losing everything we worked so hard to build, and our identity. Our city is doing well but others have had a more difficult time. They will press through this and a new age, a better age, will dawn for the elves.

“I’m sure it will,” Callobus replied. “We feared for the state of Faragard after seeing the hardships in Elvradar. Elves are having trouble trusting other

elves, let alone other races.”

“Speaking of Elvradar,” Shasralthas said. “To answer your original question, Faemil Evergreen was the one who let me know of your impending arrival.”

“You know her?” Mileena asked.

“When I was young, before even your great grandparents were born, I traveled all across this land. I found myself in Elvradar and made friends with another young elf. Faemil and I were both ambitious and passionate about our heritage. We became friends quickly and remain so to this day. We speak often, even more so as of late, and she has told me of the courage you and your friends displayed during this whole ordeal. Despite the chance of death, you decided to help my people and for that, I thank you.”

“Silverleaf deserves more of the credit than I,” Callobus said. “It was he who exposed Belemil and Vaellos. He risked everything for his people.”

“I know,” the counsellor responded with a look of respect. Her face also took on an expression of deep affection and hope. Her cheeks even turned a slight shade of red, but she wiped the look away quickly. Callobus knew that she cared deeply for Silverleaf, perhaps even loved him, but being the widow of Silverleaf’s brother prevented either one of them from acting on those feelings. In elven society, that type of relationship would be seen as strange and some may view it as dishonorable.

“His name will never be forgotten and I hope to see him return soon.”

“He will,” Mileena replied, seeing her feelings. “He promised to return, but he wanted to visit Elvradar first. I think he wants to make sure that his people are recovering and that they will survive and thrive, even in the face of all that has happened.” She could tell by the look on Shasralthas’s face that she was looking forward to seeing Silverleaf again.

“Now,” the counsellor said, wanting to change to subject. “I know most of what happened with my people, but what about you? Faemil told me what she knew but it seems there is so much more to tell.”

Callobus realized her feelings for Silverleaf was a sensitive subject so he obliged her and began his story after he had left Faragard.

For over an hour, Callobus told Shasralthas about his journey. He spoke of his exploits in Indelshire, Thornstone and his journey through the Heldonrock Mountains to the dwarven kingdom of Thoriddon. He had both women’s complete attention for though Mileena knew much of this, Callobus was going into greater detail. After he came to the part about Shadowspar, Mileena joined in the story telling, explaining about her past and about the wizard Druzeel. Shasralthas listened to everything, asking a question or two when something

piqued her interest. She was especially interested when they were taken to Elvradar for the first time, as prisoners.

“A shame,” was all she said about the situation. Though she looked like she did not blame the elves for their behavior, considering Belemil’s manipulation, a small part of her was saddened for her peoples’ overreaction.

Callobus continued with their journey to Starfall, the friends he made, the battles he fought and even his battle with his curse. When speaking of his return to Elvradar to seek the elves help, he made sure to give exceptional praise to Silverleaf and on how much his willingness to put his life on the line meant to him and everyone else. Shasralthas cringed at the detailed telling of *Kel’Sularius*. She mentioned that the ancient ritual was actually banned from being performed in Faragard.

“Most cities that allow other races besides elves have banned the ritual,” she said. “Only those that are strictly elven are known to perform *Kel’Sularius* but I think even in those communities it is slowly fading away.”

Callobus then told of their battle in the throne room, the elves help, Killian’s sacrifice and finally the defeat of Bazmal. Anger crept into his voice when he mentioned that Bazmal had escaped. To this day, Callobus was unsure whether he had survived or not, but in the back of his mind, he knew the man was still alive.

“After the monstrous armies were killed or driven off,” Callobus said, “Katrina took the initiative and started to set things right. She took all the treasure Bazmal had left behind and put it to work rebuilding the kingdom and its people. The citizens have a hard year ahead of them but hope has been restored. With the queen back where she belongs, Starfall will become a great kingdom again.”

“I know it will,” Shasralthas said. “And I intend to keep in contact with Faemil to know how it is progressing.” She set her cup on the table. “So why leave so soon? I know your sister and mother will miss you.”

A slight expression of pain showed on Callobus’s face at the mention of leaving his sister and mother. Shasralthas saw it and was about to apologize but he eased her worries.

“We stayed until the chaos had calmed and helped where we could. Silverleaf, as you know, is probably already on his way back. Brom and Orin may still be there but Brom was anxious to return home. If I know Orin, he’ll go with Brom to get another look at the library, which brings me to us.”

Callobus told Shasralthas why he had left Starfall so soon, and about his curse. He actually started at the beginning, to when the rage had first taken hold and when he had almost killed a friend of his. He explained how it had

affected his grandfather and every other Swordstar for generations.

“That is what you were keeping secret when you first came here,” Shasralthas said, referring to the time Silverleaf had brought them before the council. Shasralthas had a feeling then that Callobus was hiding something, something deeply personal.

“Yes,” he answered truthfully. “I did not want to alarm your people. With the resentment from Belemil and Vaellos, I didn’t want to cause a stir. I hope you understand why I kept this to myself.”

“I do,” the counsellor answered with a smile, dismissing Callobus’s guilt. “It was personal and if it only comes on while you are experiencing great anger, there was no danger to us.”

“And that is why we left,” Mileena said. “Though his curse seems to be dormant, we both realize that it poses a danger not just to Callobus, but to everyone.” She explained how that after Callobus had met her, the rage seemed to disappear but at times of great anger or stress, it can still emerge.

“Mileena seems to keep it away,” Callobus added, “but I know it will never be gone, unless I find a cure. Orin found only a small mention of barbarian tribes of the south. Elvradar had nothing, so we came here in hopes of exploring any literature or knowledge you may have.”

Shasralthas could see the hopeful look on both their faces. “Of course,” she said. “You may explore our library and see what you can find. I will help where I can and know others that can lend assistance, but please do not get your hopes up. Much of our literature, like Elvradar, is elven in nature. We do have other history books but I do not know if they will contain what you seek. You are welcome to stay as long as you like.”

“Thank you,” Mileena said, giving Callobus a smile. The three talked a little more about past battles, old friends and other trivial things. As the sun started its descent, Shasralthas led them down to the ground and across the city, to the library of Faragard.

The library was actually built on the inside of a large, hollowed out tree. Dozens of windows, balconies and steps decorated the outer surface, allowing visitors to relax outside and enjoy the air. The openings spanned the entire height of the tree, many hundreds of feet high. Two large doors sat closed, decorated with silver trim, leaves and an image of an open book with the crease being where the doors closed together. Being so late in the day, the large red doors were shut. During the day, they remained open for many citizens visited the vast den of knowledge. Shasralthas opened one and led the two inside.

The floor was made from the tree’s base, chiseled with designs of leaves, vines and other plant life. Thick, wooden columns, also made from the tree,

rose anywhere from a few feet to hundreds to connect to large platforms, wide balconies and even extending to the ceiling. Many of the columns were wrapped with bright green vines with multicolored flowers while others held deep alcoves which held books, statues and other antiques. The balconies and platforms were made of thousands of packed leaves, wood, stone and vines. Elegant furniture sat everywhere, providing people with places to sit and read, though the building was almost empty at this time of day. It was beautiful, and literature covered everything but the floor.

Shelves stretched all the way to the top of the library and every one was covered with books, tomes, scrolls, stacks of parchment and even stone tablets. Tables were covered with writing materials, blank parchment and other odd types of recording tools. And it was all organized, which was an amazing feat, given the size of the structure.

“Orin would be beside himself,” Mileena said. Callobus was also thinking of his friend. Then the realization that he actually had to find something in all of these books dawned on him.

“How are we supposed to find anything in this?” he said.

“Worry not,” Shasralthas said and signaled to a small female elf that stood across from them. The petite woman hurried over and bowed to the counsellor.

“Lady Silvergleam!” she said excitedly. “How may I assist you?”

She wore a long green and yellow robe held closed by a white sash. Her blond hair was long and her brown eyes sparkled in the glowing gemstones that were set around the library. She spoke like one who wanted approval from the distinguished person in front of her.

“This is Ariel,” Shasralthas said. “She knows these books inside and out and will be able to help you with your search.” Ariel looked from the counsellor to her two guests. She eyed Callobus for a few seconds longer than Mileena but a smile eventually spread across her face.

“I will also arrange for a place for you to stay across from the library,” Shasralthas said. “Stay as long as you need. If you wish food and drink, Ariel will arrange it for you.”

“Thank you,” Callobus said. He turned back to the library and took a deep, steady breath. Shasralthas walked next to him.

“If you do not find what you are looking for here, I would try Tiral. It is a large human city located many miles to the south. They have a very large library and it would hold more human history than ours.”

“We will,” Mileena said. “Whatever it takes.”

Callobus nodded in agreement. Shasralthas gave each of them a hug and wished them well. Then she left.

“What can I help you with?” came a peppy voice from in front of them, turning their attention back to the library. Ariel practically bounced over to them. Her eyes were wide with optimism for she believed that the library of Faragard held every ounce of knowledge in the world. If she could not find what the two humans were looking for, the knowledge simply did not exist.

They spent two days scouring over literature, looking for some reference to the barbarian tribes of the south, any barbarians for that matter. They did not find a single reference. The people Callobus descended from were either very good at keeping their secrets or extinct. He was beginning to think the latter. Ariel kept on insisting that there was nothing written, for the library would hold the information if it did.

“That doesn’t mean the barbarian’s don’t exist,” she had told them, seeing Callobus’s frustration. “There are plenty of civilizations that do not record their history. Some rely on outsiders to record events. Others simply do not accept outsiders into their society, which is why they may not have anything written about them.” She was very helpful and knowledgeable but that did not help Callobus’s mood. He kept thinking that there was no hope.

During their search, they were given anything they asked for or needed. Ariel provided delicious food and drink while others at the library helped gather books for their research. Though some of the elves shot them distasteful looks because of their race, most were friendly and respectful.

At night, the small domicile Shasralthas had arranged for them proved quite luxurious. It was well furnished and stocked with plenty of food and supplies. A small note was in the room explaining that if they needed anything for their trip to ask.

“You have good friends,” Mileena said while changing into a soft silk robe on their last night in the city. The fabric felt good against her bare skin. Tomorrow they would leave Faragard to continue with their search. Callobus lay on the bed, arms behind his head, staring at the ceiling. He had not heard what Mileena said.

“Terrial to Cal,” Mileena said, snapping her fingers.

“Huh?” he replied, looking at her for the first time that night. Mileena walked over and sat next to him on the bed.

“I said you have good friends. They care about you.”

“I know,” Callobus said with a smile. Then his eyes went back to the ceiling, his thoughts scattered all over.

“We’ll find a cure,” she said. He looked at her with uncertainty.

“Will we? I don’t even know if we can find the people I came from.” He leaned up and started to pace around the room. Mileena just sat in silence,

listening to him vent his irritation.

“There’s nothing written! Where are these people that my father spoke of? Do they even exist any more? How can I hope to find a cure when I can’t even find my ancestors?”

“We will find them,” Mileena said. She walked over to him and took his hands. “We have been to two places, both of which carry history of the elven race. Orin found something in Starfall, though minor, so I know we’ll find something in Tiral. If their library is as grand as Shasralthas says it is, I know we will be able to find what we are looking for.”

“I wish I shared your optimism,” Callobus said. She smiled and he looked into her eyes. “I’m sorry we have to do this. You’ve been cooped up so long in Shadowspar I wish we could be doing something else. I don’t want to spend my life with you doing nothing but searching for answers.” Mileena leaned in and gave him a hug. He wrapped his arms around her.

“I know,” she said, “but ease your mind. This is something you must do and I shall do it with you. As long as we’re together, it doesn’t matter what we’re doing.” She looked up and kissed him. “Besides, I’ve always wanted to see the world, and that’s what we are doing.”

“We’ll leave for Tiral at first light,” he said. He was anxious to get on the road and find some answers, but then Mileena backed away from him. He looked at her with curiosity.

“You need to go to Denwald.”

New emotions rolled around in Callobus’s head. He knew that being so close that he may return to Denwald, but could he really return to that city? Pain still filled him when he thought of all that had happened to him there, but he was never one to turn away from pain. He owed it to Keld and Emaria, to let them know, in person, that he was all right and that his family, that their family, were alive and well. His father also lay in Denwald, along with Serl, and he needed to pay his respects being this close to the city.

“I know,” he said reluctantly. “I almost forgot.” She raised an eyebrow.

“Forgot or avoided?” She knew about his past and about everything he went through in the city. It would be hard for anyone, but it was something he needed to do and she was going to make sure he did it.

“I hope the mayor has forgotten about our little encounter,” he said with a smile, referring to the time he had punched the man in the face after retuning from the dragon’s lair.

“He’ll have to deal with me if not,” Mileena said with fire in her eyes.

“That I wouldn’t wish on any man,” he responded with a playful smile. Mileena smiled back then pushed him on the bed.

“Only one man,” she said seductively, letting her robe fall to the floor. It was a good thing the journey to Denwald was short for he didn’t get much sleep that night.