

TOWN SHADOWS

The illustration depicts a warrior in a dark, cavernous setting. The warrior, a man with brown hair and a determined expression, is dressed in a chainmail tunic, brown leather pants with blue accents, and red boots. He holds a large, ornate sword with a yellow hilt and a silver blade. Behind him, a large, menacing red demon with horns and sharp teeth looms. The scene is lit with a warm, yellowish glow, and the floor is made of stone tiles. In the foreground, two large, white, pointed shapes resembling blades or spears frame the bottom corners.

BOOK II

THE SLAYER SERIES

CHRISTOPHER LAPIDES

The demon laughed at Killian. “There is nothing he can do, little thief, except watch.”

Its tail whipped around and the spike drove into Mileena’s side. She screamed as blood poured from the wound and fell onto Callobus. The demon held her above him like a puppet. Her blood dripped onto his helmet and leaked into the slit where his eyes were. It flowed into his eyes and mouth and when her blood, the blood of the woman he loved, touched his tongue, everything turned red as the rage suddenly exploded to life.

He felt his arms and legs grow as his vision clouded with red. His eyes burned into the demon and all feeling of pain and exhaustion was washed away, replaced with anger. More blood flowed into his mouth and he lavished the taste. It served to drive the rage and fuel his fury. All his anger and pain was focused on this one creature and Callobus wanted nothing but its blood.

The demon’s eyes widened as it saw the transformation come over him. With Mileena still in its clutches, it uttered a spell. The magic came forth and just like the very first spell the demon had cast on him, it curled around Callobus’s heart and tried to stop its beating, but the rage ripped the magic in half and it dissolved.

Mileena also saw the change and only stared in wonder as, for the first time, she saw the curse take hold of him. The man she had known disappeared and he was replaced with a mindless killing machine.

BOOKS BY CHRISTOPHER LAPIDES

THE SLAYER SERIES

Dragons Plight

Town Shadows

Kingdoms Peril

November 2010

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For my mother, who always encouraged me to do what I love and provided me with the tools to do so.

For my father, who showed me hard work pays off and to never do anything at half speed.

PROLOGUE

A cool wind blew through the open window, shifting papers and making candle flames flicker. Shadows danced upon the thick stone walls and across the man's face as he focused intently on the large crystal ball in front of him. Smooth skin, short dark hair, a trimmed goatee and dark red eyes focused on the images in the crystal orb while various noises came from the potions he always had brewing.

The room was filled with vials of bubbling liquid, cages of animals and specimens he had gathered over the years. An ornate wooden desk lay against the wall, piled high with papers regarding the slave trade and financial figures involving the mining in the cliffs. Benches and cabinets were filled with magical components and other various magical devices he used to check up on all his servants and associates. There were so many magical artifacts within the large room that even the most learned and ancient of wizards would be astonished.

Another gust of wind came in, scattering more of the papers onto the floor. With a wave of his hand, the shutters banged shut and the papers floated back onto the desk to lie where they were before. His dark eyes peered deeper into the swirling chaos.

Druzeel Sesstar watched as his giants directed slaves throughout the mines. One raised a whip high and lashed a human slave across the back, which drew a scream of agony and made blood splatter those that stood around him. He fell to the ground, but was able to return to his feet. With a slight smile, Druzeel focused on other parts of the tunnels, making sure the orcs and giants were watching the slaves closely. He can ill afford to let any more of them get loose. He made an example of a group that had managed to get free a few days ago.

They were hanging by ropes and hooks throughout the tunnels, their charred and twisted bodies a grim reminder of what happens to those who defy him. They were getting more and more courageous, mainly because the Resistance had stepped up their efforts in disrupting his plans. The mangy band of rebels was becoming a larger nuisance than they already were. He had yet to locate them but he had his assassins combing the sewers and underground tunnels in an effort to locate their base of operations. If he could exterminate them, he could turn his full attention to more important matters.

The image in the orb shifted to the town. The citizens of Shadowspar were going about their usual nightly activities. People walked the streets, on their way home after doing whatever it was commoners do. The taverns would no doubt be packed tonight with drunks and vagabonds. His agents reported to him on a daily basis that the townsfolk were still cooperating and his magic was still holding. If anyone from the surrounding areas really knew what was going on, he may have an army knocking at his door, and that he could not afford. There were some reports of dwarves showing up in the mountains but he was confident the giants could deal with them.

Once again, the image shifted back to the mines as he concentrated on a particular person. The image blurred and a woman came into view. She was walking through the tunnels, carrying jugs of water to the slaves. Her curly brown hair was pulled back and her bright blue eyes sparkled in the torchlight. Dirt and dust covered her face and arms while she gave an elf some water to drink. Druzeel stared at her for many moments.

She attempted to escape almost everyday, but after the last time, he crafted a magical anklet that would not allow her to step foot outside of the mines. She had tried again but after experiencing the pain the anklet bestowed, she eventually relented to his rule. Although still defiant, she agreed to be less obstructive once he promised her she could help feed and care for the slaves. He knew the Resistance was hoping to free her, which is why he kept her in the deepest part of the tunnels. If they lost her, most of their plans would be destroyed and Druzeel knew he would be in danger. His superiors did not accept failure but so far, everything had gone according to their plans. Soon, the surrounding lands would fall.

The image expanded to show a wider view of the tunnels. The valuable black rock that the slaves mined sat in large piles, waiting to be taken to him then transported to his superiors. The rock was used in making armor and weapons stronger and had magical implications as well. In a few years time, Druzeel and his small army had turned the small meaningless town into their own mining port. The ignorant citizens of Shadowspar had lived in the desert

for years not knowing they had a virtual treasure in their midst, and he planned to keep it that way. Since the surrounding areas did not yet know about the mineral, the guild wished to keep it a secret and kept the town citizens under close watch. They could have killed everyone but had to keep up the appearance of a normal town if their operations were to go unnoticed. With a combination of fear and the mystic arts, Druzeel had torn families asunder, taking some to the mines while placing enchantments on others. With the threat of their loved ones death, and with his magic, it had been fairly easy to keep them obedient. If only it was this easy with Grimfall, he thought.

The guild had held onto the kingdom of Grimfall by a thread, but now that they had found the missing girl, their hold on the kingdom would tighten. They had set up other places to operate out of such as Denwald and Hollowdon, but his agents had failed and let a prisoner escape from the latter. All their activities were shut down, but the one in Denwald was moving along, or so he hoped. Someone had triggered the wards on the dragon's cave, but after speaking with Cindermane, Druzeel learned the intruder was dead. He figured a lone city guard got lucky and stumbled on the entrance so he had placed some orc guards near the opening. In a few days time he would return to the dragon and order it to destroy the city. Once everyone was dead, the orcs could take over and the guild would have an outpost in the east. He would have to find more orcs since the first raid on the city was disastrous, but the brainless beasts were inconsequential. As long as he had the dragon, the city would fall.

A knock sounded on the door. Druzeel quickly dismissed the image and the crystal orb went dark. He walked behind his desk and sat down on his plush leather chair.

“Enter.”

The door opened and one of the guild's thieves walked in. He was wearing black studded leather armor and sported a black cloak—the usual garments of the guild. His hair was short and neatly trimmed. A longsword was at his hip.

“Speak,” Druzeel said. He didn't even know the man's name. The guild's members were plentiful with more coming every day, so he never bothered to learn anyone's name. They were just bodies to him. Chances were they would be reassigned or dead before long.

“My lord, we have received dire news from the city of Denwald.” His hands were shaking a little. No doubt the news was bad and Druzeel did not like hearing bad news.

“Out with it.”

“Yes sir. Our agents in the city report that Cindermane is dead.”

“What!” Druzeel said with shock. He stood up so fast the guard took a step

back in fear. Anger boiled up inside him. “How did this happen?”

The man swallowed and continued. “All we know at the moment is that the city guards have been bringing some of the treasure back to the city. A group of adventures brought back the head and it was put on display. One of our agents, disguised as a guard, went to the lair. It has been destroyed. Somehow, the entire lair caved in, crushing the dragon and burying its horde. The mayor ordered the cave to be cleared and all the treasure that could be found is being brought back to the city.”

Druzeel was shaking with anger. He had just spoken with Cindermane less than a month ago. What had really angered him was that all the gold and magical gifts he had given to the dragon were now in the hands of the city. With that amount of treasure, they could rebuild in a matter of months. He knew at once that the boy had something to do with this. Damn Maulrong and Garok for their failings! The boy had killed the necromancer, twice. He should have been killed long ago and their attempts to recapture him were unsuccessful. He was obviously skilled but Druzeel never thought he would be able to kill the dragon. Now he was an even bigger problem—his problem. He was probably already on his way to Shadowspar, seeking his mother and sister.

“Sir?”

Druzeel just realized the man was still standing in his room. He calmed himself and walked behind his desk, deep in thought. Denwald was a lost cause now, which, now that he thought about it, was not as bad as it sounded. He had devoted too much time to the city and now he could devote all his time to Shadowspar and the mines. If his superiors had not contacted him yet, they were not concerned about the loss of the city either, or they didn’t know. Either way, they had something else to consume their time. He looked to the man.

“Get some of your agents together and head to the outlying towns. Report back to me and me alone anyone who enters the towns that doesn’t belong. Do nothing else until you hear from me. Go.”

“Yes, sir.” He bowed and walked quickly out of the room. The door closed behind him. He was wise enough not to ask questions.

Druzeel magically sealed the room and grabbed his staff. Reciting arcane words, the spell took effect and he slowly disappeared. He wanted to make sure he was invisible before he teleported to the dragon’s cave. Speaking another spell, he felt the power take hold and the world around him blurred. In moments, it came back into view and he was standing on a plateau of the dragon’s cavern.

Torches were placed everywhere. What was once Cindermane’s lair was now a pile of rubble. Massive amounts of rock lay in huge piles over the

entire cavern floor. The soldiers of Denwald were working feverishly to clear away the debris that sat on top of the horde. Careful not to bump into anyone, Druzeel slowly made his way over to the ledge and looked down. He could see they had cleared away a good amount of debris and had gotten to the treasure below. Most of the artifacts he'd given to Cindermane had been broken or destroyed by the tons of rock. They would only get the coin, which brought little satisfaction to him. Most of the magical items were of little power, but with the treasure at their disposal, the guard would be rebuilt and rearmed. Using his levitation ring, he rose into the air to get a bird's eye view of the cavern.

Far on the other side was all that was left of Cindermane. His neck and head had been severed. The neck was left in the cave but the head had been cut free and no doubt now hung in the city like a trophy. The body was crushed and had been sliced to pieces. Whether a blade or the cave-in had killed Cindermane, he did not know. The guards were walking around the carcass, carving chunks away from the body. He thought about killing them but decided against it. The city was lost and he had other things to worry about.

Druzeel took one last look at his failed plan and recited the words that brought him back to his room. He went directly to the crystal and summoned the image of a particular elf. The picture surfaced and he saw him chained to the floor of the mines, lazily chipping away on the tunnel wall. He brought forth the magic that would teleport him to his side.



Mileena stood in her small room looking over layouts and drawings of the town and the mines. Many lives had been lost to gather this information and she was not going to let the lives of those people be wasted. They still had yet to find out where the wizard called home but they were getting close. If he could be brought down, the entire organization would crumble and the town could be saved. But it wasn't getting any easier.

Reports had come back that more thieves had arrived and the giants had stepped up their patrols of the mines. The enemy was getting larger while her forces were dwindling. They had tried to recruit more people from the town but they were too scared or brainwashed to do anything but obey. The wizard's spies and spells also made it difficult. The Resistance had to free the slaves in the mines before any of their other plans could work. Once the townsfolk families were safe, the people should fight back. Should is what bothered her the most.

“Will it ever end?” she asked herself. As far back as she could remember she has been fighting the wizard and his armies of giants and goblinkind. There were times when she wanted nothing more than to give up and let the town fall, but she knew she couldn’t. There was too much at stake and she knew if this town fell, others would follow and she could not let that happen. She was so lost in her thoughts that she never heard her second-in-command walk in.

“My lady?”

Marcus had seen Mileena under pressure, but never like this. She was standing over a large desk looking at some papers. Her long, curly auburn hair was down and looked a bit unkempt. She wore short leather leggings and high boots the color of the desert sand. Her chest and arms were also adorned with light leather armor. Her midsection was bare because of the intense heat of the desert. Even in the cool underground, beads of sweat formed on her sculpted abdomen, arms and legs. He hoped the news he carried would bring her some comfort. He had seen that worried look on her face hundreds of times and knew she struggled with something other than the illustrations in front of her.

“My Lady?” he said again.

She turned and he looked at her face. It was filled with frustration and looked as though she has not sleep in days. Her large green eyes had dark circles underneath and a few smudges of dirt painted her cheeks. Small beads of sweat dotted her forehead. Still, she managed a smile upon seeing him and that expression served to fill him with joy, if only for a moment.

“Sorry,” she said. “I was just looking over some of these sketches. It’s going to be harder than we thought to get into the mines with the increased patrols and added manpower. Since our last attempt, the wizard has set up wards and traps. With luck, we can rescue a few more slaves next time.” She smiled again and met his eyes. “What news from the mountains?”

“None, my lady. The initial reports of dwarves in the mountains to the south are unfounded, but it still may be true. Our scouts could not get close enough to get a good look. The desert is harsh and the giants patrol heavily, but if they have seen dwarves, they will probably set up more patrols. All we need to do is watch their activities and that should be answer enough.”

She looked back down to her papers. “I’ll take any help I can get. We’ll wait and see if it’s true. I’ll want some men in those mountains to see if anyone can lend help. Any news from the surrounding lands?”

“No. Most of the scouts we send out don’t return and with the lack of incoming volunteers, we can’t send out as many. The guild has spies in the surrounding towns and dispatches any they find asking for help. The entrance to the desert is too well guarded as well and the elves in the forest are too far

away to lend any assistance. Grimfall keeps them constantly on their guard. If we could reach them, I doubt they could send help anyway. We are alone, but I have some news that has affected our foes.”

Mileena listened intently. “Anything that puts a dent in their plans could be of help.”

“You remember the information we were able to get our hands on about the city to the east, Denwald I think it was?” She nodded. “Their dragon was killed by some adventurers.”

Her face lit up, but only for a moment. She realized that with the guild’s attention now solely on Shadowspar and the mines, times were only going to get worse. When their attention was split, her forces could use the distraction to their advantage. But now? Now they were going to have to accelerate their plans if they were to survive.

“Any word on who they are?”

Marcus shook his head. “No names yet but there is a rumor being whispered in the guild’s ranks that one of the men involved is related to the woman in the mines.”

She reached up and rubbed her bottom lip with one of her fingers. Marcus knew she was thinking of ways to turn this to their advantage.

“If we could get him on our side, a dragonslayer, our chances will improve. We also need to keep trying to free her. For whatever reason, that woman is very important to their plans. Find out all you can about this man and his friends. If he is related to her and has found out about her, chances are he will be heading in this direction. We need to find him before they do.”

“Yes, my lady.” When no more came from her, he nodded and left the room.

She turned back to the papers. If they could get the help of adventures that had killed the dragon, their luck could change. If they were heading this way, she hoped they would not use the entrance to the desert. She knew that Valderin’s Gate, the fortress that overlooks the entrance, had been taken over by the guild and the pass is heavily trapped. The only people that could get into the desert would be those the guild wanted in. Until she found out more about this dragonslayer, she would have to wait, but the one thing she did not have much of was time.



Killian hammered away at the rock wall sending fragments of stone falling to the floor. A giant walked past him and he silently said a curse under his

breath. He had been working in the mines for almost two years, ever since he came back from Hollowdon with the news that Garok had been killed and they would have to shut down their operation. His superiors were not pleased. If Garok had been alive they would have taken out their frustrations on him, but instead, they took out their anger on Killian.

He had been beaten, stripped of his rank and sent to the mines to work as a slave. It was not the reaction he had expected. All his life's work in the guild had been wasted. It took years to fight his way up in the organization and on a whim they took everything away. The boy had cost him dearly but strangely, he held no hatred toward him. Killian had made his choice and he would live by that decision. He knew that the guild could turn on any of its members, but he never thought it would be him. No loyalty, he told himself, even among thieves. All he needed to do now was escape, but that was easier said than done. There were plenty of shadows but Druzeel had made sure to place a spell on him to prevent him from shadow jumping. Even if he did manage to jump into the Shadow Rift, there was nothing but an endless desert all around him and he was unfamiliar with his surroundings. The manacle around his ankle also kept him confined to a small area. All he could do was wait until the Resistance came and attempted another rescue. Maybe he could convince them to free him.

The band of rebels had been a thorn in the guild's side ever since they had come to Shadowspar. Even the best thieves of the guild could not find their base. It was rumored that the leader was a powerful wizard but Killian knew it all to be lies. They were just a bunch of townspeople with a lot of luck on their side. He knew it was only a matter of time before Druzeel and the guild found out their location and killed them all. When that happened, Killian would be out of options. He hoped if the Resistance could not aide in his escape, the boy and his friends would. He knew Callobus would head toward the desert. Even he was smart enough to figure out where his mother and sister were taken. At least Killian hoped he was.

He took a deep breath and continued to chip away at the solid wall. A familiar noise sounded behind him a moment later. There was a rush of wind and a low popping sound. The slight smell of brimstone hung the air. He didn't even bother to turn to face the wizard.

"I hope you are being treated well," a mocking voice said from behind. The wizard always had a way of ruining his day.

"Wonderful. I can't tell you how happy I am to help. Chiseling away at this rock is what I've always wanted to do." Killian turned to face him.

Druzeel was dressed in dark green robes with yellow trim. A mantle of

the same colors lay on top of his robes, which ended in pointed tips near the shoulders. His black hair was always neatly trimmed, as was his closely cut goatee. His red eyes added to the sinister look. A handful of rings lay on his fingers and other magical items lay hidden within the folds of his robes. He held a golden staff that was wrapped in veins of red and white. They ran from the base of the staff all the way to the top. Their constant pulsating made them look like twisted arteries. The top of his staff was tipped with a skull that was constantly changing color, but no matter how many times Killian saw the wizard, what always seemed to amaze him was how young he looked.

He looked no more than twenty but in reality, Killian knew him to be well over fifty. It was widely known that the wizard toyed with potions and spells that kept him young because he hated the idea of growing old. He had gotten the nickname of the Ageless by many of the guildsmen. Many times his opponents had underestimated him because of his outward appearance. Most of them were either dead or enslaved because of their misjudgment.

“I’m glad you enjoy it for you may be here for some time. We always love using elves over humans because of your long life span. The same goes with dwarves, but they are so much harder to come by, and control.” Druzeel put on a cruel smile. Killian knew this was not a social visit just so the wizard could berate him.

“What do you want?” he finally said.

“What all men want—power. But today, I need to look inside your head. I need to look upon that boy. He is becoming very popular lately and he has caused me more trouble than he knows. I just realized that I have never seen him up close. Garok was the one who dealt with him but now, because of his untimely death, you’re the only one left who has seen the boy. Until now I have had no reason to be concerned about him, but he has become increasingly troublesome.”

Killian smiled slightly at the mention of Garok’s death and the fact that Callobus was becoming a nuisance. Druzeel caught the expression.

“I’d be delighted to describe the boy to you, in the fullest detail, but I seem to have forgotten what he looks like. Let me think.” Killian tapped his chin for a bit. He could see Druzeel was getting agitated. “Think he was a short man with long blonde hair. No, wait. Tall, with red hair. No, that’s not it either. I just can’t seem to remember. Sorry for the inconvenience.”

Druzeel’s irritated expression disappeared and he smiled once again. “That’s quite all right. What your memory has locked away, my magic can pry open.”

The wizard’s hand shot out and reached for Killian’s head. Because of

his bonds, he couldn't get away. Druzeel's hand gripped him tightly on the head and he squeezed. The wizard chanted and pain shot through him. He screamed and dropped to his knees. It felt as though his brain was going to explode. Images flashed through his head of Denwald and Hollowdon. He saw Garok, Maulrong and the uprising. Then Callobus appeared and the image of the boy stopped. After what seemed like an eternity, the pressure on his head disappeared and the pain disappeared. He felt something on his face right below his nose and brought his arm up to wipe it away. It was blood. He looked up at the wizard with intense hatred.

"Thank you. I see you were quite busy while in Hollowdon. You certainly know how to keep yourself entertained."

Fear ran through Killian for the first time in years. Druzeel had just seen everything that happened—the uprising, his role in helping Callobus escape—everything. If his life was bad now, it was only going to get worse. He slowly got to his feet and looked at Druzeel, expecting the wizard to strike him down or reduce him to ashes, but nothing happened.

"I'll see you again," was all he said. He spoke a few words and vanished from sight. The only clue that he had been there at all was the musky smell of brimstone.

Killian wiped his face clean. He knew now that the days he had left to live had considerably shortened. If Druzeel's superiors found out what he had done, they would torture him until he begged for death. The wizard would hold it over him forever and would certainly use it as a tool to get him to do things he would not normally do. Killian was now a toy for the evil man.

He walked over and picked up his pickaxe. He slammed it on the rock so hard that he bent the tip.



Druzeel appeared back in his study and went right to the crystal orb. With the image of the boy still in his head, he waved his hands over the orb and mouthed the mystic words to activate the artifact's magic. Mist swirled and the image of all his troubles slowly appeared.

The boy was larger than any warrior he had ever seen. His body radiated strength and power and his face was devoid of emotion. Looking closer, Druzeel saw a fresh scar painted his face over his left eye. He could see the eye was devoid of color, giving the boy a demonic look. He wore chainmail and sported a huge sword on his back. The image expanded so he could see where the boy was.

He was in a forest somewhere, accompanied by two others—a dwarf and a human dressed like a priest. These had to have been the ones that helped him kill the dragon. He would watch them intently to see exactly where they were headed. If the boy was coming to free his mother, Druzeel planned to have a few surprises waiting for him. The thieves had been dispatched to the surrounding towns and the giants patrolled the mountains, but he knew there were other ways to get into the desert unseen.

Another image drifted into his thoughts and the crystal acted accordingly, showing the person he was thinking of. The form of a dark skinned elf with short white hair appeared.

“Druzeel,” the form said with a little irritation.

“Yes, Vilhilis. I have some work for you.”

The dark elf sneered. “How may I be of service o mighty wizard?”

“First, put an end to the mocking tone. It does not suit you. I need you to step up your watch in the tunnels. There have been reports of dwarves in the mountains. I thought you said you had the tunnels covered?”

“We do. There are thousands of tunnels spread throughout our subterranean world. I have not the numbers to watch every single one.”

Anger started to rise in Druzeel. He hated dealing with the dark elf, any dark elf for that matter. They were arrogant and thought every race was beneath them. But if that were true, why was he the one giving orders?

“That is true so I want you to watch to the most traveled. Seems the dwarves are getting too curious. Stem the flow and report back to me if anything unusual occurs.”

“And if they get by us?”

“Then you will not be paid so I suggest you make sure they do not. You are a dark elf. Am I to believe dwarves can get by you and your men? Maybe they need a new leader, one who does as he is told. I would hate to believe that you are letting them through.”

The smile on the dark elf’s features disappeared. “Don’t be so bold as to tell me how to run my men. We will stop your dwarves and any who come through. Anyone in particular we should be looking for?”

“Yes, a human. He will be larger than any other human you have seen. Be cautious for he is a highly skilled warrior, as are his friends. Take the man alive but kill the others.” He looked into the dark elf’s yellow eyes making sure he had his full attention when he said the next words.

“Vilhilis, don’t fail me and make sure the man is taken alive.”

The dark elf just put on his mocking grin again but before he could speak, Druzeel ended the sending. That was one avenue taken care of but if the boy

and his friends managed to get through the elves, they would come out into the Whispering Woods. He needed to make sure that road was watched as well.

Closing his eyes, he pictured another form in his mind and activated the crystal. The trees of the woods came into view and he concentrated on one particular part of the forest. The lush green vegetation swirled and turned into a swamp. Murky black water filled the land. Dark colored trees and bushes sprouted from the moist ground. Crocodiles and other creatures made their way through the dark water. He pushed on and the image swirled again. Finally, he came to what he was looking for.

Sitting in a pool of mud and filth was a huge reptilian beast. Druzeel smiled as he saw that it was sleeping and unaware, which would make it that much easier for him to take control. Chanting the words of a spell, he focused all his magic into the crystal to where the beast slept. He felt his mind reach out and dive into its thoughts and dreams. Even though it had many brains, the creature still shared one mind.

Gently, as not to awaken it, he planted a suggestion into its subconscious. It slowly took root and would soon develop into an over powering command. He eased back through its mind and came back to himself. Opening his eyes, he looked into the clear surface and saw the beast awaken. It shook its many heads and growled, but eventually went back to sleep. Druzeel smiled.

“Sleep, my large pet. Soon, you will feed.” He waved the image away and sat back down at his desk. Papers were spread out before him and he realized he still had a lot of work left to do, but the work didn’t seem so bad anymore.

A grin came to his face. The boy and his friends had no idea how bad their lives, or what was left of them, were going to get.

CHAPTER 1

Silverleaf led his fellow elves through the thick underbrush of the Aspenwood. The trees were tall and strong, and though the vegetation was thick this deep in the forest, he and his men moved effortlessly through the woods. The forest had been their home for many years and they knew the trails and secret passages as good as any elf. The sun was high in the sky and bits of light poked through the thick canopy above. A red-tailed hawk flew through the leaves and landed on his shoulder. It squawked a few times and took to the air.

“We’re close,” he whispered to his men.

His party of fifteen elven warriors had been tracking a large party of orcs for some time. News had reached the druids that the dragon that made its home in the mountains had led a war party of orcs in an attack against the human city of Denwald. The humans were able to repel the brunt of the assault but many city guards and citizens were killed. The good news, at least for the city, was that the orcs had been defeated and beaten back into the mountains. A short time ago, the druids also found out that a group of adventurers had found and killed the dragon. Leaderless, the orcs fell into disorder once again and some had fled into the forests, trying to make a home for themselves. That the druids could not allow. They’d been sending out rangers to track the orcs and remove them from the woods by any means necessary.

As far as he could tell by the tracks they left, the orc party only consisted of about ten and three of them were wounded. They had surprised the party a while back and killed a few but the rest got away, some with arrows in their backs. Retreating quickly as they were, it was easy for Silverleaf and the others to track them. What they did not know is where they were fleeing. There could

be more orcs in the woods and they could be running to them so he wanted to be careful. When the tracks looked less hurried and slowed to a walk, he told his men to stay back while he scouted ahead. It would be easier for one of them to get close than the entire patrol.

Silverleaf, as well as the rest of his men, wore armor that helped them blend into the forest surroundings. Their armor was painted the color of the trees and all of them carried a small wooden shield in the form of a leaf. All the elves of the Aspenwood decorated their faces and arms with green paint in the shapes of elven runes. They believed the runes held mystic power that helped protect them. All carried bows and a quiver full of elven arrows but each carried the weapon they were most comfortable with. He carried a spear but also had a longsword for fighting up close. Because the brush was so thick, he had to leave his spear behind. His hair was pulled back and tied into many small ponytails that hung just below his shoulders.

Crawling on hands and knees, he silently made his way through the brush, toward the orc camp. He could hear the creatures speaking in their barbaric language and could smell the filth and death that always clung to their kind. A couple of sentries were posted on the outside of the camp, keeping watch for the others. Deciding to let them live because he did not want the alarm sounded too early, he snuck around to the side of the encampment.

The camp held about twenty orcs, all of whom now sat around a small bonfire. The three wounded lay near the fire trying to warm their bodies, for winter was fast approaching and the air held a bitter chill. All but four of the orcs wore leather armor. The others had on chainmail. Each sported a jagged edged longsword and some carried crossbows. They didn't have much food and he could see the remains of dead forest animals littered the ground at their feet. Most of the animals had been killed in the most painful manner possible, which made him angry. The beasts held no respect for the forest or the creatures that made it their home. Some of the trees had been hacked to pieces for their firewood and the vegetation all around the camp had been killed and cleared away. Some of the orcs were arguing but he couldn't understand what they said for he did not speak their language. A trail in the back of the camp led deeper into the forest, toward the mountains.

Silverleaf couldn't tell if this was all that was left of the orc horde or if more were roaming the woods. The rangers and druids had killed many of the smelly creatures in the past few days but they were like cockroaches—where one was, you could count on many more being nearby. They had followed this party for a few days and he felt confident that this was all that was left so he headed back to his men to plan the assault. Orcs were not as comfortable in

daylight as elves so he decided to strike right away.

He made his way back to his men and informed them about the layout of the camp and the two sentries in front. The elves fanned out, each knowing exactly what their role in the attack would be. The group had been working together for some time now and each man knew their place in battle. He would head the frontal assault while Sunlas and Enillas led the attack from the sides. Three of the others would make their way to flank the orcs and prevent any from retreating further into the woods. They wanted to make sure this was the last time the creatures disturbed their home.

“Eldain, Velrand—the sentries are yours.”

They were the best archers in the group and they would take out the sentries. When they dropped, Silverleaf would start the attack.

The elves slowly made their way forward as not to make a sound and alert their prey to their presence. The two archers, two other elves and Silverleaf reached their positions and waited a few moments for the others to get ready. He looked over at Eldain and Velrand and nodded. Both took a single arrow from their quivers and strung it. While eyeing the sentries, each pulled back on the bow and let fly.

The last thing the two orcs heard before the arrows pierced their necks was the twang of the bowstrings. They tried to cry out in alarm but the elves were so skilled the arrows had cut through their vocal cords and only bubbles of blood came out. Both creatures grasped at the arrows in a futile attempt to pull them free. They fell to the ground and their struggling ceased.

The rest of the orc camp still had no idea that two of their companions were dead. Silverleaf made a chirping sound to signal the others. The orcs paid no attention. He received a high squawking in response and knew the rest of his men were in position. He and the other four elves came forward and removed the weapons from the dead orcs.

“You two stay back here and drop as many of the ones with crossbows as you can. We need to take one alive to see if there are any others we missed.” The two nodded and Silverleaf gripped his spear while the other two behind him took out their weapons—one a longsword and the other a pair of rapiers. He chirped one last time and got into position. He realized they could probably kill all in the camp with their arrows but they needed to make sure none escaped for they could bring more orcs to the forest. He would not take that risk.

A sudden shout came from the orc camp. Two of the creatures finally noticed that their companions were missing and they walked over to where Silverleaf lay hidden. He assumed they were calling out their companion’s names and gripped his spear in both hands as they walked closer. When they

came within a few feet, Silverleaf bolted between them.

It took a moment for them to realize an elf just ran by. They grabbed their swords and turned to follow. An arrow hit each of them in the back, dropping them to their knees. Before they could rise, the other two elves ran out and drove their weapons through their skulls. Blood sprayed and the two fell to the ground. The elves ran on, following Silverleaf into the camp.

The orcs realized they were under attack and drew their weapons. Since they only saw three elves, they thought it was going to be an easy victory. As Silverleaf reached the first one, the rest of his men that were in hiding exploded into action. Arrows flew from the woods and cut down four orcs immediately, before they knew what was happening. The rest got their weapons out in time to meet the attackers.

Silverleaf was the first to reach the orcs and he jabbed out with his spear. To its credit, the orc parried like a seasoned warrior and tried to get in closer, but Silverleaf pulled back and whirled his weapon rapidly then swept it around in a wide arc at the orc's feet. This time it was too slow and the tip of the spear took it in the legs, slicing through flesh. It screamed and struggled to keep its balance but the pain was too much and it fell to the ground. Silverleaf flipped his weapon around, leapt toward the prone orc and rammed it through its chest. After a few breaths, it stopped struggling. He pulled the weapon free and continued forward into the fight. His two friends had already passed him and engaged the others in the camp.

One orc broke ranks and turned to flee from the battle. It took three steps toward the trail that led back toward the mountains and got two arrows embedded into its chest. The force stopped the orc cold and it fell.

Silverleaf saw the orc drop and silently thanked his friends who had taken position in the back. No orc would leave this camp alive and the other orcs seemed to know that as well for they fought like crazed animals, swinging wildly, trying to get away. One of his men screamed as a blade bit into his arm, almost severing it. His weapon dropped and the orc slashed him across the chest, splitting his armor and spilling blood on the grass. Silverleaf watched in horror as the orc continued to hack him to pieces. He yelled out and lifted his spear. With all his strength, he threw the weapon.

The spear flew through the air and slammed into the crazed orc's side just beneath the armpit. The orc was thrown sideways and tumbled to the ground where it laid still, the spear still sticking out of its body. Silverleaf unsheathed his sword and blocked a swing from an orc who thought him unarmed.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw another of his men fall, his throat cut. These were no ordinary stupid orcs, he knew. They had been well trained

and the creatures knew how to fight. They had underestimated them but with two of his companions already dead, they would quickly compensate for their mistake. The orc in front of him came on with bloodlust in its eyes.

He raised his shield to block the wicked sword. He was rewarded with a loud thunk as it cut a groove into the surface. He pushed forward and the orc stumbled back but held its footing. Whirling his sword, Silverleaf jabbed his weapon forward but the orc knocked the blade away and tried to punch him with its off hand. He ducked and brought his shield up, knocking its arm away and leaving an opening, so he swung his sword around and it bit into the orc's shoulder. It growled and brought its sword up but was too slow. Silverleaf was able to hop back just as the blade came by where his face was a moment earlier.

He decided to go on the offensive and rushed in, hoping to catch his opponent off guard. It worked and the orc fell back a step. He followed through with a backslash that hit the orc down the chest and ripped through its leather armor, drawing blood. Using the momentum of his downward slash, he continued down, turned and brought the sword around, which cut the orc's head from its shoulders. The body stood like a strung puppet for a heartbeat and then dropped to the ground.

Another of the creatures rushed in thinking to get a sneak attack on him. Silverleaf turned quickly and brought his shield up to block the strike. The orc's weapon hit the shield but it kept coming forward, slamming into him and driving him back toward the woods. It never let up and kept slashing at him. Silverleaf parried with shield and sword but the orc was relentless so he let it swing. The intense fighting strategy it was using would only last so long. Taking small steps backwards, he saw the orc was getting tired. Silverleaf felt the tree at his back and feigned a moment of weakness. Surprise showed on the orc's features and it rushed in for the kill.

Silverleaf dropped low and jumped to the side. The creature's sword thunked into the tree and the weapon was held tight. It tried to pull away so Silverleaf reversed his grip on his sword and jabbed it into the orc's side, driving it into its kidneys. It screamed and dropped to the ground trying to stem the flow of blood. Another swing of his sword ended its life.

He turned and saw six orcs left. Another of his men had dropped but was still alive and had crawled away from the fight, a nasty wound on his leg. Making sure his friend was out of danger, he looked to the ground and saw one of the orcs that had dropped was still alive and was searching through one of the many sacks the orcs had around the camp. All of his men were occupied so he made for the creature. It saw him coming and searched faster. It finally drew out a black signal horn.

Fear gripped Silverleaf. He knew what the horn meant. There were other orcs in the area and the beast was about to call for aid. They had the orcs outnumbered but if this one called for help, there was no telling how many would show.

He yelled for one of his archers to stop the orc for he was too far to reach it in time, but the noise from the battle around him was too loud and word did not reach Haldthas in time.

It brought the horn to its lips and blew. A deep bellow sounded throughout the camp. The sound could no doubt be heard for quite a distance. Two arrows flew into the orc, stopping the noise and bringing a yell from its throat. Silverleaf quickly surveyed the battlefield, trying to determine where the orcs would come from and how much time he had before they showed. Then he heard a rustle in the woods back near his archers.

He made for the front of the encampment and saw Velrand fall from the brush, his body bloody from many sword wounds. Eldain came out as well, fighting off three orcs. He had cuts on one arm and a gash on his face but he held them back. Just as Silverleaf thought his friend would prevail, a fourth orc came from the side and rammed its sword into Eldain's side. His strength left him and the other three orcs cut him to pieces. The four orcs ran into the battle followed closely by six others that emerged from the woods.

Silverleaf couldn't understand how the other creatures had arrived so fast unless they were already—

The thought entered his mind and he turned to warn the other archers near the back of the encampment. He saw Haldthas stumble out of the woods and fall to the ground. Four daggers were embedded into his chest. Legimil ran out, firing arrows into the trees. Ten more orcs followed him. One of the closer orcs got an arrow in the eye and fell but another ran around him and slashed through Legimil's bow, breaking it in two. His friend tried to draw his sword but was so intent on getting away from the orcs he tripped over a root and fell to the ground. The orcs fell upon him and ripped him to shreds.

Silverleaf shouted a warning to his men. He ran over and yanked his spear free of the orc. "To me! Defensive circle."

The remaining elves pushed away their attackers to get back to back next to their captain. One elf ended another orc's life with a sword strike through the face and got into the circle.

They were surrounded and outnumbered. The orcs closed in on them, many still covered with the blood of his men. Others licked the blood off their swords. Half of his remaining men had been wounded in some way and Silverleaf did not think they would have the strength to fend off the remaining

orcs. Their circle tightened, as did the circle of orcs surrounding them.

“We go down fighting. May Alerirs Goldenbow take you to his kingdom,” he said, referring to the god of goodly elves.

“And may Larhishia Silverhair smile upon you,” one of his men replied, referring to Alerirs’s wife, the goddess of the goodly elves.

He was about to lash out with his spear when his elf ears picked up a soft chanting somewhere to the left of him, in the woods behind the orcs. The chanting stopped and he noticed the two orcs in front of him stood rigid. The chainmail around them started to glow red and he could feel the heat coming from the armor. They screamed as the metal started to turn white. The other orcs looked to their companions. Just then, the orc to his right grunted and fell to the ground, a small throwing axe embedded in its spine.

All eyes turned and they saw a strange dwarf burst through the bushes, running at the orcs. He was wielding an odd weapon. It seemed too large for the small, charging dwarf. It had an axe head on one side and a hammer’s head on the other. He wore a spiked helmet on his head and his armor was an amalgam of different types of protection, but looked as though it fit together perfectly. He sported a long black beard and shouted at the orcs as he came on. Two of the orcs growled in return and ran to meet him. Silverleaf wasn’t one to let a good opportunity go to waste and sprung forward, skewering one of the orcs who was trying to get his armor off.

The rest of his men acted upon the orcs’ distraction and attacked. Silverleaf pulled the spear free and met two oncoming orcs. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the dwarf hit one of the orcs in the kneecap and it dropped to the ground, yelling in pain. Then another figure emerged near the dwarf. He saw it was a human dressed like a priest with a long white cloak. So that’s whom the chanting came from, he thought.

His thoughts were ripped away from their rescuers when a sword came at his face. He raised the spear and knocked the blade away. Another orc came in but he lashed out with the opposite end of his weapon and connected solidly to the orc’s stomach, drawing a groan from the creature. It backed off, trying to regain its breath.

One came back in with a wicked slash to his right. Silverleaf dodged and jumped back. He raised his spear to jab down at the orc and it raised its sword to block the thrust so he swung around instead and hit the orc in the side of the head, sending it stumbling to the side and falling hard to the ground. The one he had hit in the stomach regained its breath and came in swinging. Silverleaf thrust out once again but this time it was ready and turned to the side. The spear went harmlessly wide and the orc came in close, so he dropped his spear

and tried to withdraw his sword, but the orc was so close he had to back off. The orc followed.

Swing after swing of the jagged blade came in. He dodged to the right side, jumped back and rolled to the other side confusing the orc and sending him off in a separate direction. He rolled and came to his feet, sword in hand. Silverleaf just noticed the roll had driven him back toward the woods and the other orc he had hit in the head was back on its feet, coming at him. Looking quickly to the battle, he could see with the help of the human and the dwarf, the orcs had lost four of their companions, but another of his men had dropped. He still did not know what happened to the other orc whose armor had heated up.

The two orcs circled him. One came in from each side. Silverleaf fended one strike with his shield and the other with his sword. The orc on the left brought its blade in but he sidestepped and stuck his foot out. The orc tripped and stumbled into its partner, sending them both stumbling back. They regained their footing quickly and turned toward him again. He now had his back to the battle and had to glance around every so often to make sure an orc wasn't sneaking up on him.

The orcs, seeing his discomfort, decided to fight dirty and one reached for its crossbow. In the melee, Silverleaf hadn't even noticed the other weapons they had on their belts. He started to run forward to intercept the attack, but stopped in his tracks as he saw another form emerge from the forest behind the duo.

It had to be one of the largest humans he had ever seen. The man towered over the orcs and had a very large sword he had to hold with two hands just to wield. His arms were as large a tree branches. He had a nasty scar over his left eye and Silverleaf noticed that it was colorless. Bright chainmail glinted in the few rays of sun that managed to make it through the trees. But the weirdest thing about the man was that he wasn't making a sound as he walked up on the two unsuspecting orcs.

Just as the orc readied to fire, the large man brought his sword around and almost cut the orc in half. Blood sprayed all over its friend and the body flopped to the ground, spilling blood and entrails all over the grass. The other looked down at its companion in horror and then up at the man. It screamed in silence as he rammed the sword through its chest. It convulsed for a few moments then lie still. The man threw it from his sword and nodded at Silverleaf.

He could only nod back at the man who had just cleaved an orc in two. He mentally thanked Alerirs Goldenbow that the warrior was fighting against the orcs and not his men.

The sphere of silence that encompassed the man followed wherever

he went. Silverleaf followed right beside him, piercing an orc through the back that was just about to kill one of his men and driving it to the ground. Everywhere the man walked, orc blood was spilt. The gleaming sword swung out wide and lopped the head from one while taking the arm from another. An orc, foolish enough to try its hand at the warrior, was cut from neck to groin. Blood sprayed all that surrounded it. It ran around screaming in agony until the large sword pierced its chest.

The dwarf and the human priest were excellent fighters as well. The priest chanted a spell and a shimmering blue mace appeared over the head of one orc, bashing in its head and knocking it unconscious. He threw up his shield, parried and swung, twisted to the side and brought the mace he was carrying down on an orc's arm, breaking the bone and making the creature howl in pain. The dwarf bashed another in the groin with his hammer and when it fell to its knees yelling in pain, he flipped the weapon and planted the axe into its skull, silencing it forever. Silverleaf thought he saw the dwarf giggling.

Not another one of his men fell, for upon finally turning and seeing the destruction the large man had wrought on its companions, the last few orcs turned and fled for the cover of the forest. The elves dropped their weapons, withdrew their bows and started firing. One orc almost made the trees but the human warrior unslung his own bow and sent an arrow speeding its way. The arrow burst through its chest and sent it flying forward to stick in a tree. It stayed nailed to the trunk and slumped over, dead. The strength of the man had to be considerable for later the elves would learn the arrow was almost embedded an entire foot into the dense oak.

After the last orc dropped, Silverleaf walked up to the trio who had gathered around the one orc who was still alive. It was unconscious. He would need to take it back to the druids to see if there were any orcs left in the forest, but first he wanted to thank their rescuers for saving them.

The man and his companions looked at him and the remaining elves that gathered around their captain. Of his fifteen men, he and seven others had survived but they would have surely been killed if it not for the three strangers. The elves owed them their lives.

“Well met, friends. I thank you for your help. We owe you our lives.” He put his hand over his heart in the typical greeting of the elves and druids. The dwarf was the first to speak.

“Aye lads. When it comes ta killin’ orcs, no thanks be needed. We be ‘appy ta ‘elp, even if it be elves that be in danger.” The dwarf gave a little laugh. It was well known that elves and dwarves did not get along, but the dwarf was trying to be friendly. A slight smile came to Silverleaf’s face.

“Yes, and we are happy to accept help, even from dwarves.” That brought a hearty laugh from the dwarf. The elves around him chuckled as well. The dwarf stopped laughing and elbowed his large human friend.

“I be likin’ this elf. ‘E’s got a sense o’ ‘umor.”

The priest walked over to him. “Are any of you injured? I can provide healing if you wish.”

Silverleaf was more than happy to accept his help and the elves that had been wounded came forward. As the human was healing, he looked to the large man who had yet to speak.

“As I said before, we are glad to have your help. May we ask the names of our saviors?”

“Aye lad,” the dwarf said. “I be Brom. The one ‘hos ‘ealin’ be Orin an this min’ ture giant be Callobus.”

The big man looked directly at him and finally spoke. “May I have your name this time, or do you still wish to remain unknown?”

The comment confused Silverleaf. He looked at the man carefully and then it dawned on him. Two years ago in the forest near the river, he had met this man. He had told him he was using the forest as shelter against possible attacks. Silverleaf felt him to be no threat to the forest or his people and wished him well. The man had looked completely different then for he didn’t have the scar over his eye and he had grown in height and in width. The man saw the recognition and just nodded. Silverleaf felt a bit overwhelmed for he thought the dragon would have killed all able-bodied soldiers in the city, but he didn’t have the look of a guard of Denwald.

“Forgive me for not recognizing you earlier. I see you have fared well in your journey. My name is Halinair Silverleaf and this is my *tehira*, or company of soldiers in your language. We are rangers from the druid enclave of Faragard and have been ridding the forest of these creatures for some time now. It seems the orcs were not as unorganized as we first thought. Luckily, you three happened to come along. You saved our lives.”

“I’m sure you would have done the same,” said the priest as he walked back to his friends. Silverleaf turned to see that all the cuts and scratches his men had received during the battle were gone. The priest was truly a master of his craft.

“Do you all hail from the human city of Denwald?” Silverleaf asked and looked to the three companions.

“Callobus and I do but Brom is from the Heldonrock Mountains far to the west,” Orin said. “But we are now on a personal quest. Callobus is trying to find some of his family and we journey to the dwarf’s home. We believe they

were taken somewhere in the Kilmor Desert and are heading that way. Rumors of orcs roaming the forest reached our ears before we left so we are doing what we can to help. I hope you don't mind us passing through."

Silverleaf smiled. "We never object to travelers who mean no harm to the woods or the animals. The rumors of the druids striking down any who travel through the Aspenwood are just that—rumors. Any goodly creature that wishes to enter the forest is welcome to do so as long as they treat the environment around them with respect. Evil creatures such as orcs and goblins only do their surroundings harm and are not welcome in these forest. The druids and the humans of the city have an agreement about the woods. We both benefit, but ever since the dragon arrived, we have had our share of problems as I'm sure the city has as well. But I hear the dragon has been killed. How does the city fare?"

"Well, I'm glad to say. Trade has started to pick up again and the citizens have started to live their lives once more. Things are returning to normal and the treasure from the dragon's lair is helping the city recover. There was enough gold for a small kingdom."

Silverleaf paused at the mention of the dragon's treasure. "You speak as one who has seen the horde firsthand."

The dwarf laughed. "We 'ave lad. We be the ones 'ho blowed up the cavern an Callobus 'ere be the one 'ho cut the beast's hed off. Blasted shame ta be cov'rin' up the treasure before we 'ad a chance ta be gettin' a piece, but the city guard be workin' ta uncover what's left."

Silverleaf's mouth hung open in shock. He could not believe he was looking at the three warriors who were responsible for the dragon's demise. For just three to kill a beast of that nature was unheard of.

"You're jesting."

Callobus's expression hardened. Upon seeing his expression, Silverleaf knew that the dwarf was telling the truth. To prove the point, Brom unslung his backpack and took out a large claw.

"This be part o' its claw. Callobus be takin' the ends o' its teeth an made 'imself a necklace. Damned lizard be tuff. We almost died in that cave but the big man 'ere be killin' it by 'imself."

"Not by myself." The large man's expression changed from serious to one filled with sorrow but he seemed to catch himself and it changed back quickly. He also didn't appear to want recognition for the seemingly impossible task. Before Silverleaf could think on it more, Brom spoke again.

"Aye, tis true. One o' our friends not be makin' it but 'elped distract the beast. But the impor'tant thing be that the dragon be ded an the town an woods

be safe.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Silverleaf said. He truly did mourn the loss of one of their companions for he knew what it was like to lose a close friend in battle. He had just lost half of his men, many of them friends. “We know the dragon was killed but did not think the heroes would be standing in front of us. Know that your friend did not die in vain. His sacrifice, and yours, saved the lives of many people, elves and humans alike.”

All Callobus could do was nod. Silverleaf could hear the murmurs of his men behind him. Words like dragonslayer and insane could be heard in the same sentence. What really had him baffled was why the trio had set out from the city. By accomplishing such a feat, surely fame and fortune would find them, but the big man did not seem to want any of those. Priests were usually too humble to seek those things out no matter what the accomplishment. And the dwarf? Dwarves were always hard to read but he thought Brom was the type to just go along for a battle. The three were obviously close friends. He wished he could speak more of the dragon and their journey but they had more pressing matters. The orc needed to be taken back to the druids for questioning. If more of the creatures were planning to invade the woods, their patrols would need to increase.

“We need to take this orc back to Faragard for questioning. We need to know if there are any more orcs or plans for them to come into the forest. With the dragon dead we had hoped they would retreat back into the mountains but it looks as though they will not.”

“The dragon was not their commander,” Callobus said.

“How do you know?”

“They took orders from a human wizard, as did the dragon,” Orin said. “We have yet to discover his name but had a run in with some of his associates. We believe this same wizard is the one who has taken Cal’s family. With the dragon dead, we think he has abandoned all efforts to assault the city and your woods. The orcs have been abandoned and are scrambling for anything to stay alive.”

“It’s good that you found this out. The druids may be able to use this information to find out more about the wizard. Would you be willing to come with us to Faragard to share what you have learned?”

“Would that be wise?” Orin asked. “I don’t think they would want outsiders knowing the way to their city.”

Silverleaf sighed. “That is true, but the information you have could help our efforts tremendously and it may be possible to find the exact location of the wizard, and your family. We’ll have to blindfold you when we get close

our home.”

Callobus looked to Orin and Brom. Brom just shrugged but Orin nodded in agreement. They knew if they could find the location of the wizard and his family, their travel time could be cut in half. Any chance that he could look in on his mother or sister was worth taking the time to find out.

“We’ll go,” Callobus said.

“We thank you for your help. We will need to take back as many of the dead as we can carry. The rest will be hidden and another *tehira* will come to retrieve the bodies. The orcs stay where they fell. The forest will take care of them.”

The three adventures said they would help in bringing back the dead. Some makeshift cots were made out of the dead bark and tree limbs that littered the ground. The bodies were gently placed and tied down. It would take a few days to make it back to Faragard. Silverleaf could learn more about the three during that time.

He had many questions running through his head about them and the mysterious wizard who they had said was the one responsible for the dragon and the orcs. If he was, he had more crimes than just Denwald to answer for. When the dragon had first appeared, the druids tried to find the creature’s lair but powerful magic, no doubt from the wizard, blocked their search and backfired. The wards the wizard had set caused the magic to go awry and turn back on the casters, killing them. When Silverleaf found out his brother had been slain in the backlash, he devoted the rest of his days to finding out who had caused his death, but the orcs had appeared and hindered his quest. Now, with the dragon dead and the flow of orcs slowing, he had time to find his brother’s killer. If these three warriors were on a quest to find the same wizard who was responsible for his brother’s death, he would follow.

The wizard just made another enemy.



Callobus made his way through the forest with the elves as fast as he could. Even with the weight of the dead, they moved quickly through the thick brush. Though he could not see it, Silverleaf said they were on trails that would lead them back to the city of Faragard. The elves had a keen sense and were very skilled in navigating the Aspenwood. He was already lost and was sure that both Orin and Brom were as well.

Surprisingly, Brom made friends quickly among the elves. His jests brought chuckles from them all and they answered back with jokes of their

own. Orin seemed quite comfortable as well. His ever-curious mind sought answers to questions about the druids and the others that lived in the forest. He was cautious not to pry too far though. The elves were very careful to keep the location of their city and the ways they navigated through the forest a secret. They knew of many ways to travel through the woods, ways humans and others races did not know about and they wanted to keep it that way, which seemed fine to Callobus. The elves and other peoples of the Aspenwood would be lost in any large human city. He could see why they lived in the forest. It was calm and peaceful, just as it had been those two years earlier when he first stepped foot in the woods. He was more comfortable here than in Denwald. The thought didn't trouble him in the least.

The night came on and they set up a small camp in a clearing. The elves could have traveled throughout the night but he and his friends needed to rest. The orc was tied up and placed near a tree where three elves stood over him. If it tried to escape, they said they would fill it full of arrows. Callobus knew it was an empty threat for they needed information out of the orc about its companions. Orin said he could stop the orc without violence if it tried to escape, but they all knew the creature would stay where it was.

As they prepared to rest for the night, Callobus noticed the elves did not lie down as humans did. They would sit, cross their legs and place their hands on their knees. Then they would close their eyes. It looked more like a meditative trance than sleep but Orin later assured him it was similar. He read many books of the forest people and said elves go into a type of meditative trance called *miltishar* instead of sleep. It didn't take hours like normal sleep for humans and they came out of the trance fully rested. It seemed strange but it was their way of doing things.

Callobus was about to lie down when Silverleaf walked over to him and sat down next to the small fire. He wore the look of someone who had questions.

"I want to thank you again for your help. You put on an impressive display of strength and your fighting ability is amazing for one of your size."

Callobus just nodded and looked into the fire. The elf put his hands closer to the flames to warm them. The nights had become increasingly colder. It would only be a few more days before the snow started to fall. They should be well on their way to Brom's home before then. He knew it snowed in the Heldonrock Mountains but the desert would be hot and dry.

"I hope you don't mind me asking, but what happened? How did you defeat the dragon and destroy its lair?"

"Mostly luck." The elf paused but remained silent. "Brom had special powder that caused the explosion. We managed to sneak it into the cave while

Orin and our other friend kept the dragon occupied. I joined the battle and managed to goad the beast into breathing its fire to where we hid the stuff. The explosion brought the ceiling down and buried it, but it wasn't dead. I awoke and it emerged from the rubble. Serl managed to distract it but died in the process. I got free and killed it but was too late to save him."

The entire battle played out in his head again. He purposely kept the part of the rage out of his explanation. The elf did not need to know that detail.

"This," he raised his hand to his eye, "was a parting gift from the dragon. Orin managed to heal us enough so we could make it back to Denwald. Soon after returning, we left. The mayor was less than happy about us killing the dragon without his knowledge. Made him look bad. The bastard even tried to have us arrested. I helped some friends get back on their feet and left. I was going to go alone but they insisted on accompanying me. Brom has been away for some time and needed to return anyway. Orin just wanted to help."

"Your friends are loyal to you."

"I just hope their decision doesn't cost them their lives." He felt a deep sense of sadness for Serl and for the condition Keld was in because they had decided to help him. Bytia flashed in his mind but he quickly dismissed the image. Thinking of her was still too painful. The elf continued to speak.

"That is their decision to make. I think they know the potential consequences of their actions. My men face the same. None of them were forced to come with me, they choose to. That's what friends do. They put themselves in that position because they care."

Callobus nodded. He knew the elf was right and had heard the same from Keld and Emaria. He had a question for the elf.

"What brings you into the woods searching for orcs? You say your men choose to come with you. Were you not sent?"

"Yes and no. I have a duty to defend these woods from all who wish to do it harm. It is my home just as Denwald is, or was, yours. But for me, the desire to drive them away comes from a desire to find out who was leading them. I thought the dragon was the one pulling their strings but with the news you gave me, it seems someone else was in charge. The same person may be responsible for the death of my kin and that action cannot go unanswered."

"You talk like someone close to you was hurt."

"It is true. Until now, I was not sure I wanted to share this with you, but I see now that you have a pure heart and you suffer from a similar loss. My brother was one of the druids trying to find the location of the lair when the magic backfired and killed him. It looks like your wizard may be the one responsible."

“I’m sorry.”

Silverleaf nodded and looked into the fire. “He was always trying to help out and I told him to let the more experienced druids handle it, but he insisted. Though I mourn his death, I know he only did what he thought was right. Hopefully, we will be able to find out who this wizard is and bring him to justice.”

Justice was not what Callobus had in mind. He would find the wizard and kill him. The way the elf talked made it sound as though he would accompany them to Brom’s home and beyond. He welcomed the thought of having an experienced ranger along for the journey. He didn’t ask and decided to wait and see what happened when they reached Faragard. Orin was excited about getting to see the city but Brom did not care all that much. He was more comfortable in the mountains and underground than he was in a forest. Either way, Callobus knew that seeing the forest city was something that few outsiders had the opportunity to do, but he was also in a rush to get to the desert. His mother and sister were depending on him.

“May I ask why you left the city so soon?” Silverleaf had turned back toward him. “Surely one who accomplished such a task would be considered a hero among the citizens. Though you say the mayor was upset with your actions, the people would see you as heroes.”

“I’m no hero.” The comment sent a look of bewilderment on the elf’s face. “I only did what I had to do. Now that the dragon is dead and my friends are safe I can find my family. I never wanted any fame or fortune, just a normal life. The beast killed my father and my fiancée. Vengeance is the only thing I care about now. Those who were responsible for this are going to die and I’m going to kill them.”

He turned back to look into the fire. The elf studied him for a long time. After a long silence, he rose.

“There is more to life than vengeance and revenge. Once you find what you are looking for, I think you will realize that. I can understand your pain and understand what drives you. But ask yourself this—once those who are responsible are dead and gone, what then?”

Callobus didn’t have an answer. He had thought long and hard about that but could never come to a conclusion. When the wizard was dead, could he ever hope to return to a normal life? The rage he felt on a daily basis assured that he could not. While around him, his mother, sister and those he cared about were in danger. What scared him the most was that he could now feel it constantly, like an itch he could never scratch. Even now, it tugged at the back of his mind.

The elf walked around the fire and looked back at him. “I hope you find your family Callobus. If I can assist you, I will, but don’t let hate and anger fill your life. That road is a lonely one and can only end unpleasantly. In a few days, we will be at the city. Get your sleep for we leave early in the morning.”

He turned and walked back toward his men. The other elves had been watching him and their captain most of the time. When his eyes met theirs, they turned away. Brom was snoring loudly and Orin had fallen asleep. The elf was right, Callobus knew, but there was nothing else for him at this point in his life. All he had was vengeance.

No sleep came to him that night for visions of the dragon, the wizard, his mother and his sister danced in his head. After he found them, what then? He hoped that he could find a life that was not full of hate and anger. He just wanted to feel normal, but he knew at this point, it was hopeless for the rage was ever trying to break free.