Book One



Ryan Rees-Davies

Book One

Relic Hunters of Rillendael

THE RAVEN BRINGER

by Ryan Rees-Davies

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Originally Published by Ryan Rees-Davies in 2023

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I dedicate this novel to all those Souls seeking connection…

May you find your Light despite the Darkness.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

If, like me and millions of others world-wide, you are a fan of Andrzey Sapkowski's fictional character Geralt of Rivia, found in his 'The Witcher' novels and 'The Witcher 3' video game based on his novels, then read on!

I was inspired to create my character, Draevan, the protagonist of this debut Fantasy novel of mine, who shares Geralt's straightforward, heroic, take no prisoners approach in dealing with the True Evil he encounters, be it monstrous, human, or otherwise. His approach appeals to my personal, primitive sense of justice. We all love to see True Evil stamped out with extreme prejudice instead of being allowed to victimize innocent people repeatedly. We dream of being able to deal with it the same way in 'The Real World'!

Blatant honesty, too, even in the face of potentially negative consequences, is a character trait that I truly appreciate and try to emulate in my own life. In this frequently morally grey world we live in, honesty and trustworthiness are very rare qualities to be found when dealing with people. After half a century of life, and having lived in a number of different countries in the world with varying cultures, I have found this to be true. Without trust, there is inevitably conflict and ultimately Chaos! This applies to every possible relationship, be it personal, commercial, or social. Indeed, human or otherwise.

Protagonists with a long lifespan have always appealed to me on an emotional level due to the sheer strength of will and character I believe it would take to survive a world for an extended period, not only physically but psychologically. I quite simply could not have written this novel, as it stands, earlier in my life, due to the fact that, on an emotional level, it has been inspired by the very real feelings of loss, love, betrayal, and yearning for a Soul

Connection, that I have experienced over my entire lifetime. Yet my lifetime only recently passed a half century. Imagine then if you can, a millennium! Daunting to say the least!

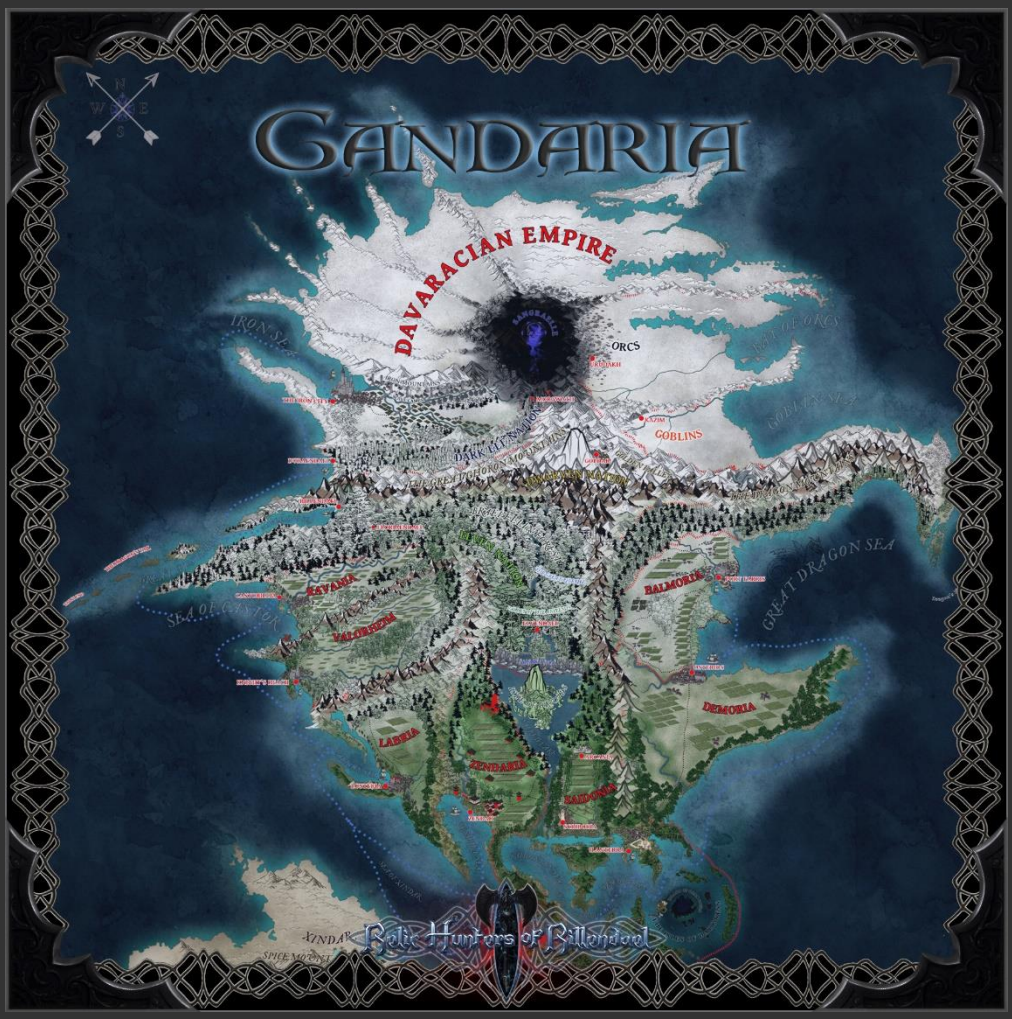
Having hope for the future within an often, at times, dark world is something all fictional heroes that have appealed to me, embody. They are a shining Light to guide our Souls through the Darkness! Inspiring us to keep moving forward in life despite the challenges that we face daily. Draevan's centuries-long, epically adventurous life has meant that he has experienced it all! I have only just begun to explore the depths of it in this first book. There is still so much more to come!

I thank you for using your precious time to read my web of words! I hope you enjoy being caught up in them as much as I have enjoyed weaving them around myself! If you do, please let me know by using my fan email address at the bottom of the copyright page. I wish you all happiness!

Ryan – Happily Dreaming Whilst Awake!



MAP OF GANDARIA



See the following pages for close-up views of the above map

MAP DETAIL I


GANDARIA
DAVARA
IRON SEA
IRON MOUNTAINS
SLAVE CAMPS
THE IRON CITY
DURAENDAEL
THE GRE
RILLENDAEL
WANDERING SEA
FLORIAENDAEL
THE DRAGON'S TAIL
GREAT WESTERN WAY
TAILS END
CASTORILLIA
RAVANIA
SEA OF CASTOR
VALORHEIM
Relic Hunters of Rillendael

MAP DETAIL 2


GANDAIRIA
DAVARACIA
SANGRAELLE
ORCS
URUDAKH
IRON MOUNTAINS
SLAVE CAMPS
MORGWATH
KAZIM
GOBLINS
DARK ELF NATION
THE GREAT/GHORN MOUNTAINS
GOLDAR
GOLDEN VALLEY
DWARVEN NATION
FLORIAENDAEL
BRAELELLIN FOREST
ELVEN NATION
THE GREAT RIVER EL
BALMORIA
VALLEY OF THE ANCIENTS
ELVENDAEL
VALORHEIM
Relic Hunters of Rillendael

MAP DETAIL 3


GANDARIA
RE
ORCS
URUDAKH
BAY OF ORCS
GOBLIN SEA
KAZIM
GOBLINS
GOLDAR
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THE DRAGON MOUNTAINS
GREAT DRAGON SEA
BALMORIA
PORT FARRIS
OSTERIOS
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MAP DETAIL 4


GANDARIA
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MAP DETAIL 5


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MAP DETAIL 6


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ARCANIA
TLANTERRA
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MAP DETAIL 7


GANDARIA
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FLORIAENDAEL
THE DRAGON'S TAIL
GREAT WESTERNIA
RAVANIA
CASTORILLIA
SEA OF CASTOR
VALORHEIM
KNIGHT'S REACH
LABRIA
LABRIAN SEA
LUSTERIA
SEA OF XINDAR
XINDAR
ZINTHARA
Relic Hunters of Rillendael

MAP DETAIL 8


VALLEY OF THE ANCIENTS
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THE MISTS OF EL
OSTERIOS
ISLE OF DRUIDS
SACRED LAKE
DEMORI
ARCANIA
ZENDARIA
SAIDONIA
ZENDAR
SCRIBORIA
ILANTERRA
SAIDONIAN SEA
SEA OF ILAN
STRAIGHTS OF SAIDON
ISLAND OF DARK SOULS
THE ISLES OF DARKNESS
Relic Hunters of Rillendael

PROLOGUE

Draevan looked up at the twin full moons as they rose above the high, snowcapped mountain peaks towering overhead. The Great Ghoron Mountain Range, home of the Dwarven Nation, started here at the border of the Dragon Mountains and wound its way west across the Gandarian continent. Gandaria had been so named in honour of the legendary Dragon God, '*Gandar The Great*', whose massive body was said to have formed the continent itself at the time of his death. A death that ended '*The Age of The Dragon Gods'. T*he continent was split in half by the Ghoron range that were the remains of Gandar's mighty spine, separating the harsh frozen Northern Realms, dominated by the slaver Empire of Davaracia, from all the Free Kingdoms of Gandaria in the South.

Travelling from his adoptive home city of Rillendael, the largest Elven port on the West Coast, south of the Ghoron's, Draevan had made his way east through the vast Bravaellin Forest, home of the Elven Nation. Bravaellin lay below the southern slopes of the Ghorons. The ancient forest stretched across the entire continent from Dragon's Fire Point in the East all the way to the Great Western Way in the West, where the Dragon's Tail lay submerged in the ocean, forming the channel island chain that took that name. The Relic Hunter had been on the road for almost a full moon cycle.

Word had reached him of several recent mysterious disappearances in this remote area that served as the eastern entrance of the Ghorons. It was a favoured location for brigands raiding the Dwarven gold convoys, passing south from their mines hidden deep in the nearby mountain valleys. Only well- armed

convoys dared use the Eastern Way that wove its way south, down the East Coast. Even so, many lives were lost in skirmishes with the brash raiders in the area. However, the recent disappearances were not related to those clashes, it seemed. According to some less than legally employed citizens, it was in fact brigands who had disappeared mysteriously.

Draevan had sent his personal scouts ahead to survey the area. Their unique abilities allowed them to gain information much more discreetly than he could himself. When they behaved themselves, that was. The disadvantage of becoming the most famous Relic Hunter of Rillendael was that, with few exceptions, he could no longer gain information quietly, for the most part.

His fame throughout the entire Gandarian continent had a lot of pros, especially the female companionship kind, but when it came to discrete information gathering, it definitely fell into the cons section. Fortunately, he had many alternatives available to him now after five hundred and forty long years of Relic hunting.

The big silver-grey cloaked Relic Hunter made his way slowly down the forest path towards the Eastern Way. He let his large black war horse, Gorn, the 49th he had given that name, dictate the pace as it negotiated the slippery slope in the moonlight.

As he neared the junction, a small group of five ravens roosting in the trees above the path stirred from their rest. They watched the Relic Hunter arrive at the main road below from the shadows of the branches. His huge battle axe and longsword attached to the harness on his back glinted in the light cast by the twin moons.

With a loud squawk, one of the ravens fluttered up and flew down towards him on magical blue, transparent, feathered wings that covered the

skeletal remains of its dead body. Only around half of its original black feathers remained. The Undead Raven left a subtle ghostly, magical trail in the air just behind it.

Draevan extended his arm, providing a perch for the enchanted bird to land on. It spread its wings wide and settled gently onto his forearm, gripping it through his thick cloak's fabric tightly with its talons. Blue, ghostly eyes burned in its empty eye sockets. The Undead Raven opened its skeletal beak and let out a single loud squawk before a rough, spectral human voice issued from it.

"Ello, boss! Took yor time gettin' 'ere didn't ya! Ou' barely feather'd bums 'ave been stu'k in th't tree fer sev'n long days alre'dy! I wou'd 'ave died of bor'dom by now if I wasn't alre'dy dead! Ha! Ha!" it said humorously.

Draevan's hard, light-grey eyes glinted with a soft blue ethereal magic light under the hood of his cowl. The head of his blue dragon facial tattoo wrapping around his left eye onto his forehead and upper cheek shifted subtly as he raised his eyebrow. "I'm sure you lot amused yourselves as usual," he growled softly in his deep bass voice.

"Who us!? Nev'r! Ha! Ha!" the Undead Raven laughed. "Alrigh', we did 'ave a littl' fun wit' a couple of unsavory typ's earli'r this evenin'! Tho'ght they could set up a little snatch'n grab ove' the road ther'. We flew ov'r for a little chat wif 'em. Turns out they've got a bit of a phobia about the walkin', talkin', flyin', bitin' dead! Scarpered pretty smartly wh'n we did a little snatch'n grab of ou' own on their nether regions! Ha! Ha!"

Three of the other four Undead Ravens in the group above joined in the ghostly laughter. "Mus' 'ave thou't we was afte' their shiny family jewels! Ha! Ha!" one exclaimed.

The corners of Draevan's mouth twitched up with amusement beneath

his beard. "So, besides inspecting the local brigands' nether regions... what have you found out about their missing co-workers? Narrowed down the mystery zone yet?"

The Raven on Draevan's arm cocked its head to one side and raised its skeletal left wing to point toward the mountains. "Jus' a mile up the pass, boss. Seems ta be centr'd roun' the lower rest stop camp site, accordin' to the local dodgy types in th' area. We flew ove' it, but ther's not much ther' oth'r than th' ol' rundown shite houses. Got ta be pretty desperat' ta use 'em tho'! Smells lik' som'thin' crawl'd in ther' and died!"

"Sounds promising," Draevan growled, nudging Gorn forward with his boot heels. The big war horse moved off slowly as Draevan lifted his arm up toward his shoulder, allowing the Raven to climb onto it.

"Time ta fly, boys and gal!" it yelled up to the other Undead Ravens, three black feathered and one white.

They turned left onto the Eastern Way and made their way up the mountain pass in the moonlight, followed silently by the four Ravens.

A mile later, the now evidently occupied campsite appeared on the right-hand side of the road. Recessed into a cliff face that protected it from the strong winds blowing up and down the mountain range. A campfire burned brightly, surrounded by eight long-bearded dwarves cooking their meal in a big pot over the blaze, next to a covered wagon.

"Mmmm, looks like we've go' som' dwarven company tonigh'!" the Undead Raven on Draevan's shoulder remarked, taking flight to join his fellow Undead finding perches in a nearby tree above the road.

Draevan moved slowly towards the dwarves in the moonlight. They heard his big horse's hooves approaching, and all stood up cautiously. Dwarven

axes and great hammers were held at the ready in their sturdy hands. Two carried crossbows over their shoulders.

Draevan stopped his horse just short of the fire so that they could see him in its light and greeted them calmly. "Evening."

The dwarves eyed the big newcomer suspiciously, glancing at each other wearily.

"Well, you'r a big bastard, aren't ya!" one of the dwarves stated loudly.

"We've taken down bigger!" another dwarf stated with conviction, patting the handle of his axe.

"Aye, but my old arse is still numb from that god awful wagon seat bumpin' all the way down the goddamn pass, so I hope you've come in peace, big man? I really don't need another pain in my old arse right now!" asked the nearest dwarf, twirling his large great hammer once in his right hand effortlessly, a meaningful smile on his face.

Draevan smiled back and slowly dismounted. "You can all relax, dwarf. Your old arse has nothing to fear from me. I have no interest in it at all. Or in whatever you have on that wagon of yours." He tethered his horse on an old rusted metal pole buried deep into the ground off to one side of the campfire, testing the old rings to make sure the reins were secure.

The dwarves stood their ground, not relaxing at all.

"I would be interested in doing a bit of trading for some of that fine smelling stew you're cooking up in your big pot there, if you're willing?" Draevan asked, taking a sealed large jug of cider out of his saddlebag and holding it up for the dwarves to see, while lowering his cloak's hood. "A full jug of fresh Bravaellin cider I picked up on my way through the forest worth a bowl?"

The dwarves peered at him carefully, taking note of his slightly pointed

elvish-like ears and wide silver Elven headpiece that ran over the centre of his head, decorated by a small pointed raven head. The metal Elven headpiece held back his mane of long dirty blond hair that was shaved bare on both sides of his head.

A large tattoo of a blue dragon, clutching a round stone in its front claws, adorned the bare scalp on the left side. It wrapped around onto his forehead and face. The right side held a blue raven tattoo that wrapped slightly round onto his forehead, giving its bright blue eye an interesting three-dimensional quality. The eye seemed to peer out at a person viewing it. Various other blue tattoos adorned his neck, extending down out of sight beneath his brown leather armour.

"Well, I'll be damned if you'r not the stoutest elf I've ever seen, stranger! Your kind are normally a tall but skinny bunch!" the older dwarf with the numb arse stated loudly, relaxing visibly and lowering his hammer.

"Aye! And judging by your lack of flowin' white Elven hair, I'd be guessin' you can only be a half-breed that had a very big human father? Or was your mother a big heifer slumin' with the high and mighty Elves?" one of the other dwarves with red hair that resembled the older dwarf stated rudely.

Draeven's face hardened around the eyes, but he grinned at the rude dwarf. "Elf mother, human father," he confirmed.

The older dwarf frowned hard at the rude dwarf. "Excuse my rude young son's big mouth, stranger! He hasn't been out of the mountains before this trip, so he still needs to learn some manners on the road."

Draevan smiled, his hard eyes relaxing.

"No worries, friend dwarf. We were all once brash in our youth. Life has a habit of teaching us manners, slowly but surely," he stated, thrusting out his big hand to the older dwarf. "Draevan of Rillendael."

The dwarf took Draevan's hand in his powerful old work worn hand and shook it solidly. "Very true! Pleased to meet you, Draevan of Rillendael! I am Hammer Hands Ghoronson of the Golden Valley! And this is my brash youngest son, Godurin Ghoronson!" he stated, slapping his son roughly on the shoulder and then steering him towards Draevan to shake his hand.

"You can just call me 'God'!" Godurin stated, shaking Draevan's hand as solidly as he could, a tight smile on his face.

Draevan took the young dwarf's vice like grip in his stride and applied an equal pressure of his own. "Good to meet you, young Ghoronson. You have your father's powerful hands. I'm sure one day you will also have his affable nature."

Godurin's face tightened under the strain of effort as he tried to resist Draevan's rock hard grip. He grinned suddenly and released Draevan's hand before he lost face.

"Oh, yes! Friendliness is a family trait of ours!"

"That it is!" Hammer Hands agreed loudly, a big smile on his face. "Come Draevan, let me introduce you to the rest of my company! Then you are welcome to share a bowl of our humble stew! It is my personal recipe for the road! Not as fine as our usual home cooked stews in the Golden Valley, but it fills the belly!"

***

Draevan scrapped the final spoonful of stew from his wooden bowl and placed it down next to the log he was sitting on. "Damn fine stew, Hammer Hands! Thank you," he said, picking up his wood mug and raising it towards his host before draining the dregs of cider left in it.

"You're welcome!" Hammer Hands stated, raising his cup of cider

towards Draevan too. "Fair trade for this fine cider! Haven't had its like in a very long time!"

Godurin walked over with two tankards of ale he had just poured from a cask of dwarven ale on the back of the wagon.

"Now that you've finished that fancy elvish shite of yours, it's time to warm your belly with some proper drink!" he bellowed, handing Draevan one of the tankards.

Draevan took the tankard from the now smiling and quite tipsy young dwarf, who staggered on his feet slightly before banging his tankard against Draevan's. "This'll put hair on your chest!"

The Relic Hunter smiled indulgently at the young dwarf. They both took a good mouthful from their drinks. Draevan felt the strong ale burn his throat on the way down and immediately begin to warm his belly. "Mmmm, definitely warms the belly on a cold night!"

"Aye! That it does!" Hammer Hands agreed with a smile. "Brew it ourselves for exactly that purpose!" He gestured toward his son. "Should normally be enough in that keg to last the trip down south but the way Godi's tuckin' into it tonight, we'll be lucky if it lasts half way!"

Draevan smiled, glancing back across at Godurin.

"I'm just being sociable, daad!" Godi slurred with a big grin, before burping loudly. "Wouldn't want to be 'rude' to our big guest, now would I?" he stated sarcastically.

"It's not the amount he's drinking that I was referring to, son!" Hammer Hands said pointedly. "I'm amazed it's not pouring out of your ears already!"

"Well, now that you mentioned it...my bladder is feeling a tad full..." Godi stated before burping loudly and letting out an even louder fart. "...and

that stew is bustin' to come out the other end!" he laughed, putting down his tankard.

He staggered away from the fire toward the three old ramshackle outhouses, barely visible in the moonlight against the hill beyond.

Hammer Hands shook his head. "He's lucky his mother isn't here! She'd clip him backside the head for getting drunk on the road!"

"He must be seriously pissed to be using those outhouses! Smells like someone fell in there and died!" laughed one of the dwarves as they watched Godi open the middle outhouse's door.

He wobbled, hanging on the door for a moment.

"Damn, right! I opened one of those doors when we arrived and almost died from the stench myself! Peed behind a bush instead!" agreed one of the other dwarves.

Suddenly, 'The Eye of the Raven' in the Relic Hunter's blue raven tattoo on the right side of his forehead began to glow bright blue. The smile instantly left his face. He jumped up, discarding his tankard of ale, startling the group of dwarves!

"What the hell!!!??" Hammer Hands exclaimed with surprise.

Draevan snatched up his massive axe from his shoulder harness nearby and ran towards the outhouses.

The dwarves looked at each other questioningly.

"Where's he off to in such a damn hurry?" asked one of the dwarves. "That was a waste of good ale!" he stated, eyeballing the discarded tankard dripping ale into the dirt.

"Don't tell me there's something dodgy with the stew?" asked another dwarf with a nervous laugh, looking suspiciously at the extra bowl of stew he

was helping himself to from the pot.

"It's not the stew!" Hammer Hands exclaimed exasperatedly. "I don't think he needs an axe to take a shite!" he pointed out sarcastically, picking up his great hammer before moving to follow Draevan.

"Godurin! Get out of that outhouse!" Draevan yelled, as he hurtled up to the outhouses, and ripped open the middle one's door so hard the door came off the hinges. The unmistakable smell of death immediately assaulted his nostrils!

Godurin squinted up stupidly at Draevan's large silhouette looming in front of the open doorway. He was halfway into a squat over the hole inside as he struggled drunkenly to get his pants down.

"What th' hell!? This one's occupied, big man! Use one of th' others! I'm dying for a shite! Smells like something crawled up my arse and died!"

"You need to get out of there before whatever is in there eats your drunken arse," Draevan boomed.

"What are you blathering on about?" Godurin slurred. "There's nothin' in here! Fuck off and let me take my dump in peace before I shit in my pants, you big oaf!"

He started to attempt to squat over the hole again when a thick pink tentacle silently appeared between his legs as it made its way out of the hole beneath him.

"What the fuck?" Godurin exclaimed, staring blurry-eyed at the tentacle. "Is that ma cock? But I haven't got ma pants down y-!"

Suddenly the long tentacle wrapped itself rapidly around his ankles and pulled him off his feet! Godurin landed on his face in the doorway!

"Ugh!" he exclaimed, as the breath was knocked out of him.

The tentacle started to pull him into the hole! His eyes went wide with fright! Instinctively, Godurin reached out and grabbed the doorframe with his hands. “Oh, shit!” he swore.

Draevan immediately raised his left hand, palm facing upward, muttered a low incantation, and a bright blue magical flame enveloped his hand. He could now clearly see the pink tentacle wrapped around Godurin’s ankles.

Muttering another incantation, he sent the flame floating upwards before grabbing the dwarf by the back of his coat with his big hand. He pulled Godurin further out the door, against the tension of the attached tentacle. Almost instantly, the tentacle doubled in thickness and pulled the dwarf toward the hole much more strongly.

“Argh! What th' fuck!!!” Godurin yelled, grabbing hold of the doorframe again, causing the old outhouse to creak ominously.

Draevan grimaced, baring his teeth as he pulled the dwarf away from the hole again with more effort, exposing a couple of feet of the thick pink tentacle at the entrance to the hole. He swung his massive axe in a short arc and severed the tentacle with a solid ‘thunk’, releasing Godurin from captivity.

A loud angry roar instantly emanated from deep within the hole beneath them, and the ground began to shake!

“Holy shite!” Godurin exclaimed, pulling the remains of the still squirming pink tentacle off his ankles. “What th’ fuck is in there?” he yelled, back peddling away from the outhouse on his hands and heels, his drunken state now washed away by the flood of adrenaline through his system.

He jumped to his feet, only to be knocked off them again almost immediately when the ground beneath the outhouses began to rise into the air rapidly! Something massive buried deep below was rising up from the depths,

pushing everything above it upwards before it! With a rumble, the soil began to split all around them!

Draevan held onto the frame of the outhouse door with his left hand for a moment, steadying himself before dashing toward Godurin. He grabbed the dwarf by the scruff of his coat neck and lifted him into the air as he jumped from the edge of the rising pile of dirt. Landing solidly on the ground ten feet below, he deposited the young dwarf on his feet next to him.

Hammer Hands stood in front of them gapping up at the rising mound of dirt now towering high above them in the moonlight. "What in the gods' names is that!???" he exclaimed, as the three outhouses were toppled, raining down as little more than kindling wood.

Draevan and Godurin spun round just in time to see the cascading mound of dirt and timbers slowly reveal a monstrous creature in the moonlight!

Two colossal six clawed forepaws pulled the massive worm-like creature out of its pit beneath the outhouses, as it clawed its way onto the surface! Armoured scales on the surface of its body made a loud rasping noise as it scrapped over rock and earth!

A flexible proboscis-like head segment, from the centre of which the severed pink tentacle still extended, bent towards Draevan and the dwarves. Multitudes of burning red eyes on either side of the head segment blinked open from their hidden eye sockets, buried in the folds of wrinkled rock-hard flesh! The round opening from which the pink tentacle protruded suddenly widened almost instantly as the creature roared, revealing a colossal cave-like mouth filled with multiple rows of massive, razor-sharp teeth at its entrance! Giant mandibles on either side of the mouth snapped together, ready to skewer its prey and feed it backwards into the sharp shredding teeth! The smell of its breath carried the

odour of excrement and death!

"Oh, gods!" Hammer Hands exclaimed. "It's a Cave Crawler!" he yelled, backing away from the monstrous creature.

"A Rat-Snatcher!?" Godurin yelled incredulously, also backing away. "It can't be! They're only two feet big!??? That monster is the size of our goddamn house!"

"I know, son!" Hammer Hands agreed. "I've never seen one this size before! But it looks exactly the damn same!"

"I agree," Draevan growled, standing his ground as the creature gnashed its immense circle of teeth. "It's a Cave Crawler. I've spent enough time searching caves over the past five hundred years to recognise one. Even a magically altered one such as this."

"Sorcery!?" Hammer Hands spat. "Why in the gods' names would someone do such a thing to a damn Cave Crawler!? That is insan–!"

The Colossal Cave Crawler suddenly lunged rapidly forward at them with its massive mouth, intent on engulfing them whole! Draevan instantly engaged a large magical 'Sphere of Sfaenn' over himself and the two dwarves, saving them from a quick death! The monstrous maw wrapped around the blue protective Sphere and tried to swallow it! Giant mandibles inside the mouth scrapped over the Sphere's surface, drawing sparks of blue magic as they tried to feed the Sphere into the creature's teeth!

The dwarves screamed in terror as the razor-sharp abyss of teeth hammered at the protective Sphere over their heads! It gnawed at the Sphere like a bone.

Draevan looked up into the creature's massive tunnel-like throat beyond the lethal circle of teeth. He could see a faint ethereal blue glow emanating from

the top. Closing his eyes momentarily, he muttered a series of incantations that caused the Sphere of Sfaenn to expand, forcing the monstrous creature's mouth open further and further. Then he raised his left hand with its palm facing the creature.

"Shield your eyes!" he warned the dwarves.

A bright white light exploded from the palm of his hand.

The Colossal Cave Crawler immediately reared back away from the flash of bright light emanating from the Sphere in its mouth that hurt its multitude of sensitive eyes!

Draevan turned to the dwarves. "Get back behind the fire!" he shouted. "It is sensitive to light! I will be back shortly!" he stated, dropping the protective Sphere.

"What!???" Godurin screamed incredulously. "Where the hell are you going!!??? You can't leave us alone with that fuckin' thing!"

The Relic Hunter started sprinting towards the monster!

"You'll be fine! Get to the fire! I'll explain when I get out!" Draevan bellowed over his shoulder, as he neared the creature's gapping maw!

The monstrous Cave Crawler immediately raised one of its colossal clawed paws and struck out at him with surprising speed for its size! Draevan dive rolled forward, barely avoiding the paw as it thundered down onto the ground behind him, knocking the two dwarves off their feet with the quake it caused!

Draevan came to his feet again from the roll in a fluid motion, sprinted the final distance to the creature's cavernous mouth, and launched himself in a tremendous leap, directly into it!

"Graaghh!" he yelled, gritting his teeth as he reignited the blue flames to

envelop his left hand while sailing over the rows of razor-sharp teeth, his massive axe held tightly in his right hand.

Dangerously close to being cut to shreds, he disappeared completely from view as the monster abruptly closed its mouth like a colossal trap! The dwarves stared wide eyed, their mouths agape at the spectacle.

"By the gods! He's insane!" Godurin stated, wide eyed.

"Totally!" Hammer Hands agreed with astonishment, as the Colossal Cave Crawler stared down at them, ominously blinking its many eyes.

"Did he say, 'when he gets out'?" Godurin asked incredulously.

"I think he did!" Hammer Hands yelled as the Cave Crawler started to drag itself cautiously towards them with its giant clawed paws. Evidently, it was still weary, thanks to Draevan's earlier light flash.

"But I don't hold much hope of that! He's likely already dead! Time to run, son!" Hammer Hands yelled, jumping up, and pulling his son to his feet.

The two dwarves started running away from the creature as fast as they could!

"That crazy bastard saved my life back there!" Godurin yelled as he ran for his life.

"He sure did, Godi! So, less talk, more runnin'! Otherwise, it will have been a very short reprieve!" Hammer Hands yelled over the loud rasping sound of the Crawler behind them.

Inside the cavernous mouth of the creature, Draevan swayed with its crawling motion as the flesh of its gargantuan throat moved him rhythmically down toward the creature's stomach. In the dull blue light, cast by the magical flames enveloping his left hand, drops of foul smelling, excrement filled saliva could be seen dripping from the walls of the mouth cavity, making the surface

beneath his feet treacherous.

Draevan grimaced as he looked down at the saliva and excrement sticking to his boots.

"Fuck. There goes another perfectly worn in pair of boots," he stated irritably.

The Relic Hunter made his way forward, further down the tunnel-like throat towards the blue glow emanating from the top of the creature.

Godurin and Hammer Hands were forced to split up as they reached the campfire, pursued closely by the Colossal Cave Crawler, dragging its massive body towards them with increasing speed! They ran around either side of the fire, joining the other dwarves in the company, who also dispersed with cries of terror! The monstrous creature suddenly reared up when it encountered the bright light of the fire! It roared loudly, once again exposing its razor filled maw!

"Oh, thank the gods! He was right!" Hammer Hands exclaimed with relief from the opposite side of the fire. "It doesn't like the light of the fire!" he stated as the creature closed its multiple eyes against the bright firelight.

"Quickly! Feed the fire!" he yelled, grabbing up some wood from the large pile they had collected when they arrived at sunset.

All the dwarves rushed to help him throw the wood onto the fire.

Deep inside the throat of the creature, Draevan stopped beneath the glowing blue section and looked up at it. He closed his eyes again momentarily, muttering another series of mystic words beneath his breath. A round Relic Tattoo in the shape of a military shield, on the right side of his neck, began to glow brightly.

The blue glow spread in a magical swirl of light from the Tattoo, flowed down around his body, and formed a round blue Shield of Light beneath his

feet. Draevan floated upwards on the Shield as it began to levitate in the air. His ascent slowed as he reached the top of the throat, directly beneath the blue ethereal glow.

At the dwarves' campfire, the Crawler squinted its multiple eyes angrily at the ever-enlarging fire as it was fed by the desperate dwarves. Suddenly, with a deep growl, it swiped a colossal forepaw across the ground, creating a wave of earth and rock that engulfed the fire, extinguishing it instantly. Nothing but wisps of smoke remained!

"Oh, shite!" Godurin exclaimed with trepidation. "So much for that plan! We're in deep shite now!" he stated, looking for a way out of the camp area that was surrounded by the high cliff faces on three sides, very effectively forming a dead end.

Draevan extinguished the flames surrounding his left hand. He took his massive axe in both hands, pointed it at the glowing area, brought it back, and swung it hard.

The monstrous Crawler started dragging itself forward toward the dwarves again, forcing them all back against the cliff face behind them. Knowing it had them trapped, it lifted both paws, ready to crush them! Suddenly, its head segment reared upward, and it roared harshly into the night!

Draevan swung his axe again, slicing another huge gash in the glowing section.

The Crawler writhed about wildly! The monstrous creature felt the damage the Relic Hunter was doing inside it! Its tail segment swung right around the campsite and connected the dwarves' wagon, obliterating it instantly! The wagon debris, including its gold cargo, flew across the area, forcing the dwarves to hit the ground on their stomachs to avoid it!

Their terrified horses shied away from the creature, pulling the metal tethering rods right out of the ground with their reins as they tried to get away from danger! Even Gorn, Draevan's huge battle-hardened war horse on the opposite side of the campsite, backed away from the danger wearily, his nostrils flaring!

Draevan took a deep breath. "I hate this part," he growled to himself before gritting his teeth and sticking his left arm up into the hole he had made in the glowing cavity.

The arm went in right to the shoulder. Inside the cavity, his fingers found and closed around the handle of a gold dwarven hammer floating in the centre. The hammer's surface was decorated with a series of glowing blue rune symbols.

Instantly, Draevan felt the Dark Magic power of the Relic flow into him through his arm and his eyes turned wholly black! His teeth bared in a grimace as the Souls trapped within the Relic assaulted him! To take control of Necromantic Dark Magic always had a cost. The process, known to all Necromancers as 'The Soul Sacrifice', burned the very Soul of the wielder.

Thousands of Souls trapped within the Necromantic Trap, inside the Relic, tried desperately to escape their captivity by engulfing the wielder! The Souls' ghostly spirit forms pulled at the wielder's Soul from deep within the Trap! Clawing like drowning swimmers pulling a potential saviour beneath ocean waves, in a desperate attempt to escape their fate! Draevan felt his Soul form being ripped from his physical body! The pain was excruciating! It felt like his entire body was engulfed in searing flames, burning his flesh away to the bone! Howling spectral voices screamed at him as they clawed at him desperately, begging for release from their prison! He felt the familiar moment of panic and forced himself to calm down. The pain would pass shortly if the wielder's Soul

was strong enough to resist the pull of the Soul Sacrifice.

Draevan knew this well as he had paid the price many, many times over the more than five centuries of Necromantic Relic hunting he had endured. He concentrated his focus and whispered the magic incantation that would fight back the hordes of trapped Souls. Repeating it over and over, he felt the pain begin to subside.

The assault ended as abruptly as it had begun.

"Ughh! Fuckkk!" Draevan swore, gasping a breath in relief. "Gods! I fucking hate that!"

His Soul had survived! Again!

Even so, he did not celebrate his victory. He could feel that the heavy Dark Burden on his Soul had just increased like it always did when he activated a Relic. If he did not complete the quest and attain enough of the Relics of Sangraelle to win 'The Dark Quest', his own Soul would be lost forever. It would join the hundreds of thousands of trapped Souls in Necromantic Purgatory fed on by 'The Darkness', a Truly Evil primordial entity and the very source of Dark Magic.

The Darkness preyed upon Souls invisibly through its foul 'Soul Succubi' minions that were only revealed upon the Soul plane by magical means when they appeared in order to suck the Soul Energy directly from a Soul weakened by negativity. The monstrous looking creatures of Darkness were like a plague of locusts where battles were fought, as they drained the Souls of the living and dying. As always, the thought sent a shiver of apprehension through Draevan's body.

He extracted his left arm from the cavity, the golden Relic gripped tightly in his hand. As soon as the Relic left the cavity, the blue glow was extinguished.

The Colossal Cave Crawler's body froze momentarily, before sagging now that its Necromantic power source had been removed.

The monster died instantly, like an extinguished lamp.

Draevan felt the Relic clasped in his hand grow scorchingly hot now that it was not providing its Dark Power to the creature. The blue glow of it became so bright that he could see the skeletal bones of his hand through his solid flesh.

An ominous Dark Voice emanated from the glowing Relic. Draevan knew it as the voice of 'Davarac The Destroyer', the now fallen leader of 'The Dark Cabal', creator of 'The Dark Quest'. "Do you claim this Relic for yourself or do you claim it for another?"

"For myself!" Draevan stated clearly, his memory as always, flashing back to the fateful moment of claiming his very first Relic over five centuries ago. He did it out of desperation then, setting his Soul permanently on this Dark Quest from which there was no escape.

"Then it is yours!" the Dark Voice announced. "Prepare yourself to be marked with its Power!"

A new blue Relic Tattoo appeared on the top of Draevan's left hand, glowing brightly as it burned itself into his skin. There was physical pain, but it was nothing compared to the excruciating pain he had suffered moments before in the Soul Sacrifice. In his hand, the physical Relic itself dissolved away to nothing as the Tattoo formed.

The Relic Tattoo took the shape of the Dark Magic rune that denoted a hammer. Draevan stared down at its glowing form. As always, there would be a message from the creator of the Necromantic Relic.

A wisp of blue ethereal magic smoke rose from the glowing Tattoo. It formed the image of a smiling old dwarf, dressed in a dark blue hooded cloak,

that floated in front of Draevan's face.

"Congratulations Relic Hunter!" a deep bass voice emanating from the apparition stated in a jovial manner. "You have succeeded in attaining my 'Relic of Power', 'The Earth Cracker!' With it, you can crack open the earth beneath the very feet of your enemies and engulf them!"

"But be aware that the Necromantic cost of its use at full power is a very high one!" the apparition warned. "Ten thousand Darkened Souls will be burned out and useless to you for over a year before they recover! So, use it wisely!"

The dwarf's jovial face changed abruptly, becoming dark and foreboding! Its eyes, black as night, a sense of evil emanated from it! "And remember very well that I, Tongarson, The Terrible, its creator, will be taking my Power back when this damn 'Dark Quest' is done!"

The jovial face returned just as abruptly as it had left. "Savour your time with it while you can! After all, you literally went through a lot of shit to get it! Enjoy the shit shower! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

With that, Tongarson's magical apparition disappeared.

Draevan's left hand began to shake as the new magic contained within his Relic Tattoo suddenly exploded outwards, causing the monstrous creature's body surrounding him to burst outwards from within! A massive spray of offal chunks covered in excrement shot upwards before raining back down over the entire area! The dwarves, climbing wearily to their feet in front of the frozen creature, were forced to cover their heads as the disgusting cloud of debris rained down on them all!

"Argh! What the hell!!!" Godurin yelled as he was pelted by the falling foulness. "Oh, gods! This is fuckin' disgusting!"

When it ended moments later, they stared in shock at the glowing blue

Sphere of Sfaenn surrounding Draevan, left standing in the middle of the skeletal remains of the Colossal Cave Crawler's body, untouched by the foulness raining down.

"What the fuck did you do, big man!???" Godurin exclaimed.

Draevan smiled as he stepped out from under the skeleton and dropped the magical Sphere. "Glad to see you too, Godurin Ghoronson."

"Don't get me wrong, I really appreciate you saving all our arses from that fuckin' great big monster, big man! But did you really have to blow it up and cover us all in this shite!???" Godurin exclaimed exasperatedly, peeling chunks of dripping offal off his shoulders.

Draevan grinned with amusement at the young dwarf.

"The 'shit shower' was a parting gift from the monster's creator, your Dwarven Nation's former ancient ruler, 'Tongarson, The Terrible'," Draevan revealed. "His words, not mine. It seems he had a wicked sense of humour."

"Ha! Tongarson! Now that's an ancient terror! By all accounts, that evil bastard certainly did have a '*wicked*' sense of humour!" Hammer Hands stated, with a grin himself. "Tales of his magical pranks are legendary in the Golden Valley!"

"Normally all shite related too!" one of the other dwarves pointed out. "Obsessed with it he was! His name should have been Tongarson, The Turd!"

"Aye! He was certainly full of shite when it came to bullying everyone that opposed him! My grand-dad said he didn't hesitate to kill his rivals and anyone else that got on the wrong side of him. Hung their bodies in front of his fortress as a warning during 'The Dark Times', he did!" Hammer Hands stated, the grin slowly leaving his face at the memory of his grandfather's haunted face as he had told that story.

"But that evil old fucker disappeared hundreds of years ago, didn't he?" Godurin stated questioningly.

"So, they say," Hammer Hands confirmed. "Four hundred and eighty years ago, he just vanished out of the Golden Valley, never to be seen again. No one knew exactly when he disappeared because they were all too scared shitless of his dark moods to check in on him for over six months. All of Dwarfdom eventually rejoiced when he did not return!"

Godurin stared at his father in confusion. "So, what the hell has he got to do with this great big fuckin' Rat-Snatcher monster, then?" he asked with exasperation.

"He created it five hundred and fifty years ago to protect one of his 'Relics of Sangraelle' as part of '*The Dark Quest*'. The so called '*Great Game*' he played with his fellow 'Sorcerers of Sangraelle'," Draevan stated.

"Five hundred and fifty fuckin years ago!!???" Godurin asked incredulously. "How the hell does that work?"

"Necromantic Dark Magic," Draevan stated, looking around at the remains of the Colossal Cave Crawler. "Trapped 'Souls of the Dead' sustained the creature while it grew in the earth below the outhouses. No doubt feasting on the unwary between long periods of hibernation. Vermin and travellers alike, judging by that large pile of bones," he said, pointing out hundreds of skeletal remains in various states of decay, now exposed within the remains of the Cave Crawler's cavernous stomach.

Godurin swallowed nervously as he stared at the gruesome contents, realising how close he had come to joining the pile of bones. "By the gods! That is a lot of dead."

"I can't believe it was hidden here for all that time!" Hammer Hands

exclaimed, his face pale at the sight of all the evident carnage that had taken place at the campsite he had been stopping at regularly for over one hundred and fifty years. "My whole clan has stopped here for hundreds of years! We lost many family members that disappeared over that time, but we thought it was likely by the hands of bandits, not monsters like this thing! I've been so unwittingly close to death many, many times here."

All the dwarves in the company looked deathly pale.

"All of us have," stated one of the other dwarves.

"The gods were on your side, Hammer Hands," Draevan stated with conviction. "The creature must have been slumbering whenever you and your fellows stopped here."

"Excuse me a moment," he said, turning towards the pile of remains.

His eyes turned wholly black as he entered a necromantic trance, accessing the Soul trap within his new Relic Tattoo which began to glow brightly blue. Thousands of black 'Darkened Souls' appeared around him, their ghostly wailing filling the air.

The dwarves stood frozen in shock by the sight of the apparitions!

"Holy shite!" Godurin breathed.

"All innocent and guiltless Souls who have committed no evil prior to being trapped within this Relic, I release you from your bondage! Depart now and rest!" Draevan stated in a booming 'Dark Necromantic Voice'.

Thousands of Souls instantly shed the blackness of 'The Darkness' that held them trapped upon the plane of the living, their forms becoming a bright silvery blue mist, as they rose up into the sky! The bright light from their departure flashed across the campsite, momentarily bathing the awestruck dwarves in its ethereal glow.

"By the gods, that is a glorious sight to behold!" Hammer Hands stated reverently as they all felt the lifting of negativity in the area as the Souls returned to freedom, some after centuries of captivity.

"Truly!" agreed the other equally mesmerised dwarves.

Not all who witnessed the Souls departure were happy though, Draevan noted as per usual. A massive horde of Soul Succubi glared at him from the edges of the campsite! The ghostly creatures' barely visible, monstrous faces showed their evident fury at his releasing of the thousands of Souls they had been feeding upon for their master. The Darkness never appreciated the loss of its prey. But the Soul Succubi had learnt to keep their distance from 'The Raven Bringer', for he had destroyed too many of their kind since he had gained his necromantic powers. Doing so always forced their Dark Master to replace them at the high cost of expending its precious Soul Energy without which it could survive!

The corners of Draevan's mouth raised a little in satisfaction, as he felt a small lifting of 'The Dark Burden' upon his Soul. He closed the necromantic trap within the Relic Tattoo, causing the remaining evil Darkened Souls to disappear from view, as his eyes returned to their normal light grey. He turned back to the company of dwarves.

"We will have to build a memorial to our clan members who fell here," Hammer Hands stated sombrely.

"Aye," agreed all the dwarves.

There was a moment of silence for the fallen.

"Well, I'm very fuckin' glad I didn't join them tonight!" Godurin exclaimed, letting out a big breath of relief, breaking the momentary silence irreverently as he walked up to Draevan. "Thank you for that, big man! I owe

you a very large debt now!" he stated, putting out his hand. "If I can ever return the favour, I will!"

Draevan took Godurin's hand, and they shook. "You are welcome, Godurin," Draevan said with a hint of a smile. "I'm glad I was here to help you, and I may indeed need to call on you one day for a small favour or two."

"If ever there is anything I can help you with, I will!" Godurin stated seriously.

"Aye! As will we all!" Hammer Hands agreed, also moving over to Draevan and shaking his hand. "I thank you for saving my son's life and the lives of my entire company here, as well as my own!"

All the dwarves shook Draevan's hand with heartfelt thanks.

"You said Tongarson was playing a game with the 'Sorcerers of Sangraelle'? Are they not the evil bastards that ruled the whole of Gandaria for thousands of years during 'The Dark Times'?" Hammer Hands asked.

"They were," Draevan confirmed.

"Twelve of the thirteen fell within their own 'Dark Quest' game, thanks to the efforts of 'The Relic Hunters of Rillendael', founded by Garaen of Rillendael, later known as 'The Guardian of Gandaria'. Our order has quested for the Relics since they were first created by the Sorcerers of Sangraelle, for 'The Dark Quest' centuries ago. I continue that quest. We cannot allow the Relics to fall into evil hands lest they be used to take control of Gandaria again."

"Ha! That's it! I thought your name sounded familiar earlier this evening!" Hammer Hands exclaimed excitedly. "Draevan of Rillendael! The Relic Hunter of Rillendael, known as 'Draevan, The Raven Bringer'! Am I right?" he asked enthusiastically.

"You are," Draevan confirmed, with a slight tip of his head.

"By the gods! You are truly a legend, my friend!" Hammer Hands stated in awe. "My father and grandfather told us stories of you Relic Hunters and your adventures!"

"'Relic Hunters'? They're real?" Godurin exclaimed to his father. "I thought they were just tales grand-dad told to entertain us when I was very young?"

"As you can see, son! They're definitely real!" Hammer Hands laughed; his hands held palm up towards Draevan.

He pointed out the Relic Hunters of Rillendael circular medallion attached to the centre of Draevan's leather chest plate and on his wrist guards. "That is their Raven crest! And the tattoos all over you are Relic Tattoos, right?"

Draevan nodded in confirmation. "Correct. Except this one," he said, pointing at the raven tattoo on the right side of his head. "That one is our Relic Hunters of Rillendael Raven tattoo. 'The Eye of The Raven' warns us of Dark Magic nearby."

"Ha! Yes!" Hammer Hands exclaimed triumphantly. "I'd heard the Relic Hunter stories since I was a tiny boy, way before Godi here was nothing but a twinkle in my eye!" Hammer Hands grinned.

"Draevan here is the most famous one of them all, son! We all just now became part of one of his adventures!" the old dwarf laughed, clapping his hands loudly. "Bloody scary life he leads, isn't it!?"

"So, you mean we're going to be famous!?" Godurin exclaimed with a grin.

"Aye! That ye surely wil' be, Godi, me young dwarven friend!" a spectral voice stated from above their heads, preceded by a loud squawk.

Godurin and the dwarves looked up.

Their faces paled instantly once more as their eyes took in the sight of Draevan's five Undead Ravens, flying around them in the moonlight.

"By the gods! So that's why they call you 'Draevan, The fuckin' Raven Bringer'!" Godurin exclaimed, staring wild-eyed at the Undead Ravens.

"Well, technically it's caus' of all th' bodi's 'e leaves be'ind everywhere 'e goes! Flocks of ou' living raven brethren tend ta clean up th' mess for 'im!" the Undead Raven chuckled. "All evil do'rs, mind you! He's very particul'r abou' who 'e sends to th' afterlife! Bu' I can see where ou' featherless ars's creat' som' confusion fo' ya!"

Three of the other Undead Ravens joined in with ghostly chuckles, too.

Draevan grinned a half grin and shrugged his shoulders at the dwarves as they stared nervously between him and the Ravens. "Relax! They won't bite! Long story! I'll tell it to you over a tankard of ale or two sometime."

"Or I can!" the talkative Undead Raven stated with enthusiasm, as he swooped down and landed on Draevan's shoulder.

"Name's, Rog'r th' Rav'n! Us'd ta be a pirat' in me prev'ous life befor' Draevan 'ere show'd me and three of me mates there th' error of ou' ways! Sen' all ou' bodies to th' bott'm of th' ocean, bu' gav' ou' Souls a chance at redem'tion in ou' pres'nt bar'ly feather'd forms!"

"And my ears have been paying for it ever since," Draevan growled wryly, a hint of a smile on his face.

"Our fello' hi'h and mighty white Undead Raven over there's story I'll 'ave ta leav' ta th' boss ta tell!" Rog'r the Undead Raven squawked. "She's a quiet one, she is!"

Draevan's face lost its grin at the mention of the white Undead Raven, his eyes clouding over with a dark memory.

"Well now! That sounds like a couple of interestin' fuckin' tales!" Godurin blurted. "I'd love to hear it right now, BUT I need to go take that shite I never got to have, before I shit ma pants!"

"It's been touch an' go fer fuckin' ages now between the fuckin' monster rat-snatcher an' seeing your freakish half-feathered friends there!" he yelled, waddling rapidly for the bushes at the edge of the road on his toes, a hand on his arse as his arse cheeks clenched.

His seven fellow dwarves and the four raucous Ravens burst out laughing at the sight!

Draevan's full grin reappeared.

Moments after Godurin disappeared behind the bushes, a series of wet farts burst out loudly in succession, then his voice rang out. "Ohhh, gods! That's a fuckin' great relief!"

***

CHAPTER 1

RAVEN'S TREASURE INN

Godurin Ghoronson laughed out loud. "After all the weirdness that night, those damn Undead Ravens really did almost make me shit my britches! I almost blew my arse cheeks off!" he exclaimed before taking another sip of his ale from a huge tankard in his hand.

"That was one hundred and fifty years ago when I was only a young lad of fifty years old and still wet behind the ears!" he stated to the crowded tavern room that had been listening intently to his tale. Their faces were a mixture of awe and mirth at his telling of it.

"I spent the next fifty roaming Gandaria on and off with that crazy Relic Hunter, getting into all sorts of trouble! But that's a bunch of stories for another bloody day! Where's ma grub!? I'm bloody starvin!!" Godurin bellowed.

A group of dodgy, rough-looking men at the opposite end of the bar counter smirked. "Stinking dwarves are all full of shite!" one of the men commented derogatorily. "Aye!" his mates agreed, causing Godurin to turn and look in their direction.

"What the fuck was that, arseholes?" he bellowed.

"Do I need to come over there and beat you all senseless with nothing but my old fuckin' cock!" he yelled at them.

The evidently well-armed men's faces lost their smirks instantly, and they all started moving towards him with intent.

"You've a big fuckin' mouth for a tiny shite, dwarf!" the leader of the group yelled back. "We can fill it with our boots! All twelve of them!"

Suddenly, their advance was stopped in its tracks by a deep voice that cut through the tavern noise. "You're still wet behind the ears, Ghoronson!" Draevan boomed, as he walked through the Raven's Treasure Inn tavern. "Must be all the ale you're still consuming!"

Godurin's face broke into a big smile instantly.

"By the gods! Speak of the bloody devil!" Godurin exclaimed happily. "The fuckin' big man himself!"

The rough men stared across the room at the big Relic Hunter towering over everyone. All the patrons in the crowded tavern grew instantly subdued as they stared at Draevan in awe. His fame as a death dealing and defying warrior still preceded him, even here on the far East Coast of Gandaria. They gave him a wide berth, opening a path to Godurin in front of him.

"How the hell are ya, ya big bastard!" Godurin asked loudly as they slapped their solid hands together and shook. Draevan had to bend over, even though the old dwarf was sitting perched on the top of a high bar stool.

"As good as it gets, Godi!" he boomed.

"Always plenty of evil arseholes in the world to deal with! But what's the use in complaining!" he stated, pointedly, giving the rough men a hard look that instantly poured ice on their hot heads.

Godurin nodded his head. "Ain't that the truth, my old friend!" he agreed enthusiastically. "If it's not dodgy pieces of shite bandits trying ta kill you for your hard toiled for gold, it's Gandaria's royals taxing every fuckin' thing to hell as usual! We lowly gold shovelers always get the fuckin' shaft! Barely be enough left for my kids when I croak!"

"All nine of them now, your uncle Baraghan tells me he heard through the family grapevine!" Draevan smiled, still amazed that the infamously drunken

dwarf became a family man.

"Aye! Fuckin' nine! I can barely believe it myself!" Godurin chuckled.

"Keeping that new young wife of yours very busy, aren't you? She's on number four now, isn't she? Your ex-wife must be happy for the rest after five!" Draevan grinned.

"Ha! Nothin' makes that grumpy old battle axe happy anymore!" Godurin laughed. "That's why I traded the old bag in! Ha! Ha! Costing me an arm and two fuckin' legs to pay for the two households, though! But my middle leg is very happy so I can almost use it to stand on instead! I'll have to change my name to Peg Leg and become a fuckin' pirate to pay for all my kids, though! They can all join me on the fuckin' ship! Maybe your ol' Jolly Rog'r the Undead Raven can give me some tips of the trade!"

Draevan laughed out loud. "Good to hear some things haven't changed, Godurin! Your sense of humour is still well intact!"

"Have to laugh life off, don't ya!" Godurin chuckled.

"So how is that old sorcerer uncle of mine doin' anyway? His magic still keepin' him spry as a fuckin' teenage dwarf as usual? We still barely seeing him since he joined you Relic Hunters! Just once or twice a year when he orders materials from us for that smithy of his. He ever take a break from forging you lot his magic infused weapons?"

"Barely! Baraghan's beard is almost touching the ground now, but yes, he's still as strong as an ox!" Draevan smiled. "I can't believe he's been with us for almost one hundred and fifty years already! His weapons are keeping most of the order alive by themselves!"

"He still branding them all with that ridiculous 'All ye evil bastards beware!' shite?" Godurin asked.

"Oh, yes!" Draevan laughed, taking his massive axe off his back and putting it down on the tavern counter with a heavy 'thunk'. He pointed out the branding on both sides of the two bladed axe.

"Oh, hell's bells! He does love that shite!" Godurin smiled. "But his work is second to none! That thing is a serious piece! Hate to be on the receiving end of it! Aren't you still bloody glad he decided to join your quest after you saved our arses that night?"

"Definitely, my friend! His weapons are the best I've ever had! Saved me a world of pain, many, many times!" Draevan agreed, returning his axe to its shoulder harness on his back.

Much to the evident relief of the rough group, who quickly made their way to the tavern exit and departed. Draevan's lack of tolerance for evil doers was well known throughout Gandaria. The subdued tavern atmosphere began to warm up again after the group's departure.

"Well, it's fuckin' great ta see you down this way again, my big friend! It's been ages! Let's get something for you ta drink! I've ordered some grub, and it looks like it's ready at long last! I'm bloody starvin!" Godurin exclaimed, catching the eye of two serving girls carrying big trays of food to an empty corner table. "We can stuff our faces while we catch up!"

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CHAPTER 2

CATCHING UP

Godurin swallowed a piece of boar meat. "So, what brings you to this rat-infested shite hole?" he asked Draevan, before taking another bite of boar from a large leg portion. "Port Farris isn't exactly the kind of city you come to for a holiday, unless you like the stench of rotting fish, so I assume you'r here on Relic business as usual, right?"

Draevan nodded, swallowing a mouthful of boar before answering. "Had an interesting tip that some wild boar hunters have been disappearing on the south-eastern edge of Bravaellin Forest northwest of here. According to our researchers back home, it's been happening every ten years consistently. So, promising."

"Aha! So, following the trail of the missing and likely dead, as usual then!" Godurin exclaimed with his bushy eyebrows raised. "My friend! Like I have said to you many times before over the years, you have one bloody interesting and adventurous BUT morbid fuckin' job!"

"True," Draevan agreed.

"Some of those hunts I joined you on still give me the fuckin' shivers if I think about them! So, instead of telling me about another hellish monster guarding one of your Relic treasures, tell me about the ladies in your life, big man! You've heard about my marital bliss through the grapevine, so it's only fair I get some details of your bachelor-for-life adventures! Let me live vicariously through you!" Godurin grinned, letting out a loud belch. "Which lady has grabbed you by the balls recently? I mean that figuratively, of course! Ha! Ha!

You still hung up on that dodgy elf sorceress that keeps tryin' ta kill you? Or have you started thinking with your big head again like a sane person? What was her name again?"

Draevan's half grin appeared but his eyes dropped and clouded over a little as the memories of a beautiful ethereal ice-blond haired elf flooded into his mind's eye. "Myste."

"Shite! Sorry, big man! I can see all over your tattooed face asking about her is still a bloody sore point! I'm a drunken fuckin' idiot! I tell you to leave off on the fuckin' monster stories and then ask you about the one that has wounded you the most!" Godurin laughed. "As if I don't have my own Ex that tried ta kill me many times over the bloody years! I should know better!"

Draevan grinned fully, unable to stay morbid around the jolly drunk and always cheerful dwarf, whose irreverent attitude he knew extended towards all things in life. "I remember witnessing a couple of those times when I dropped in at your home unannounced over the years!"

"Aye! Glin had one fiery fuckin' temper, that's for sure!" Godurin exclaimed. "She still does! I make sure to wear my armour every time I go over to her place to see our youngest daughter, Glori, that still lives with her. Just in case she's in a foul mood! Fuckin' scary woman that! I'd rather face that fuckin' Colossal Rat-Snatcher again on my own than deal with her in a bad mood! Ha! Ha! My two sons with her are scared shitless of their mother and I don't blame them at bloody all!"

Draevan laughed out loud.

"She did make me nervous sometimes! And that's with the Dragon Stone here to heal me!" he said, touching the Dragon Stone Relic Tattoo on his left cheek. "I feared for your life, my friend! Ha! Ha!"

"Ha! Ha! As did I!" Godurin laughed. "Amazed I'm still breathin' today!"

They bumped their mugs together in a cheerful toast and took a mouthful of ale.

"So out with it!" Godurin pressed. "Who's the latest! I haven't seen you for, what, three years? There must be someone!"

Draevan could tell Godurin was not going to let the subject drop. He silently cast a Privacy Shroud spell to hide their conversation from any eavesdroppers. "Her name is Rhiannon of Ravania."

Godurin's face cracked into a wide grin. "Ahh! Nice name! I knew it! Where the fuck is Ravania again?" he exclaimed thoughtfully.

Draevan held up a finger, chewing another piece of boar.

"Oh, wait! Ravania is on the West Coast, isn't it? Weren't you born there? I remember you telling me that over a hundred bloody years ago, but my old memory is a bit fuzzy!"

"Yes. Small human kingdom on the south-western border of Bravaellin Forest," Draevan confirmed, after swallowing the piece of boar.

Godurin grinned again.

"Ah! A sweet home girl for you then! Nice! A farm girl for you, the original farm boy?"

"Not quite," Draevan smiled. "Archer on the King of Ravania's personal guard when I met her. Expert with a pair of Elven daggers, too."

"Oh, my! A warrior woman! With *Elven* daggers! Interesting! Could be dangerous though!" Godurin chuckled merrily. "Go on, let's hear it all!"

"Around seven months ago, I was heading back to Rillendael along the West Coast Road through Ravania," Draevan began..."

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CHAPTER 3

RHIANNON

Draevan made his way slowly up the West Coast Road through Ravania. At midday, he made his usual stop for a quick bite to eat at a small inn called 'The Mermaid's Tale'. Located half way between Castorillia, the port capital of Ravania, and the southern border Ravania shares with the neighbouring kingdom of Valorheim, it was a convenient stop for travellers.

When he arrived, a Ravanian royal carriage escorted by eight guards on horseback had already pulled up outside the inn to rest and water their horses. The royal guards on horseback eyeballed the big Relic Hunter nervously as he rode up and closed their protective circle around the carriage. He gave them a wide berth and tied Gorn to the horse rail next to the entrance, before heading into the inn.

Two more of the armour-clad royal guards came out of the inn as he went in. The first, his head turned to talk to the other behind him, walked right into Draevan, obviously not expecting anyone to be in his way.

At two-thirds the Relic Hunter's size, he rebounded off him and landed on his arse in the mud at the entrance. The look of surprise on the guard's thin pasty white face was quite comical as he looked up at Draevan towering over him.

"What the bloody hell!" he exclaimed indignantly in a high pitched, annoying, nasal voice.

By the ornate helmet he held in his right hand, Draevan realised the man

was the Captain of the Ravanian Royal Guard.

"Apologies, Captain. I did not see you in time to get out of the way," he said deferentially, bending down and offering the Captain his hand to help him up.

The Captain slapped Draevan's hand out of the way irritably and scrambled up awkwardly himself.

"How dare you get in the way of the king's royal guard!" he spluttered, standing up again to his full height, which still left him looking up into the big Relic Hunter's face, a foot higher than his.

"I..." the captain faltered for a moment as he encountered Draevan's hard grey eyes. "I... I should have you thrown in the stocks!" he finished, his hand going instinctively to his sword.

Draevan lowered the hood of his cloak, exposing his blue Relic Tattoos.

The Captain took a step back, fear instantly filling his eyes. The royal guard behind him also put his hand on the hilt of his sword, along with the guards on horseback behind the Relic Hunter.

"That would be regrettable, Captain," Draevan stated softly. "Considering it was just a question of unfortunate timing."

He let the blue magic glow build in his eyes slightly.

Murmuring a spell, he readied a Sphere of Sfaenn, keeping his hands relaxed casually at his sides.

The Captain quailed visibly upon seeing the blue glow.

"Well, uh, yes! I will let it go this time, Relic Hunter! Ne... next time be more aware of your surroundings!" he stammered before walking hurriedly towards the carriage, followed by his fellow guard.

Draevan tilted his head in a small acknowledgment, "I will be sure to..."

he turned and continued into the inn's entrance. "...look out for 'Captain Clueless' next time," he muttered under his breath.

The royal guards all watched the Relic Hunter go with relief. Just inside the entrance, a broadly smiling, beautiful face greeted him. The dark-haired woman with striking green eyes grinned as their eyes met. Draevan grinned back slightly before taking in her paired down royal guard uniform clinging to her tall slim frame. Her helmet lay on a chair next to where she stood, along with an Elven long-bow and quiver of arrows that were leaning up against the wall.

With her cloak hanging on a hook on the wall, her bare professional archer's muscular forearms could be glimpsed between her wrist guards and her rolled-up sleeves. A belt around her waist resting on her shapely hips held thigh scabbards for long Elven daggers, strapped to either thigh. *For close quarters combat, should the need arise*, Draevan thought to himself. *Definitely not your standard royal guard weaponry*.

The archer chuckled. "That's the first time I've seen him quail in front of anyone!" she said with amusement evident in her voice. "Pompous arse that he is," she added more quietly. "The king's uncle's son. Not much of a warrior, but he likes to think he's one."

Draevan allowed the half grin to stay on his face.

"Afternoon, dear lady," he greeted her with a bigger tilt of his head than that he had afforded her leader. A gesture that was not lost on her, judging by the curl of her lips.

"Saying that, you are quite an imposing mass of a man, Relic Hunter," she stated, looking Draevan up and down from head to foot with a naughty grin. "Especially the shaved head and tattoos. The glowing magical eyes were a nice touch too! Very intimidating!"

"I'd hazard a guess and say that you are not easily intimidated by any man, my lady," Draevan stated with a low warm tone, having felt an instant attraction to her.

The archer laughed a husky laugh and smiled at him. "Your guess would be quite right, dear sir," she confirmed with a hint of a pout on her full lips. "My name is Rhiannon! And yours is?"

"Draevan," he answered simply, without titles or any other embellishments, just as she had.

"Nice to meet you Draevan, the Relic Hunter!" Rhiannon said, as the innkeeper appeared from the kitchen with a basket of food, and handed it to her.

"Thank you, John! Smells delicious!" she exclaimed with a smile, accepting the basket from him.

"A pleasure as usual, Lady Rhiannon!" the inn keeper stated with evidently genuine pleasure. "I hope His Grace enjoys it!"

"I'm sure he will, John!" Rhiannon said, placing the basket on a small table next to her.

She retrieved her cloak from the hook on the wall. Throwing it over her shoulders, and then her long-bow and quiver over her back, she picked up the basket once more. Retrieving her helmet, she turned towards the door.

Rhiannon paused to catch Draevan's eye on the way out. "Farewell, Draevan! If you ever find yourself in Castorillia, please drop by the castle and visit me!" she said, smiling.

The Relic Hunter returned her smile and tilted his head to her. "For you, my lady, I will have to make a point of it."

She beamed at him. "I will look forward to it then!"

There was a loud call from the carriage. "Rhiannon! What is causing the

delay? His majesty is starving!" the Captain of the Ravanian Royal Guard drawled irritably.

He was obviously annoyed at seeing her conversing with the man responsible for the embarrassment he had just suffered in front of his guards, at least in his mind.

Rhiannon rolled her eyes towards Draevan, showing the disdain she felt for the annoying man.

"On the way, Captain!" she called back to him cheerfully over her shoulder.

Starting out the door once more, she took another moment to step closer to the Relic Hunter. "By the way...I'm not much of a lady," she said seductively with a wink, and then walked out the door to the royal carriage.

Draevan's mouth twitched up with amusement. He watched her reach the carriage and hand the food basket to the Captain, who rudely snatched it from her hands.

Pretending to ignore his rudeness with another cheerful smile, Rhiannon climbed nimbly up the side of the carriage. She positioned herself in the archer's seat with her bow and quiver, preparing to keep an eye out for any danger approaching from the rear.

The carriage pulled away, surrounded by the eight guards, moving north up the Western Way Road, towards the Ravanian capital city. Rhiannon gave Draevan a farewell smile and small salute.

He returned the salute casually with a smile.

"Feisty one, she is!" the innkeeper, who had also stepped outside to watch their departure, stated with a knowing grin.

Draevan smiled at him. "I noticed."

"Father was one of the Ravanian king's favourite royal guards. When he fell to an assassin's arrow meant for the king, she returned from the Elven city of Floriaendael across the border in Bravaellin Forest, where she was training as a border scout with the elves. She immediately requested to take his place on the Ravanian Royal Guards."

"Apparently, with the skills she learned from the elves, no one can outmatch her with that long-bow of hers. Wicked quick with those two Elven daggers of hers too! Earned the grudging respect of all the Royal Guards over the past six months, after a rocky start."

"That Captain in particular was against her joining them, but the king forced him to take her on in honour of her father's sacrifice. She's received many marriage proposals over the years apparently, but turned them all down. Independent spirit, it seems!" He turned to go back inside. "So! What can I get for you, Draevan?"

"Just a bowl of stew and fresh bread if you have, please, John," Draevan answered, making his way inside again with him.

The Mermaid's Tale had been a regular stop for the Relic Hunter for two hundred years. John's great-grandfather had built it, and it had been in the family ever since. The family were also secretly paid spies for the Relic Hunters of Rillendael, keeping a watch on the comings and goings along the Western Way Road for them. Their eyes and ears were especially trained to listen out for information the Relic Hunter's researchers could use to pinpoint possible Relic locations, as well as detect any enemy activity. Political activity within the kingdoms was also important to the Relic Hunters' cause, so John, as the head of the West Coast agency in Ravania, kept abreast of current affairs for them too. Including all staff changes.

Draevan seated himself at his usual table that had an open window opposite the front door. He soon had a hot bowl of stew and two slices of bread in front of him. It all went down his throat pretty quickly, his stomach eager for sustenance after a long morning on the road.

About to order a half cider to wash it all down, he froze at the sound of a fast-approaching horse, its hooves thundering along the road outside. The Eye of the Raven in the Relic Hunter's tattoo thrummed against his temple, and started glowing blue, warning him of Dark Magic in the vicinity.

Instantly he looked up out the window where he locked eyes on a blood-red cloaked rider on a black horse speeding past the inn, going north.

The rider sensed his presence too and looked over his left shoulder, revealing his gaunt, very pale grey, almost skeletal face. His completely black eyes burnt around the edges with a dark blue light in his spectre-like face. The rider smiled at Draevan evilly as he continued on his way rapidly up the road.

Draevan's blood froze in his veins for a moment as it always did when he encountered one of 'The Seekers of Sangraelle', sworn enemies of the order of Relic Hunters in Rillendael! He had vowed to rid the world of every one of the foul Davaracian necromancers and their Evil every time he had the good fortune to bump into any of them!

One of their kind was responsible for the death of his father and mother when he was only thirteen years old, and he would never stop avenging their murders! He had already killed over a hundred of the Relic hunting cultists over the past six centuries. And yet the rage he felt towards them still had not abated a single iota in all that time.

Draevan jumped up and ran out of the inn to his horse!

CHAPTER 4

SEEKER

Draevan pushed Gorn hard, determined to catch up to the Seeker. His large hooves thundered along the hard packed dirt road, leaving a trail of dust behind them. The road wound up the coastline, frequently hiding behind rocky outcrops, making it impossible to gauge the distance to their target ahead.

Mile after mile passed with no Seeker in sight, before Draevan eventually needed to slow, lest he break Gorn irreparably. He recalled that the Seeker's horse's eyes were bulging from their eye sockets with a blue glow to them when it passed the inn. A good sign that it was being driven hard through fear inducing Necromantic Magic. Draevan had no doubt the Necro Magic was the reason his Relic Hunter tattoo, enchanted to detect Dark Magic, had begun to glow as the Seeker approached the inn. The horse he rode would surely die later from exhaustion.

Not that the Dark Necromancer would care at all. The Seekers were devoid of emotion. They felt nothing for anyone or anything. All they cared for were the Relics of Power they sought relentlessly. Seekers would destroy anything and anyone they needed to in order to attain them. They harvested the Souls of all that they killed to fuel their Dark Horde made up of Darkened Souls, tied to them alone through Necromantic Magic. For them, Necromantic magic power was like a drug that they craved constantly. Consumed by their addiction, it was all they lived for. Their very reason for existing.

Entering a forested section of the road at a trot while he let Gorn catch

his breath, Draevan heard the distinct sounds of a battle taking place ahead! He urged Gorn on and the big horse responded like the true warhorse he had been trained to be, despite his exhaustion.

A forest glade appeared over the next rise in the road, and Draevan could see the Royal Ravanian carriage stopped in the centre of it. The final horse mounted royal guard went down as he approached; the others already having fallen from their mounts. They were being systematically slaughtered!

Only Rhiannon remained in defence on the top of the carriage. She fired her arrows desperately at the Seeker, who had engaged his Dark Horde to attack the royal convoy! Draevan could see the telltale tendrils of black spectral-mist the Darkened Souls formed as they flew rapidly around the glade. Their unnerving black spectral faces boiled in the icy mist that burnt everything it touched with extreme cold, accompanied by ghostly howling, which in itself was enough to chill anyone who heard it to the bone!

The insubstantial Darkened Souls could suddenly take solid physical form for a moment in order to attack and wound a target. Their black Dark Tendrils hardened into Dark Blades that slit the throats of victims within a moment and then dissipated just as quickly. This ephemeral quality made them incredibly difficult to defend against physically, as the Dark Blades needed to be deflected almost instantly before they cut.

Magic was the only really effective protection against the attack of a Dark Horde. Swords and other physical weapons would just pass through the Dark Tendrils of mist before and after the solid Dark Blades formed and dissipated.

The throats of the royal guards were cut with ruthless precision, blood spurting from their severed jugulars, bathing the glade in red. The Seeker casually used his Dark Horde to create momentary solid surfaces to deflect Rhiannon's

arrows in mid-air as they flew towards him. They ricocheted away harmlessly in all directions. He focused his Horde on the archer, sending the Dark Tendrils flowing rapidly towards her from all sides!

Rhiannon quickly realised her arrows were having no effect, and that she was now in extreme danger from the Tendrils as they flew at her. She immediately discarded her bow and quickly drew her two long Elven daggers from her thigh scabbards. As the Tendrils approached, she slashed at them rapidly with both daggers before they could solidify. Moving in a rapid evasive dance on top of the carriage, she displayed an impressive combat skill that enabled her to survive the Horde's first strike.

Draevan's memory suddenly flashed back momentarily to a dark childhood event he had tried unsuccessfully to forget for centuries: his mother fighting off a Dark Horde with her two Elven daggers! Her ice-blond hair swirled about her head as she frantically held off the Dark Blades slashing at her...

His memory merged with the scene before his eyes fleetingly, before it was abruptly broken by Rhiannon dismounting from the top of the carriage that limited her movement. She somersaulted down to the ground, landed nimbly on her feet and immediately continued to deflect every solidifying black Blade, before they could do her harm. Her arms were a blur as she whirled about in all directions, sending sparks flying where her daggers connected the Horde's Dark Blades.

The Seeker, confident that she would soon fall to his Dark Horde, directed his attention to the royal carriage, sending more Tendrils to pierce the windows and kill the occupants inside. Screams of terror rung out from the interior of the carriage and blood soon splattered the inside of the windows, as the black mist did its evil work!

The door of the carriage swung open and the Captain of the Royal Guard fell out, still clutching his throat where his blood poured from his wounded neck. He landed in the mud below the carriage and began to claw his way across the ground in an attempt to escape! He quickly expired from loss of blood within a short distance. His naturally pale face, even whiter than before, stared up at the sky lifelessly as the Seeker stepped over him with barely a glance on the way to the royal carriage.

The Davaracian necromancer made his way to the carriage door and had just taken a step up to climb inside, when Draevan's battle axe slammed into his back! The powerful momentum of the heavy axe he had thrown with all his considerable strength cut through the Seeker's spine and drove his body into the carriage interior! He disappeared from sight as the carriage door swung closed, leaving only a small open gap.

Rhiannon's life or death battle had reached a critical point. She started to succumb to exhaustion and only partially deflected two of the Horde's Dark Blades. They left her with a cut across her left cheek and a much deeper cut on her left shoulder. A Dark Tendril flashed towards her from behind, delivering a final killing Blade intended to be driven into the back of her neck!

She spun around just in time to see the Dark Blade hurtling towards her eye, but too late to stop it! As she raised her dagger in her right hand, desperately trying to deflect it, Draevan's big left hand appeared between the Blade and her face! It enveloped the Blade before it could pierce her right eye!

Rhiannon's dagger, still moving rapidly on its hopelessly late trajectory, slammed into the back of the Relic Hunter's left arm, as he continued through his lunge!

"Uggh!" he grunted as he felt her dagger bury itself up to the hilt in the

muscle of his upper arm.

The pain almost distracted him from completing the Sphere of Sfaenn he was casting around Rhiannon and himself, to stop the Dark Horde Tendrils. He had neglected to protect himself from Rhiannon's instinctual defensive thrust, and paid the painful price for the oversight.

As he clutched his deeply wounded arm, the Tendrils slashed at the blue Sphere around them, skittering across its surface in an attempt to penetrate the shield. An immediate increase in the volume of the ghostly howling signalled the Horde's frustration at encountering the magic barrier. Their indistinct ghostly faces formed in the mist-like Tendrils, scowling in anger, as they peered at their target through the transparent shield, leaving icy frost trails across its surface.

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CHAPTER 5

THE SCROLL

Rhiannon's shock at Draevan's unexpected intervention played out on her face. "Wha- what the hell!?" she exclaimed in surprise.

Draevan turned to her with a pain filled grin on his face. He gripped the hilt of her dagger, still embedded in his arm with his right hand.

"Hello, my lady. Fancy meeting you again so soon. Such a..." he pulled her dagger smoothly out of his arm. "Ugh! ... pleasant surprise," he said wryly.

Rhiannon stared at him in shock for a moment. Taking in his blood-soaked arm, while still very distracted by the noise of the Dark Horde surrounding them. Its multitude of Dark Blades, scratching creepily across the surface of the protective Sphere all around them, accompanied by the Darkened Souls' eerie howling.

"Draevan!?" she blurted.

"I think this is yours," he smiled stiffly, handing her now blood-soaked dagger back to her, hilt first.

She stared at it momentarily, mouth slightly agape.

"Oh, by the gods! I-I'm so sorry!" she stammered, taking the dagger by the hilt. "I–"

"No. My fault," Draevan grinned painfully again. "Happens all the time! Beautiful women feel the urge to stab me every now and again," he jested, only half in jest as a mental image of his last encounter with the beautiful but deadly Myste, flashed across his memory. An encounter that had left a very similar Elven dagger protruding from his chest.

"By the gods! This is madness!" Rhiannon exclaimed, staring at the Dark Blades still attacking the Sphere. "I thought I was done for!" she stated, her beautiful tanned face now pale with shock.

"You're safe now," Draevan assured her. "The Dark Horde cannot penetrate the Sphere of Sfaenn."

Suddenly Rhiannon remembered the King of Ravania. "Oh, gods! The king!" she exclaimed, rushing to the side of the Sphere in an attempt to see into the royal carriage. "We have to save him! I-I have to save him!"

Judging by the bloody fate of the Captain of the Royal Guard, he had witnessed while rushing to kill the Seeker and save Rhiannon, Draevan doubted very much that the king had survived.

"I'm afraid we may be too late," he stated sombrely, as the Dark Horde's Blades suddenly dissipated into thin air, leaving just the sound of the forest glade behind. The relative silence was eerily unnerving after the cacophony of the attacking Horde.

Draevan kept the Sphere of Sfaenn in place around them as a precaution. It moved slowly forward so they could make their way to the royal carriage. Rhiannon moved forward in front of him, desperate to see if the king had survived.

As they neared the door, the Relic Hunter gently held her back with his right hand, so that he could cast a magic shield in front of them before going into the carriage. She reluctantly allowed him to take the lead, and he dropped the Sphere of Sfaenn replacing it with the Shield of Light he attached to his left arm.

Drawing his short broadsword from its scabbard attached to his belt with his right hand, he stepped up into the carriage. Pushing the door wider with the

blue Shield of Light, it bumped up against something behind it. Draevan pushed harder, and the door opened wide enough to see the carnage inside.

The king was slumped against the side of the carriage on the opposite side, blood soaking his regal collar from the wounds in his neck. His dead eyes were vacantly staring at an ornate silver scroll container he still clutched in his left hand. It was likely the last thing he had on his mind at the moment of his death.

"No!" Rhiannon gasped from behind Draevan, as she caught sight of the dead king.

Directly opposite the king on the other side of the carriage, the lifeless body of the other royal guard lay slumped across the seat. His neck too, had been slashed to ribbons by the Dark Blades. In the centre foot well lay the body of the Seeker. Draevan's axe was still protruding from his back where it had severed the Seeker's spinal column and continued through to his left lung. Paralysed from the spinal wound, he lay where he fell with his face to the side.

Draevan dispelled the Shield of Light and stepped into the carriage. The Seeker suddenly took a shuddering wet breath and his black eyes fought to look up at him. They were filled with anger and a dark resentment towards the Relic Hunter for what he had just done to him.

The Seeker coughed bloodily, then his eyes moved to the scroll container in the dead king's hand. Draevan realised it was likely the reason he had attacked the King of Ravania. Sheathing his sword, he took the silver container from the king's lifeless hand and opened it, revealing an ancient scroll rolled up inside.

The broken seal on the scroll immediately caught his attention. He recognised it as the ancient seal of the original leader of 'The Sorcerers of Sangraelle', 'Saidon, The Sorcerer of The Southern Seas'. His unmistakable seal

symbol was that depicting a giant ocean wave engulfing a three-masted ship, while a storm raged.

The Relic Hunters had been searching for Saidon's secret island fortress for years before Draevan joined their order. The ancient reclusive sorcerer had ruled the Sangraelle cabal and therefore all of Gandaria with an iron fist for a thousand years.

He was eventually deposed as the leader of the Sorcerers of Sangraelle by the youngest member of the dark cabal, 'Davarac, The Destroyer'. Davarac, the undisputed leader of the eponymous northern Empire of Davaracia, had secured the support of a majority of the thirteen-member cabal. He did it by cleverly using them against one another, and ultimately uniting them in their shared hatred of Saidon and his very long, heavy-handed leadership.

Saidon had become even more reclusive in his defeat, and retired to one of his many secret islands, reputedly hidden from the outside world by a magic veil he had cast over it. He remained hidden for almost another thousand years, before suddenly surprisingly reappearing to take part in The Sorcerers of Sangraelle's 'The Dark Quest'. A game proposed by Davarac, which they had in their apparent shared boredom, decided would determine the leadership of the cabal from that time on.

When twelve of the thirteen members, including Davarac, fell in the Dark Quest, thanks to the interference of the Relic Hunters of Rillendael, Saidon disappeared once more, before the Hunters could dispose of his Evil too. That was over six hundred years ago now. They were still searching for his hidden island fortress and most of his Relics, that had proved as elusive as their creator.

Draevan opened the ancient scroll gently, afraid that it may crumble in his fingers. Keeping his growing sense of excitement at what it might reveal

under control, he rolled the scroll open. The ornate scroll was decorated with beautiful painted art around the border, depicting many scenes of ocean life, including waves and beaches, as well as sea monsters and other creatures of the deep.

The centre of the scroll however, was dominated by a highly detailed map of the entire Gandarian continent. Draevan immediately sensed Dark Magic in the scroll. He could see that the exact present locations of the Relics of Sangraelle that they had already collected were depicted on the map by their Relic symbols! Including his present location! The map shimmered with magic in his hands and each of the Relic Tattoos on his body began to glow in turn, matched by their map counterpart! The scroll was Saidon's Relic Divining Map!

Draevan took a deep breath. This map was a serious tracking tool fashioned by powerful Dark Magic! It was no longer a mystery at all why the King of Ravania had been targeted by a Davaracian Seeker!

The map also indicated several Relics their rivals had obviously already collected. Most of which were located in the Davaracian slaver territories in the north, near the Sangraelle Caves, where the Seekers were based.

Vague, misty, black blurred areas spread in small patches across the entire map were present, too. Draevan realised immediately that these were the sites of potential Relic locations! Some of them corresponded to locations his order had recently discovered! The map would speed up recovery of the Relics of Sangraelle incredibly!

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CHAPTER 6

DARK HORDE

Draevan's excitement at the fantastic find was abruptly interrupted by the loud howling of the Seeker's Dark Horde as it rose up once again, and surrounded the carriage!

"Oh, shite! Not again!" Rhiannon swore at the sight, quickly raising her Elven daggers.

The Seeker laying paralysed and dying at Draevan's feet grimaced angrily at him, his teeth bared in a snarl! The dying cultist was furious at seeing how close he had come to attaining the map, now in the Relic Hunter's hands.

"Dieeeee!" he gurgled, spitting the word out of his blood-filled mouth with a final supreme effort.

His Dark Horde, summoned for the last time by its dying master, descended upon the carriage, forming a multitude of Dark Blades intent on destroying Draevan!

The Relic Hunter did not hesitate. Instantly drawing his broadsword, he smashed the blade down powerfully on the dying Seeker's neck, severing it from his body! Abruptly, the deadly Dark Blades that were flying towards him dissipated into a dark mist a hair's breadth from attaining their target! The air moved over him coldly with the mist's passing.

"By the gods! That was close!" Rhiannon exclaimed with an expulsion of breath.

She stared nervously out at the remaining black Tendrils of the Dark Horde that now began to swirl thickly around the carriage. She kept her daggers

tensely raised.

Draevan wiped the blade of his broadsword on the Seeker's red cloak that covered the cultist's now dead body. He removed the necromancer's dark blood from its surface, then calmly returned the sword to the scabbard on his belt.

"You can relax, Rhiannon," he said reassuringly.

"Is he really dead?" Rhiannon asked, still wide eyed as she stared at the Seeker's severed head laying face up on the floor of the carriage. Its dark black, now vacant eyes stared upwards at the carriage roof.

"Yes," Draevan growled, without the slightest twinge of regret at taking the Evil cultist's life.

The Seeker was number one hundred and thirteen of his kind that had died by Draevan's hand. *Far from enough yet,* he thought to himself. Many more still remained. The Davaracian descendants of Davarac and his minions, known as 'The Sons of Sangraelle' had continued his cult of death after he fell in the 'The Dark Quest'. They spewed out Seekers to continue the search for the Relics of Power.

"Then why are we still surrounded by that!" Rhiannon exclaimed, pointing at the Dark Horde Tendrils that continued to circle the carriage slowly. The Darkened Souls' howling was very low now, like a loud haunting whisper in the air. The mist had become so thick that the light was dimmed to that of a twilight.

"The Horde is waiting to greet their new master," Draevan stated calmly. "As his killer, I can now take control of them if I choose to do so."

"Gods! That fills me with such mixed feelings!" Rhiannon admitted, staring at him with trepidation. "Utter relief! And revulsion at the thought of you

taking control of such evil!"

Draevan smiled a half smile at her, pleased that she had the purity of heart, and the intelligence to understand what was before her.

"I'm glad to hear you say that. Your honesty does you credit, lady warrior," he stated sincerely.

Draevan rolled up the Relic Divining Map and returned it to its silver container. He handed it to Rhiannon on his way out of the carriage door.

"Please hold on to this for me. I must perform the Necromantic Rites required to take control of the Horde. Then I can release the innocent Souls from it while retaining control of the Evil ones like him, who are also trapped within," he gestured at the dead Seeker. "Lest they be free to return to plague this world in another life."

"Uh, as you wish..." Rhiannon replied nervously, accepting the scroll container from his hand.

She watched in awed silence as Draevan stepped down to the ground outside, beneath the Dark Horde. Lifting his hands palm up, he closed his eyes and began the Necromantic Rites, murmuring the Dark Incantation of Bonding. The Dark Rite drew the Souls of the Dark Horde to him. Dark Tendrils descended from above and enveloped him, circling rapidly like a whirlpool.

Draevan opened his eyes now, which had become black throughout. Within the spinning centre of the circling Dark Horde, a gateway to the Soul Realm opened around him. The Dark clouds of Souls trapped within the Dark Horde Web surrounding him were revealed. Their howling spectral voices echoed around the walls of the spinning whirlpool.

"Hear me all you innocent Souls who have no guilt for committing acts of Evil before being trapped within this Dark Horde! You are now free to go to

your interrupted rest! Depart this place immediately!" Draevan ordered in a booming necromancer's Dark Voice that echoed through the glade.

There was instant chaos amongst the Souls! Just over three thousand of the amassed Souls flew upwards into the sky. Their misty forms transforming from the black darkness of the Horde into an ethereal light blue, as they cast off the Dark Bondage!

The relief the departing Souls felt at their long overdue release, washed outwards as a sense of elation Draevan could feel within his very Soul! It was in sharp contrast to the Evil that remained.

A hundred and sixty-six Darkened Souls remained trapped within the Dark Horde.

"You Souls who are guilty of Evil are now Bonded to me, and me alone! I am now your master! You shall obey only me!" Draevan continued in a terrible voice of doom. "For your crimes, you shall serve me until the end of my days, as and when I see fit!"

He felt a wave of resentment wash towards him from the remaining Darkened Souls, their Evil burning bright in their red smouldering eyes. One of the Souls rushed towards him from within their ranks, flying legless like a wraith! Its anger at being kept in the Necromantic Trap that forced it to serve within the Dark Horde was fresh and hot! With a banshee-like screech, its face loomed in front of Draevan as it stretched its talon-like claws towards him! He recognised the face of the dead Seeker he had just killed!

"Stop!" he ordered it with a voice like thunder, and its Darkened Soul instantly froze in place, writhing against the Dark Magic Web that trapped it. The web sparked red in places, throwing out sparks like a disturbed fire in the wind. The Seeker's Soul glared at him with hatred from within the Dark Web,

but ceased its struggle.

"I will be free again! My master will come for you!" the Seeker's Soul screamed at him with a spectral voice.

"And until then, you will join the many thousands of Evil Souls that I have Bonded to me over the centuries, and do as you are told!" Draevan boomed. "Get back and wait for my summons!" he commanded, throwing his hands forward, willing the Dark Web to drag the Seeker's Soul back into the crowd of Darkened Souls once more.

The wraith disappeared into their mass, as the one hundred and sixty-six Souls were absorbed into Draevan's personal Dark Horde of well over a hundred thousand Evil Souls. Evil Souls he had amassed over six and a half centuries while ridding the world of Seekers, one at a time. Along with many other perpetrators of Evil he had encountered in his long life.

Draevan felt the massive growing Dark Horde's Evil emanating from their black misty Soul forms as he closed the gateway. Their Evil tugged at his Soul trying to draw him down 'The Dark Path' that he had been resisting for over six hundred years. The Dark Tendrils dissipated around him and he turned back to the carriage. His eyes returned to their normal light silvery grey, and relief flooded through him, as the Evil pull receded.

Rhiannon stared down at him from the carriage door.

"I saw the Souls you released rising into the sky!" she exclaimed with a look of wonder still in her eyes. "It was beautiful!"

Draevan smiled gently at her as the last remnants of Evil pulling on his Soul, subsided.

"Yes. It is a wondrous moment to see the innocent Souls go free. Truly, the only thing I can say I enjoy about my Necromantic Powers."

"And the evil ones?" she asked, an anxious look returning to her face.

"They are still held in the Dark Horde, along with the Seeker's Soul who has now joined their ranks," Draevan stated seriously. "That is where they will stay until I find a way to banish them permanently from our world."

"Thank the gods! That is a relief to hear!" Rhiannon stated with sincerity.

She sank to her knees at the top of the carriage steps and put her Elven daggers down, as well as the scroll.

"Ugh...because I think I need to...rest—," she breathed before collapsing and falling out of the carriage.

Draevan quickly lunged forward and caught her as she fell, gathering her into his arms. Her eyes rolled, and she mumbled incoherently. He walked over to the moss-covered base of one of the trees at the edge of the glade nearby and put her down gently. Her shoulder was now covered in blood from the Dark Blade wound she had received moments before he saved her.

Tearing her sleeve open a little further, he inspected the wound. It was a relatively shallow wound, fortunately, but deep enough to have caused substantial blood loss. The archer would normally have needed stitches. Thanks to the magic he had learned from his Elven mother as a child before he lost her to the Seeker, he had another option to heal her.

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CHAPTER 7

ELVEN MAGIC

Placing his right hand on the moss-covered ground next to Rhiannon, Draevan murmured the ancient Elven magic *Incantation of Communion* that allowed him to connect to the forest in the glade. Unlike the *Dark Connection* felt during necromancy, connecting to the forest was one of Peace and Light for him.

He had long ago learned that while death is a normal part of the Cycle of Life shared by all things, Dark necromancy breaks the Cycle in order to hijack the Soul Energy of Life, in order to use it for selfish purposes. The Elven magic, conversely, is taught to be used to help others for unselfish purposes. Healing being its primary use. Draevan's mother taught him this well.

A green glow surrounded his hand. He could feel the mass of biological material making up the vegetation of the surrounding forest. The energy provided by the sunlight above the forest flowed down through it all to the roots, thrust deep into the earth.

Through the incantation, he drew the energy from the roots in the earth. He passed it through his body to his left hand, that he placed just above Rhiannon's wounded shoulder. Using the energy provided by the forest, Draevan murmured the Incantation of Healing that would repair her broken flesh. The green glow surrounding his hand flowed down into the wound.

The process was normally a slow one when healing humans, compared to that of elves who, with few exceptions, live within the forest all their lives. Constantly exposed to the natural energy of the forest, Elves absorbed that

energy easily during healing. Humans, with few exceptions, did not.

Gradually Rhiannon's wound closed, eventually leaving only a thin scar marking the site of the original damage. He repeated the process on the wound on Rhiannon's face, taking a little extra time to make sure the scar left there was hardly noticeable. Her body had responded to the healing magic faster than he had expected, more like that of an elf. He looked at her face, intrigued by the mystery of it, as she showed no outward signs of Elven blood. Her choice of Elven Scout training and weaponry too remained a bit of a mystery.

Rhiannon's eyes began to open. She looked up at him incoherently for a moment, tensing. Her hands went immediately for her absent daggers, like the true warrior she had obviously trained hard to be. Then her eyes focused on Draevan's, which were still tinged with the green glow of the Incantation of Healing.

She relaxed visibly and smiled. "I feel like I've been caught with my pants down," she breathed.

"Not yet," Draevan said with a small naughty grin.

"Mmmm, I could have sworn those eyes of yours were grey, not green?" she said softly, holding eye contact.

"Elven Incantation of Healing," he stated. "You needed a little patching up."

"Ah, now I remember," Rhiannon grimaced. "I passed out, didn't I?"

"You fell with relative grace," he teased her gently. "Next time, give me a little more warning, though. I'm not as fast as I used to be six hundred years ago. You almost landed face first in the mud."

She grinned sheepishly. "Embarrassing! I would have preferred the first thing I fell into with you watching be a nice warm bed, rather than mud!"

"Mmmm, that would definitely have been nicer," Draevan agreed. "We will have to make up for it as soon as possible."

She grinned. "I do have to thank you for keeping me alive and healing me. That and keeping my face out of the mud gives you a lot of extra attraction points, too."

"Had to be done! It is a beautiful face," he quipped cheekily.

"IT!?" Rhiannon said with mock indignation, taking a playful swipe at his arm. "That is not the way to address a lady, sir!"

Her hand connected with the wound her dagger had given him earlier.

Draevan winced slightly at the sharp pain.

"Ugh. My apologies, my lady. No need to resort to torture!" he jested.

"Oh, gods! Sorry!" Rhiannon apologised. "I completely forgot I wounded you there!"

"I'll live," Draevan smiled. "Give me a moment to heal myself," he said placing his left hand on the mossy ground once more.

He closed his eyes to concentrate. The healing energy of the forest slowly flowed up from his hand into the deep wound in his upper arm. Muscle tissue knitted together once more almost seamlessly until all that remained were two thin scars, marking the entrance and exit of the dagger wound. They would barely be noticed among the many other scars he had collected over the centuries.

With a healing ability enhanced way beyond that of a normal human, it didn't take long at all. Thanks to his Elven blood heritage, as well as 'The Dragon Stone' Relic Tattoo, which had automatically healed his mortal wounds ever since he was forced to acquire it over six hundred years ago, he healed rapidly. Far above his skills in combat and magic, Draevan knew well that his healing ability was the single most important element that had kept him alive for so long.

As he ended the healing process and opened his eyes, Rhiannon's face appeared right in front of his. She was now sitting up directly in front of him, her face only a foot away from his. A small foot.

She smiled gently and took his left hand in hers.

"You healed me first, even though your wound was far worse than mine. Thank you," she said earnestly, squeezing his hand gently in hers. "That was very kind of you."

"Had to be done! I didn't want to deprive you of an opportunity to torture me first," Draevan jested again. "You look so enticing when you do it."

Rhiannon grinned at him.

"You really are a cheeky one!" she exclaimed huskily, moving closer.

"So, I've been told a few times," Draevan murmured.

She leaned forward then and kissed him on the lips for a lingering moment.

"I love it," she murmured in his ear. "I'd show you how much right now, but I just don't feel comfortable making love with you in this glade filled with death...necromancer or not."

"Agreed," Draevan answered huskily, swallowing down the strong desire for her that had built up instantly when her lips touched his.

Being a warrior for so long had taught him many things. One of them being that survival of a life and death event generally heightened desire, regardless of how appropriate or inappropriate it may be at the given time. Death comes for all eventually, sooner than most are comfortable with, so life needs to be lived to the full. As a warrior herself, Rhiannon obviously shared that understanding.

She put her arms around Draevan and hugged him. "Let us leave this

place as soon as possible, then," she whispered into his ear.

Draevan hugged her back with one arm. "We will."

Both of them got to their feet.

Rhiannon's face was sombre now as her eyes swept the glade, taking in the bodies of her fallen comrades.

"I need to bury them. I cannot leave them to the wolves," she stated quietly.

"We can do it the Elven way, using magic," Draevan suggested. "If we take their bodies further away from the road, to the edge of the forest, we can lay them to rest there."

Rhiannon nodded her head. "That would be good."

They set about the grisly task.

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CHAPTER 8

ELVEN BURIAL

After carrying the king and all ten of the royal guard's bodies to the edge of the forest, they lined them up next to each other in a neat row. They placed the king wearing his gold crown in the centre with five guards on either side of him. Their arms were folded across their chests with their hands around the hilts of their swords. Symbolically at least, the king would have his guards in the afterlife, too. Rhiannon removed only the king's signet ring to use as proof of his passing.

Draevan began the Elven Incantation of Interment. It was the ancient Elvish Magic Rite of Burial. The bodies of the dead were rapidly covered by vegetation from the surrounding forest, which came eerily to life. It grew over them in a matter of moments, hiding their bodies from sight so that they became one with the forest. Their bodies would feed the forest in the everlasting Cycle of Life and Death.

Looking around at the golden rays of sunlight shining through the trees on the edge of the glade, Draevan thought to himself, *there are worse places to be laid to rest*.

Then he burnt the body of their murderer inside the royal carriage, on the opposite side of the road, using an ancient Dwarven fire spell normally used for smelting metal. The fire burned so hot that it turned even the Seeker's bones to ashes. A wind spell spread the ashes far and wide to dissipate the residue Evil it contained. The Seeker would be mourned by no one.

Finally, they collected the six carriage horses and eight guard's horses

that had survived the attack. Still skittish from the Dark Horde's howling during the attack and the smell of blood and death, the horses were happy to leave. Draevan tied them to one another in two columns, six behind Rhiannon, riding one horse, and seven behind Gorn and himself. Saidon's Divining Map he placed securely in his saddlebag. Then they made their way northward up the coast.

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A short distance later, as the sun began to set, they stopped for the night, making their way down to the beach below the coastal road where a hidden cove would provide shelter for the night. Draevan had used the cove many times over the years as it was the site of a small freshwater waterfall.

They watered all the horses, and collected dry wood for a fire Draevan started in the circle of stones he had built up over the years. Once the campsite was prepared, they both stripped naked, and helped each other to wash the dried blood from their bodies and clothes under the waterfall.

Rhiannon looked up into Draevan's eyes and smiled. She stood on her toes to reach up and kiss his lips gently, her strong, slender hands on his chest. She kissed him more urgently and her firm, full breasts pressed against him. Draevan picked her up in his arms and carried her over to the fire where they had rolled out his camp sleeping pad. Laying her down gently, he lay down next to her and ran his hand slowly over the curves of her slim, muscular body. They began to kiss passionately. The sound of the ocean waves crashing on the beach provided a natural background rhythm.

Making love urgently a number of times, they spent the sexual tension built up between the two of them that they had felt since the moment they first laid eyes upon each other at the inn. A fateful meeting their Souls had no doubt pre-arranged well ahead of time.

Draevan's Elven blood and the Dragon Stone Relic rendered of little consequence the massive age gap between them. His relative human physical age had remained around thirty-seven, to her twenty-seven. The mental age gap he knew was always going to be the more significant one, as he had discovered to his detriment many times over his long lifetime. The centuries had taken its toll on him in that regard.

After their lovemaking, Rhiannon lay in Draevan's arms opposite the fire, her green eyes reflecting the golden flames. "How was it you came to be a royal guard?" Draevan asked. "You don't strike me as the courtly kind."

"Very perceptive of you, sir! You're right, I'm not. In fact, I'm quite the opposite. I'm far happier in a forest. My father was a royal guard. He fell, protecting the king from an assassin's arrow seven months ago. Word of his death reached me across the border in Elven Floriaendael, where I was training as an archer and tracker to aid me in my intended career as a Ravanian border scout. I travelled home to Castorillia for his funeral immediately," she answered, confirming what John the innkeeper had told Draevan earlier in the day.

"I'm sorry to hear that. My condolences for your loss," he said into her ear.

"Thank you," Rhiannon said, squeezing his arm gently. "In Castorillia, I discovered from a close friend of my father's attending his funeral that at the time of his death, my father had been on the trail of a traitor in the royal family. Someone he suspected was plotting to assassinate the king."

"My father's friend did not know who the traitor was, unfortunately, but he suspected that the arrow that killed my father was set on its deadly path by the same royal traitor he was investigating. It was intentionally aimed at my father, not just at the king. I requested a position among the royal guards the

following day to allow me to secretly investigate my father's murder from the inside," Rhiannon revealed.

"Very brave of you to enter dangerous territory like that," Draevan commended her.

"I felt I needed to find his murderer! I could not bear the thought of whoever it was going free," she exclaimed. "For the past six months, I have been slowly gathering information, getting closer and closer to finding the perpetrator. I suspect it was the king's uncle, Lord Karver, who was behind the plot. He had managed to nepotistically place his incompetent son in the position of Captain in charge of the king's personal guard, ahead of my father, when the old Captain retired. As Captain of The Royal Guard, his son's incompetence opened glaring holes in the king's personal security. I had hoped I could keep an eye on the holes to protect the king, and catch any assassin if they attempted to murder the king. I believed it was likely to be the same assassin that killed my father, who would try to exploit the holes. That plan is now as dead as the king," Rhiannon sighed disconsolately.

"Mmm, unfortunate timing," Draevan commiserated.

"Lord Karver will likely take the throne now, unchallenged as regent, until the king's young son is old enough to take the throne. As regent, he will be untouchable for my father's death. The king's son will no doubt be the next assassination target when he reaches maturity in five years' time, if Karver wants to retain power."

"More than likely," Draevan agreed.

"I promise no matter what, I will be there when he is so that I can catch Karver in the act if he attempts to use an assassin. I owe it to my father's memory," Rhiannon vowed.

"Then I will help you when that time comes," Draevan offered.

"Thank you! I'd really appreciate that," Rhiannon accepted, taking his hand to her mouth and kissing it as she looked up into his eyes with a smile.

He gave her a gentle squeeze and a warm smile.

There was a comfortable silence for a moment as they held each other and stared into the flames.

Draevan thought again about Rhiannon's revelations.

"Training with the elves in Floriaendael...how did that come about?" he asked, his curiosity peaked at the thought of a human training with the usually reclusive elves in that region of Bravaellin Forest, not far from his childhood home.

"Ahh! That was thanks to my father!" Rhiannon exclaimed. "As a young soldier on the border, many years before he became a royal guard, he saved an elf by the name of Arandael from certain death," she explained. "He was working as a scout on the border of Ravania and Bravaellin Forest. Arandael, was an elven scout, guarding the border on the Elven side. He was captured by three Ravanian poachers that crossed the border to hunt in the Elven-forest illegally. When Arandael had confronted them, one of them attacked him from behind. The man threw a rock at his head that ricocheted off a tree, catching him by surprise. It hit his temple and knocked him out cold."

"Panicking when they thought he was dead, the poachers were just starting to bury him alive, when my father happened to catch up to them. He had stumbled upon their fresh tracks by chance while patrolling the border and risked a political incident to follow them. A very lucky thing for Arandael! My father arrested the poachers, and they were charged for poaching and attempted murder. Arandael and my father became firm friends after that."

"A fateful meeting for them then," Draevan stated.

"Yes, very. My father was invited to visit Arandael at his home in Floriaendael many times, and later took me with him there when I was a little girl. I became excellent friends with Arandael's family, too. So much so that he and his wife Bellaendel became my godparents. I feel more at home with them there than I do in Castorillia, really. I love Bravaellin Forest! And Elven culture! They live so much more connected to nature than humans do," Rhiannon enthused.

"It's why I'd resolved to become a border scout after my mother passed, just over a year ago. She spent her whole life in Castorillia gossiping with all the other ladies of the court, worrying incessantly about what they thought of the way our home was decorated, and reading books about princesses and princes in far-away lands, but never really living. She day-dreamed of me wedding some visiting prince, but I was always more interested in learning to be a warrior than a princess. I vowed when she died that I would never live that life. I want to be as free as possible."

"You're a courageous woman, Rhiannon," Draevan stated earnestly. "I'm glad our Souls chose to meet in this lifetime."

Rhiannon grinned. "So am I! Especially since I'd be food for the forest right now, if we hadn't! I'm truly grateful to still be breathing!"

"I'm grateful you are too," he smiled. "Tonight would have been much less enjoyable!"

She grinned and snuggled in closer. "I agree!"

"So! You know a bit more about me now. Tell me how you became a Relic Hunter, of all things?" she asked enthusiastically, running her hand over his Relic Tattoos. "Seeing all these fantastic Relic Tattoos all over your body has

my curiosity burning bright right now! I have to hear how you collected them!"

"Well, that is a very long story," Draevan murmured.

"Go on then! I'm all ears! I'd like to know more about the mysterious man I just made mad passionate love to!" she quipped, running her hand over his thigh.

"Fair enough," he agreed reluctantly. "I'll try to give you the short version..." he stated, forcing himself to overcome his usual reluctance to visit his distant past.

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CHAPTER 9

ORIGINS

The path to Draevan becoming a Relic Hunter had everything to do with his first encounter with a Davaracian Seeker. It ended his childhood abruptly.

According to his mother Celaenn, a beautiful elf healer with long ice-blond hair, he entered this world in a truly Elven manner when she gave birth to him amongst the trees in the forest, not very far from Floriaendael. That had taken place six hundred and ninety years before he met Rhiannon.

His father Hadrian was, however, a very human ex-soldier in the Ravanian army, who had given up the warrior life. He had retired to a small apple farm that he was awarded for his thirty years of military service to the crown. It was right on the border of Bravaellin Forest, well away from any human city. Hadrian chose the location because he wanted to be as far away from other people as possible.

Known as 'Hadrian, the Hammer of Ravania', his fame as a feared warrior hung over him like a dark cloud. All the blood and gore he had been immersed in during border war, after border war with Ravania's southern neighbour, Valorheim, had been eating away at his Soul. He just wanted peace and quiet. He had been born during the so called 'Dark Times', when the 'Sorcerers of Sangraelle' ruled Gandaria, and played with their kingdoms like pieces on a game board. Stoking fires to create wars for their own bored amusement.

Hadrian cultivated his apple trees in peace for three years before he met

Draevan's mother, on the edge of the forest. He had become a gentle giant, frequently feeding birds from his big, rough hands, and taking walks in the forest amongst the ancient trees.

On one of his walks, a loud shrill cry of pain alerted him to someone in distress, deeper in the forest. When he arrived, he found a beautiful elf woman struggling to remove her ankle from a poacher's metal wild boar trap, hidden in the leaf cover. She had accidentally stepped on it while on one of her foraging trips to gather the ingredients for her healing solutions.

He gently helped her release her foot from the powerful trap, but her ankle was badly damaged by it. It was too far for her to limp back to her home. So, the big powerful man picked her up and carried her back to his home nearby, where he helped her nurse her ankle back to health for the following week.

Draevan's mother told him she had secretly been observing his father from the forest for almost a month before that. She had been fascinated by the very large brutish looking human man, with long red hair. He was covered in old battle scars, yet seemed to be so gentle with the forest creatures living around him. Like he had done for her, he had rescued many animals from poacher's traps.

After he helped her, they became friends, and she visited his farm frequently. Eventually, their friendship deepened, and they became lovers. She moved to the farm to live with him, and Draevan arrived in the world a year later. His dirty blond hair, already evident at birth, was a total mixture of their hair colours, as was his face.

His mother's beautiful, refined Elven face and light-grey eyes were given a rougher male edge by his father's harsher human features, eventually resulting in a handsome masculine face and only slightly Elven ears to go with it.

Draevan's large size was, however, definitely all inherited from his father, making the birth a harsh one for his slim mother.

Thirteen happy years followed, where he slowly grew into a young boy, enjoying an almost idyllic early childhood. He learned to tend the farm with his parents, and they harvested apples together. His mother would bake delicious apple pies with the apples, while his father pressed apples to produce fruit juice and cider, that they traded with humans and elves in the immediate area. Draevan's life was filled with butterflies, birds, and bees, along with the farm and forest animals that surrounded them.

Then a fateful event took place that would ultimately lead to the sudden end of his childhood.

They were celebrating his thirteenth birthday, eating a big birthday cake Draevan's mother had baked for the occasion, when an unexpected visitor arrived at the door. The man was a sorcerer that his father knew well from his days in the Ravanian military, going by the name of Batalion. Batalion had met his father during the first border war with Valorheim, more than forty years ago, at the time.

They had become close friends after Hadrian saved Batalion's life from a Valorheimian assassin that broke into Batalion's vacation home on the border. The assassin had surprised him while in his bathtub by tunnelling under the house, thus avoiding the magical defences on the doors and windows.

Batalion was an important military battle mage to the then king of Ravania, Kestoril, who was very grateful to Hadrian for saving one of his mages. He was promoted to the position of a general in the royal army and he and Batalion, together, saved Ravania from many invasions over the years.

After Hadrian's retirement, they had not seen each other in almost

seventeen years, until Batalion sought him out for an important reason. The sorcerer felt he could trust no other with a package that he believed had the potential to change the fate of the whole of Gandaria. "To end the Dark Times", in his exact words.

Batalion showed Draevan's father a Relic. It was one of the 'Relics of Sangraelle'. The first Draevan ever laid his eyes upon, as he eavesdropped on their private conversation, through a secret knothole in the wood floor of his room upstairs.

The sorcerer explained what the Relic was and asked Hadrian to keep it safe, until another sorcerer belonging to a secret group opposing the Sorcerers of Sangraelle, came to collect it. Hadrian reluctantly agreed to look after the package, and Batalion gave him a secret pass-phrase that the unknown rebel sorcerer would give him, when the mage collected the package. Batalion departed the next day.

After his departure, Draevan overheard his mother and father heatedly discussing the Relic, and it was obvious that she was not happy at all that he had agreed to accept the package. She said that she knew the Sangraelle Relics were evil, having been created by the evil Sorcerers of Sangraelle, and would inevitably attract evil to their door. Her prediction was a very fateful one.

That was the first day Draevan's father took him to the barn and showed him his hidden battle weapons stored beneath the floor. He immediately started training his son in armed combat with a short broadsword and spear. Draevan's mother also increased the speed and intensity of the lessons in the healing magic of the Elves, that she had begun to teach him slowly the previous year. He could sense the extreme unease that entered them both as soon as the Relic entered their home.

Then, nothing untoward happened for five and a half months after that, and the unease they felt lessened somewhat.

Never-the-less Draevan's father continued his combat lessons every day, and while they were extremely taxing on his young body, he found that he enjoyed them immensely. He practised constantly even in his spare time, pretending that he was a royal knight, slaying monsters and saving beautiful damsels in distress. Just like the human knights he read about in all the very old historical stories included in a random collection of old, fairly tattered books he owned.

His father and mother had collected the books from village markets for him over the years. Celaenn had ensured that her son learned to read at a young age, both the language of humans and the ancient language of the Elves. She told him it was important to learn to read so as not to be ignorant of the past. To try to always change the world for the better and not repeat the evils that tended to keep the world stuck in a cycle of darkness. Especially when those in power at all levels failed to recognise the benefits that came with changing things for the better and lacked the courage through greed and corruption to make any changes.

Thanks to her urging, Draevan grew very good at performing the Elven healing magic she taught him, able to draw powerfully on the energy of the forest to use it to heal. His abilities soon even surpassed hers, and she told him that he was a natural healer. That he had a very bright light burning within him that he must always hold on to and use to dispel the darkness in the world.

Then, the evil she had feared would be attracted by the Relic arrived…

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CHAPTER 10

THE FIRST SEEKER

The day aptly was an early winter morning that started out wet, cloudy, and cold. A strong icy wind blowing down from the Great Ghoron Mountains, north of Braevallin Forest, signalled that snow was about to arrive. Draevan was helping his father plant new apple trees on a piece of their land that they had worked hard on, to prepare as a new orchard.

They were just about to head back to the house, where his mother was preparing a warm meal to stave off the winter cold, when they suddenly heard a terrible ghostly howling sound emanating from the direction of the house. He and his father looked up from their work instantly!

His father threw down the small apple tree that he had in his hands, grabbed up a pitchfork laying on the ground nearby, and started running up the hill towards the evil sound! Shouting over his shoulder, he told Draevan to run to the barn and fetch his battle axe! Draevan obeyed without question, having had the previous five months of combat readiness training drummed into him by then.

But as he ran across the orchards towards the barn that stood to the right side of the house, he caught sight of his mother running rapidly down the other side of a row of tall windbreak trees separating the orchards. A black cloud of misty, evil looking Dark Tendrils were pursuing her! It was immediately obvious to Draevan that she had no chance of outrunning the roiling mass that was gaining on her rapidly!

Suddenly, she caught sight of him at the bottom end of the row, and

immediately stopped running towards him. For a moment, their eyes met, and he saw the instant sadness that filled her eyes. She wanted to run to him and gather him up to protect him, but she knew they could not outrun the black cloud pursuing her. Instead, he saw her mouth the words, "I love you." Then she turned and faced the Dark Tendrils!

She had two Elven daggers in her hands and started slashing at the black mist as it attacked her! Draevan had never seen his mother fight. Her speed was incredible! Just a blur of movement, she kept the Dark Blades that appeared in the mist at bay for what felt like a very long time, her ice-blond hair a swirling white mist of its own.

Unfortunately, the harsh lesson Draevan learnt that day is that without the magical protection of a Sphere of Sfaenn, no one can resist a Dark Horde attack forever. As her strength and speed waned, the evil Blades found their marks, slashing her body relentlessly! Eventually she fell to her knees, a bleeding wound at her throat! She turned towards him a final time. "Run!" she screamed before collapsing to the ground.

Instead, Draevan ran towards her!

His heart was pounding in his chest as he slid in the mud over and over until he was eventually at her side. Her eyes flickered weakly, staring up at him from where she had collapsed awkwardly on her back. Blood covered her hair and chest from the fatal wound in her neck. Draevan immediately thrust his left hand down into the muddy earth beside her, and began the Elven magic Incantation of Communion to connect to the forest nearby!

The connection was not as strong as it would have been within the forest itself, but he could feel it never-the-less, and he began to draw energy from it as powerfully as he could! Placing his right hand over the wound on his mother's

throat, he poured the healing energy into it as fast as possible. The wound began to close immediately, her blood flowing out of it slowed, and then stopped escaping completely.

She took a weak, ragged breath and smiled.

"My little healer," she breathed roughly, as tears ran down from her eyes. "I'm so proud of you...but now...you need to run."

Draevan suddenly realised with horror that he had just been slightly too late. She had already lost too much blood.

"No!" he sobbed, desperately beginning to cry. "Mother!"

"It's not your fault," she smiled weakly, as her eyes flickered and slowly closed. "Remember that...," she whispered with her final breath.

"No!" he sobbed, staring at her face as it relaxed in death. "Please, mommy! Don't go!" he begged her, shaking her with his hands. Her body moved limply, still warm to his touch, but now lifeless. With tears streaming down his face, he thrust both his hands into the muddy earth and started to draw energy once more. His face contorted in a grimace of grief as he drew the energy more powerfully than he had ever done before. Trees on either side of him began to wither and die, falling to dust as he drew every bit of their life-force from them with the Elven magic!

The feeling of their death was not a good one for him. The magic began to feel tainted by the death he was inflicting on everything surrounding him. But he didn't care as the extreme emotional pain of his mother's death flowed through him!

Suddenly, he sensed a dark presence approaching. He opened his eyes instantly! The Seeker stood at the top end of the row of trees, surrounded by the black misty tendrils of his Dark Horde, a long black spear held in his hand like a

staff. His gaunt, pale mask of a face stared at Draevan from beneath the red hood of his cloak. Completely black eyes with a sheen of blue magic burned coldly, directly into Draevan's tear-filled eyes. He smiled evilly at the young boy's distress, enjoying his pain!

Draevan knew instantly that he was the one responsible for the murder of his mother! His hands clenched into fists, the green magic energy he had sucked out of everything surrounding him glowed around them! Draevan jumped to his feet and ran towards the Seeker as fast as he could!

The Seeker's evil smile became a mocking smile as he calmly directed his Dark Horde at the boy. The Dark Tendrils began to flow through the air towards him, burning everything it touched with its extreme cold. Consumed by rage at his loss, and intent on avenging his mother, Draevan did not even think of the extreme danger he was in! He kept running directly towards the oncoming Dark Horde! Dark Blades took shape in the misty Tendrils and still he ran!

Suddenly, just as the mass of Dark Blades would have ended his life, Draevan's father's large body slammed into him as he dived through the air to knock his son out of the path of certain death! The Dark Blades, instead of striking Draevan, buried themselves deeply in his father's back!

They both hit the ground hard. The boy winded by the unexpected impact, gasping like a fish out of water on his back, as he tried desperately to get air back into his lungs. Draevan's father struggled up onto his knees, also gasping for breath, but as his mouth opened, he coughed up blood from the Dark Blade wounds that had punctured his lungs.

Ignoring the blood, he stood up, dragging the pitchfork he still gripped in his right hand up with him. He turned towards the Seeker and drew the pitchfork back to throw it like a spear. Suddenly, he was hit in the chest by the

Seeker's long black spear! It knocked him backwards, and he stumbled on his feet, before collapsing to his knee!

"No!" Draevan screamed hoarsely, as his winded lungs recovered.

He scrambled up and crawled over towards his father on his hands and knees in the muddy dirt.

His father looked at him, his face contorted with pain from the spear sticking right through his body. "I'm sorry, son," he groaned, putting his left hand on the back of Draevan's head and hugging the boy to him.

"I can heal you!" Draevan cried, lifting his hands up and willing the energy that he still held within his body to them, causing them to glow green once more.

"No, son," his father coughed, blood running down into his beard. "You cannot. I am too far gone." He slid the pitchfork over to Draevan's side. "You have one chance… to live. Wait for the moment...and strike quickly...do you hear me!?" he growled.

"Y..yes," Draevan stammered through his tears, taking the slippery shaft of the pitchfork in his left hand, as he looked to see where the Seeker was.

The necromancer was walking casually towards them, as if he had all the time in the world. The evil smile on his face had become a grin of pleasure as he viewed his black spear, protruding from Draevan's father's chest.

Just as the Seeker neared them, his father took a breath, steeled himself, and pulled the long spear from his chest with both his hands! He let out a groan of pain as the sharp point finally exited.

He turned it round to face the Seeker. "Get ready," he whispered to Draevan.

The Seeker stopped a few paces from his father. "Thank you for

retrieving my spear for me, farmer," he intoned in an utterly emotionless voice. "But I would rather you told me where you have hidden the Relic."

Hadrian glared at him. "What are you… talking about?" he coughed. "We… have no… Relic!"

The Seeker smiled evilly.

"That is what your lying elf bitch said to me too," he stated with the same lack of emotion, gesturing casually to her body that lay in the mud down below. "Look what happened to her. Her Soul has already joined my Dark Horde. It will give me the answer, even if you don't."

Hadrian looked back down the row to his wife's body. His face contorted angrily.

"You… will pay for… taking her life, …Seeker!" he coughed. "In this life… or the next!" he spat, suddenly lunging towards the Seeker with the spear.

"Now!" he yelled at Draevan at the same time!

Draevan lifted the pitchfork up as fast as he could and drew it back like a spear, before throwing it with all his strength! Channelling all the energy he had drawn into himself before, he thrust it into the pitchfork as it was leaving his hand!

The Seeker had just moved swiftly aside to avoid Hadrian's lunge with the black spear, receiving only a shallow wound on his thigh from it, when the pitchfork struck him powerfully in the shoulder! It thrust him backwards and pinned him to the trunk of one of the tall trees, still glowing with green light as it buried itself deep in the tree!

"Arghhh!" the Seeker screamed in pain as he hung there, the evil smile on his face now gone.

Draevan stared at the evil necromancer dangling by his shoulder from

the pitchfork.

"Son! The… spear!" Draevan's father groaned from where he lay on the ground, using his last bit of remaining strength to slide the spear over to him. "Finish him!" he growled hoarsely.

Draevan grabbed up the heavy spear that he was not able to throw and started to run at the Seeker with it!

The Seeker quickly summoned his Darke Horde to attack the boy once more, and it rose up around him rapidly! Its evil, mist-like black tendrils snaked its way towards the boy! Draevan could see immediately he would not have time to get to the Seeker before he was overwhelmed by the Horde's Dark Blades, but he continued to run at him anyway, determined to die trying at the very least! Then he would join his parents in the afterlife!

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CHAPTER 11

GARAEN

Just as the Dark Blades were about to hit Draevan, an arrow flew through the air over his head and struck the Seeker in his forehead! Instantly, the Dark Blades dissipated as the Seeker received his fatal wound! Freezing cold air blew over Draevan's face as the Dark Horde lost their master and conduit to the physical world!

With his forward momentum, he continued to lunge at the Seeker's body and buried the spear directly in his heart with a rage filled cry of emotion! "Arghhhhh!" he screamed.

Letting go of the black spear protruding from the body, he stood there staring up at his parent's murderer, his fists clenched in anger, chest heaving with exhaustion and emotion!

He let out another scream of anger and despair! "Arrghhhh!"

The Seeker's Dark Horde had begun to spiral overhead, its dark black misty Tendrils roiling slowly now, as it waited to be claimed by its new master. Draevan turned round to see a tall, slim, silver-grey cloaked warrior on a large white horse approaching. The warrior was still holding his bow that had obviously loosed the arrow that killed the Seeker. He made his way slowly toward Draevan's father, where he still lay bleeding on the ground.

Draevan ran back over to his father and kneeled down in the mud next to him.

Hadrian coughed up more blood, but grinned at Draevan. "Well done, son. You have... a true warrior's heart. You've made me... proud. Remember, in

the days to come... your mother and I... love you more than life itself... Be strong... and know we will be… watching over you."

"As will I," a voice stated behind Draevan, as the tall warrior lowered his cowl, exposing his ice-blond hair and elf ears, his bow now stowed on his back. "I am Garaen of Rillendael," he announced as he walked over to Draevan and his father.

Hadrian looked up at the newcomer. "'Thank you... for saving my son, …Garaen," he coughed weakly, extending his hand.

Garaen kneeled down in the mud next to Draevan without hesitation and gripped Hadrian's outstretched hand firmly in a warrior style. "It is the least I could do. I'm truly sorry I arrived too late to do more. 'As a traveller in these Dark Times, I reach to the Light'," he stated, giving Hadrian the secret password phrase Batalion had told him the rebel sorcerer would reveal when collecting the Relic package.

"So… it is you...at last. The Fates have truly...been unkind this day... But at least I go to… the afterlife... knowing that...my son lives... and my wife's killer… is dead. So, I... thank you… for that," Hadrian strained to say, as he coughed up yet more blood. "That Relic... has cost us dearly. Please... look after... my son, well... I beseech you… Garaen."

"I swear to you I will, Hadrian," Garaen assured him. "Your sacrifice will help to change this world for the better. It will not have been in vain. I swear this to you."

Draevan's father took his hand and placed Garaen's on top of it, squeezing them firmly together with his two large, trembling, blood-soaked hands.

"You are...bound together… by oath now… Draevan," he said to his

son. "Go with Garaen... live a good... long... life..." he breathed, as he finally let go of the life he had held onto so strongly through so many battles.

Little did he know just how long a life Draevan would come to lead!

At the time, however, Draevan's thirteen-year-old mind was still reeling from his savage loss. The tears ran down his face as he leaned his forehead on his dead father's shoulder and cried. Garaen placed his hand on Draevan's back comfortingly, as he sobbed.

Snowflakes began to fall softly from the sky.

A thin blanket of snow had started to form when Garaen eventually urged him to move.

"Draevan. I'm sorry, but we need to start moving your father and mother for burial before the cold sets into their bodies, and you freeze to death."

Draevan stirred woodenly. Emotionally drained, he slowly got to his feet and stood up over his father's body.

Garaen put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

Draevan looked up into his face.

"I know how hard this day is for you, Draevan. I have lost my parents too. You will never forget it. But the pain will dull with time," Garaen stated gently.

All Draevan could do to respond was nod his head.

"Do you have a small cart here on the farm we can use to move them?" Garaen asked.

"In the barn," Draevan answered softly, pointing in the barn's direction.

"That is where we need to start then," Garaen stated, walking back to his horse. He took the reins and walked the horse back to the boy. "Do you know how to ride?" he asked.

Draevan nodded his head. "Yes," he answered, having learnt to ride a horse when he was seven.

"That is good news," Garaen said with a small smile. "This is Cal, short for Caldaeron," he said, rubbing his horse's neck. "Climb up into his saddle and let us go to the barn together."

Draevan moved to the big horse's side and reached up to the saddle pommel to pull himself up high enough to reach the stirrups.

Garaen steadied him with his hand.

Once Draevan was up, he led Cal in the direction the boy had pointed in.

Draevan stared over at the dead body of the Seeker, still hanging from the tree, as they passed it. A deep rage still burnt in his belly as he looked at it. The rage would continue to return each and every time his eyes beheld any of their Evil kind over the coming centuries.

Garaen followed his eyes.

"That we will deal with after," he stated, with a bitter edge to his voice.

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CHAPTER 12

FAREWELLS

They collected Hadrian's small apple cart from the barn, strapped one of their cart horses into it, and then returned to Draevan's parents' bodies. Placing them together in the cart, they moved them up into the edge of the forest above the farm.

Garaen asked if there was a favoured place his parents had liked to sit in the forest. Draevan pointed out the place they had loved to sit together at sunset almost every day. At the base of an enormous oak tree on the very edge of the forest, it had an expansive view down over the valley below their farm.

The snow was becoming thicker on the ground, but had not yet reached under the branches of the massive oak tree. They laid the bodies to rest beneath it. Placing them side by side and hand in hand, so that they could be together forever symbolically.

Garaen then performed the Elven magic Incantation of Interment. The forest undergrowth grew rapidly, enclosing their bodies under a green layer, creating two mounds to mark their burial place. A burial place Draevan frequently returned to over the centuries, to rest for a moment beneath the great oak, and commune with his parent's Souls.

Then Garaen and he returned to the Seeker's body, where the elf used his Necromantic Magic to take control of the Dark Horde circling above. He released the Souls of the innocent trapped within it, including the Souls of Draevan's parents. Both of them were killed by the Seeker and their Souls trapped within the Dark Web of his Horde.

As the thousands of innocent Souls rose into the sky, casting off the Darkening, Celaenn and Hadrian's Souls floated down to stand before their young son a final time.

Garaen, having secured the Evil Souls within the Dark Web, had used his magic to allow Draevan a last farewell with his mother and father. The elf was the conduit through which their Souls could communicate with the living.

Their ethereal bright blue-white forms were holding hands even beyond the grave. They smiled sad smiles as they looked down at their son.

"Mother! Father!" Draevan cried as they neared.

His mother's Soul reached out with her free hand, and he tried to touch it with his fingers, but could only feel a warm sensation in his fingertips.

"Oh, Draevan, my son! How I wish we did not need to leave you so soon!" his mother cried with a ghostly voice from the beyond. "But know that we will watch over you always! Be strong and be good! Let your bright healing Light shine through all the Darkness you encounter in the living world!"

"And know that we will be here to welcome you home when we are all brought together once more! Learn from Garaen all you can, and as always, be respectful to him as your guardian. I love you, Draevan! Never forget that!" she ended.

Fresh tears ran down Draevan's already tear-streaked face. "I love you, mother!" he cried. "I wish you could stay!"

"So do we, son!" his father answered, reaching down with his free hand to touch his son's head, leaving a warm sensation there too. "Look after yourself, and make us proud throughout your life like you did this day! We look forward to watching you grow and become the man you are destined to be! I love you, Draevan."

"I love you too, father!" the boy cried.

"Thank you for this, Garaen!" both of the Souls said to Garaen. "And thank you for looking after our boy!"

"I will try to be the best guardian to him that I am capable of being," Garaen stated solemnly. "I shall protect his life with my own if needs be, and my home is now his home. May your Souls rest easy until we are all united in the Beyond once more."

With that, Draevan's parents' Soul forms began to fade as they started to float upwards.

"Goodbye, son!" they both called out, waving their free hands in a final farewell.

"Goodbye," he whispered emotionally, as he watched them fade upwards into the heavens.

Garaen stood next to him and placed his hand on Draevan's shoulder comfortingly, allowing him the time to compose himself once more.

The boy wiped the tears from his eyes with his sleeve. "Thank you, Garaen," he whispered.

Garaen squeezed Draevan's shoulder gently with his hand in acknowledgment.

"It was what I would have liked to have had when my parents died," he said softly, the moment obviously stirring his own emotional memories of loss.

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Garaen then burned the Seeker's body with dwarven fire magic, where it hung on the tree. The intense but focused heat turned the corpse to ashes, leaving only a dark shadow on the trunk of the tree. He dispersed the ashes far and wide with a whirlwind spell that took them high up into the atmosphere,

removing the Evil taint from Draevan's once happy home. As he watched the ashes rise, the boy vowed to spend his life removing Evil from the world where ever he encountered it.

They ended that dark day retrieving the Relic from its hiding place in the floor of the barn. Hadrian had hidden it next to his battle weapons. Then they spent the night in Draevan's home. The young boy felt strongly the empty space it had now become with the loss of his parents. He slept fitfully. His dreams plagued by nightmares of their deaths.

Garaen, as he later continued to do many times, sat beside Draevan on his bed and comforted him with his presence as best he could. The elf would eventually reveal to him many years later, that the guilt he felt for his involvement in the deaths of Draevan's parents, due to the presence of the Relic on their farm, was the most intense sense of guilt he had ever had to face in his long life.

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CHAPTER 13

ROAD TO RILLENDAEL

When morning came, Draevan was torn between the unhappy thought of leaving the only home he had ever known, and a sense of relief that he would not have to endure another night of emotional emptiness there without his parents.

Garaen and he locked up the house and barn after feeding the collection of farm animals they had kept, laying out enough food and water to see them through the week. Then they mounted their horses, with a small travel pack of clothing and food tied to the back of his horse for the journey that lay ahead. Garaen said he would arrange for the farm to be well maintained by hired workers until Draevan was old enough to decide what he wanted to do with it.

He was, as ever, true to his word. Draevan later decided to keep the farm, nostalgically unable to let go of his childhood home completely. Eventually he allowed a family he met who had lost their own farm to the Ravanian royal tax collectors, to live on the farm as long as they maintained it. Seven further generations of their family line had then lived on the farm over the centuries.

They made their way to Garaen's home, the Elven port city of Rillendael on the West Coast of Gandaria, by travelling through Bravaellin Forest, by way of the small city of Floriaendael. After a full day of riding, they were met with a brief encounter with Floriaendael's city guards stationed in the trees outside the city limits. Draevan could see that the guards obviously knew Garaen well. They allowed them to continue to make their way along the Bravaellin Way, the main road running between the East Coast and the West Coast, into the city itself,

arriving in the early evening.

Floriaendael was the first Elven city Draevan had ever visited at that time in his life. His mother had told him many stories of the beauty of Elven cities, that were built within and around the truly ancient trees growing deep within Bravaellin Forest. The Great Forest had been the home of the Elven Nation for thousands upon thousands of years. The trees themselves were absolutely massive structures!

Her stories, however, did not prepare him for the feeling of arriving under those colossal ancient trees for the first time. Although Floriaendael was in fact one of the sites of the smaller ancient trees, compared to those found in the much larger, deep central region of the Great Forest, their sheer size made Draevan feel like the most insignificant creature in the world! *Like a flea on the arse of a massive war horse*, he would say later in life! Almost invisible amongst the tree's foliage, like the flea amongst the fur!

He stared up open-mouthed at the fantastic sight, lit with myriads of softly glowing phosphorescent algae lanterns, that naturally gave off light as the sun set.

The Elves had crafted their homes within and around the trunks, and on top of the branches of the great trees. They connected them together with spiral staircases built onto the trunks of the trees, and a web of long suspension bridges strung between the branches using thick living vines. Magically crafted gardens within suspended greenhouses in between the giant trees had been constructed, too. Even in winter, the greenhouses were filled with beautiful, colourful flowers, vegetables, and fruits.

Covered by expansive semi-transparent sheets of white gossamer-like silk fabric, lit and warmed from within by the glowing algae, the gardens were

fed by water cleverly directed from waterfalls. The waterfalls fell from cliff faces in the foothills below the Great Ghoron Mountains that towered above the northern border of the forest. The warmed excess water dripped down from the circular suspended gardens into pools directly below them, creating a fine mist effect.

Everything merged together in an organic, natural way that did not detract from the forest. It was all very clean, with systems in place to deal with sewerage, and stone walkways that kept the avenues from turning to mud. Green moss grown between the now ancient stones on the ground absorbed moisture and helped anchor everything in place.

Draevan had never seen so many people in one place before! Although a small city by human standards, Floriaendael was even then home to thousands of elves who had lived there for generations. Their long-life spans allowed them ample time to travel the world, but overall, like most older humans, they still preferred to make their home in one familiar, comfortable place. Looking out at the city's inhabitants as they passed through it, he could immediately see that, like the books he had read described, the Elven Nation were a predominantly tall and slim race, who favoured letting their ice-blond hair grow long and straight.

It made Draevan think of his mother, who had kept her long hair in the elvish style, and had him grow his dirty-blond hair long too. It was hanging down to his shoulders at that time, and he, like his father, whose red hair had been long, had adopted warrior braids to keep his hair out of his eyes.

The elves' distinctly pointed ears were nothing new to him as his mother's were always visible, especially when her hair was tucked behind them during work. His, however, with his mixed blood, were less pointed. Falling

somewhere between the rounded human shape and elvish points.

Their reasonable pointedness had, however, garnered the odd look of interest from humans in the market places on the Ravanian side of the border, when he accompanied his father and mother on market trips. If anyone had had any particular dislike of elves, though, they kept it to themselves. Especially after taking in the look of his large father's battle-scarred face.

Overall, though, the Ravanian's living close to the Elven- forest were used to seeing elves once in a while. Only the human poachers were less enthusiastic about meeting elves, because they weren't supposed to be crossing the border illegally into the Elven Nation's Forest.

There were other Ravanian forests to hunt in but most of them had been claimed by the Ravanian royalty, and were therefore off limits to everyone but the royals, their family members, and their authorised hunters, upon pain of death. So, the poachers were stuck between a rock and a hard place to feed themselves and their families.

Some preferred to take their chances in Braevellin with the elves, rather than face the dark king's men who had orders to kill poachers upon sight. The Elven border scouts were more inclined to use their very accurate long bows to carefully wound poachers in the legs as a deterrent, rather than kill.

Seeing the Floriaendael inhabitants going about their business, Draevan noticed that Elven clothing styles were quite distinctive, with lots of embroidered details sown into their collars and cuffs, regardless of the particular station of the elf in the social hierarchy.

For the most part, elves were much more affluent looking than the average human. He recalled his mother mentioning at some point in the recent past that it was like that because the longer life spans of elves allowed for families

to build wealth over a longer period of time than humans could. And that the much older Elven society in general was more community based, with sharing of resources a common practice. Meaning that Elven society kept everyone living within it at a reasonably high quality of life.

It was in quite stark contrast to the common approach of most human societies. They remained, by and large, with few exceptions, a society with a 'survival of the strongest and/or most cunning' approach to life. It had resulted in a subjugated lower standard of living for most people. Extreme poverty was common throughout the human kingdoms.

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CHAPTER 14

MEETING MORAEN

Garaen lead the way to a large open air market place located at the base of one of the ancient trees, on the edge of the city. Erected between the gigantic tree's huge lateral roots that anchored it to the ground, the market was bustling with people.

Draevan spotted a few human traders doing business with Elven traders amongst the, almost exclusively, Elven customers shopping at the stalls.

Garaen explained that fresh Elven vegetables, fruits, ciders and wines were sought after products. Human royalty and wealthy merchants imported these during winter months from Elven cities, when their own markets ran out of stock. He pointed out elvish silk cloth, that was another major product the rich humans imported in large quantities.

Elvish silk was spun from silk thread harvested from the giant cocoons of Queen Silkworms, only found in the Great Forest. The cloth was far superior in strength, soft texture, and shine to that of the human silk cloth produced with standard silkworms in the warmer, southern coastal kingdoms.

They tied their horses up at an ornate railing that had been purpose-built for customers on horseback. Most patrons of the market place however, like the city inhabitants in general, were on foot.

The design of the forest city was such that it favoured pedestrians. Due to the fact that most of the city was constructed high up in the ancient trees themselves, it was therefore not accessible to horses. Draevan could see that besides the web of suspension bridges, connecting the massive branches of the

tree dwellings together, a multitude of rope lifts with counter-weights were also in operation throughout the complex dwelling structures visible above.

Garaen led him through the crowd of customers milling about in the market. First, he stopped at a stand selling fresh fruit juice, and bought them a cup of juice each to wash away the road dust. Given a choice, Draevan initially chose to have a strawberry juice but changed it to join Garaen in ordering an elderflower juice. The taste was a new and enjoyable one for him, as his family had not produced elderflowers on their farm.

Over the many years of his life to come, Draevan made a point of trying new food and drink flavours at least once if they were available, just to find the ones he particularly enjoyed. As has been said many times, 'variety is the spice of life', and his life came to have a lot of spice!

Next, Garaen bought them some freshly baked bread and warm stew, made with fresh pheasant meat, that they ate sitting at the food stall's small counter. It was an interesting dish, cooked with a bright pink salt that Draevan had not tasted before.

When he asked about the salt, the food stall owner said it was called Araxis. It came from the southern desert lands of Xindar, located over the sea directly opposite the southern Gandarian kingdom of Zendaria. The salt was made from a rare crystal that was only found in that land. In later years, after a particularly rough Relic Hunt which had led him to far-flung Xindar on the trail of an enemy agent, Draevan came to hate the taste of that salt. It reminded him far too keenly of the Araxis Desert in Xindar, that he almost died in.

After they finished their meal, Garaen told Draevan he needed to meet with a contact that could possibly help him organise someone to look after the boy's farm. If she was still in town, she'd usually be having her evening cider

sundowner nearby.

He led the boy across to the far side of the market, where it bordered on an undercover seating area. A large stall sold cider and wine, along with dry foods including nuts of all types. Garaen soon spotted the person he was looking for.

A beautiful elf, dressed in Elven border scout leathers, sat casually in one of the chairs, with her long legs stretched out and soft boots up on a chair opposite hers. She waved casually with a warm smile as she caught sight of Garaen.

"We're in luck! That's her," Garaen said to Draevan. "Her name is Moraen."

"Ahoy, Garaen! So! You weren't lying when you said you'd be back 'shortly'!" Moraen stated jovially. "Only two days this time! Must have been a successful hunt, then?"

"It was, Moraen," Garaen answered with a small amused smile playing on his face as they gripped hands in a warrior style greeting.

Draevan could, however, immediately tell by the subtle way their eyes lingered on each other's, that they were far more familiar with each other than they were showing in public. He'd seen his parent's eyes linger on each other's like that many times at market places.

"You picked up a young acolyte, I see," Moraen stated, as she looked over at Draevan questioningly.

"Yes...the hunt was...complicated," Garaen stated cryptically, losing his smile for a moment. "Moraen, this is Dravaen. He is going to live with me in Rillendael," he said, introducing them.

Moraen's eyebrows rose at his announcement. "Live with you? Mmmm, it must have been a VERY complicated hunt then!" she stated, looking at him

pointedly, before putting out her hand to the boy. "Nice to meet you, Draevan! Moraen."

Feeling quite uncomfortable, Draevan took her hand nervously. "Hello, Moraen," he mumbled softly.

"Mmmm, handsome and strong, but a shy one, aren't you?" Moraen pronounced with a warm smile. "You remind me of Garaen when we were very young! He was quite shy too."

Garaen smiled. "We can't all be as extroverted as you, Moraen," he chided good-naturedly. "Besides, first appearances as you know can be deceiving," he stated, with a cheeky grin that Draevan later in life recognised as having a hidden meaning, after using it himself frequently.

Garaen leaned in closer to her.

"I met young Draevan here a moment after he had pegged a Seeker to a tree with a pitchfork, and was about to run the Evil bastard through the heart with his own Dark Spear," he revealed to her privately in her ear, with a very lowered voice that Draevan could barely hear a couple feet away.

"Oh, my! That is extraordinary!" Moraen exclaimed with a shocked expression on her face, looking at the boy with deeper interest. "You definitely need to tell me that story in full tonight, then!"

"You're still on leave from border patrol?" Garaen asked, with evidently pleasant surprise.

"I took an extra day. On the off chance that you would return '*shortly*' as promised," Moraen revealed with a little cheeky emphasis.

"Mmmm, I'm glad I didn't disappoint you then," Garaen stated with a subtle grin.

"Oh, I'm quite used to you disappointing me, Garaen of Rillendael!"

Moraen exclaimed with semi-mock indignation. "Need I remind you that it had been well over a month since you last wandered into town, before you rushed through two days ago? Not even so much as a 'how have you been, Moraen?' before you rode off again like the wind!"

"Aaah, I beg to differ, dear Moraen," Garaen countered. "I was here just three weeks ago, but you were nowhere to be seen."

Moraen smiled. "You were!?" she stated mockingly.

"Oh, that must have been the day I went climbing with my lover in the mountains!" she added wryly.

Garaen grinned knowingly.

"Mmmm, must have been getting cold up there," he said just as wryly.

"Oh, yes! It was! Icy cold already, in fact! But we stopped off in a cabin with a cozy fireplace and really warmed up! Very romantic!" Moraen said with emphasis on the 'romantic'.

"Mmmm, you must give me some romantic tips tonight then," Garaen stated meaningfully. "I must take my lover climbing sometime too."

"Oh, I'll be happy to!" Moraen exclaimed. "She'll love it! You should do it soon! The winter holiday celebration is coming up next month, after all!"

Garaen smiled. "I'll try to make the time. Hopefully she will be in town at the time, instead of roaming around the forest somewhere."

Moraen laughed. "Oh, you know us wanderers! We always turn up sometime!"

"That we do!" Garaen grinned, enjoying their banter.

"Talking of wanderers...Do you perhaps still have that Ravanian contact that organises migrant farm labourers for the border farms? The one that you pay for poacher information," he asked, lowering his voice discreetly.

"Yes. He still has a small office in the village of Narin, a mile from the border," Moraen answered. "Why? You adding a Ravanian farm to your long list of enterprises now?"

"I need some trustworthy labourers to look after young Draevan here's farm for a few years, until he decides what he wants to do with it," Garaen explained. "Maybe your friend has a young migrant family who wants to settle down for a few years until their kids are old enough to travel? It's quite urgent. We fed the animals enough for a week this morning, so they'll need feeding and watering in about six days time."

"Mmmm, I'm sure he can organise something for you," Moraen stated. "I'm heading down in that direction tomorrow. I could take a detour across the border and ask him for you."

"Thanks, Moraen," Garaen said. "I'd really appreciate it. Tell him I'll pay them the going rate for labouring, and him his commission for organising them."

"No problem! I'm sure he will make a plan. Especially because there's money in it for him and they are going into the off season too," Moraen stated confidently. "He's normally pestering me with vague intelligence about poachers operating on our side of the border at this time of year, anyway. Always needs to make a bit of coin to see him through winter. So, your coin might save me a bit of his tongue wagging for a change!"

"A win, win for all of us then," Garaen grinned.

"Oh, you don't get off that easily!" Moraen exclaimed. "I expect you to make sure it is worth my while tonight!"

Garaen laughed out loud. "Oh, you drive a hard bargain, dear lady! But I'll try my best!"

Moraen smiled widely. "Oh, you better! I can't be accepting any half-

hearted efforts from you!"

She looked about furtively in an exaggerated way. "Think about my reputation!" she whispered loudly behind her hand.

Garaen looked about furtively in an exaggerated way, too. "Some sensitive things are better discussed in private," he whispered loudly. "Besides, we need to save Draevan's young ears from those kinds of details."

Draevan looked up at them shyly with a small smile. Their light-hearted banter reminded him of his parents when they had flirted with each other playfully. The memory left him with mixed feelings at the time. Reminding him of the good times around his parents, and the still very raw loss of them.

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CHAPTER 15

MYSTE

They spent that night in Moraen's small home, right near the top of one of the ancient trees near the market. Reached by a series of lifts, it was comprised of two small rooms built on a platform secured to the top of a huge lateral branch. The branch was more than wide enough to walk out along, and provided a wonderful overhead view of a suspended greenhouse just below, filled with colourful flowers.

Garaen and Moraen retired to her bedroom after making Draevan comfortable with a warm blanket on a well-padded seating mattress in the living room. Soon he could hear their quiet sounds of love making issuing from behind the door curtain. Again, it was a reminder of his parents, who frequently spent time making love at night when they thought he was sound asleep. The boy pushed the memory quickly aside to avoid the extreme sadness that threatened to wash over him.

Thankfully, quite exhausted from the ride, and his still raw emotional state, it didn't take him long to fall asleep after closing his eyes. Draevan always found sleep to be a truly welcome respite from morbid thoughts. At least when it was unbroken. Unfortunately, like the night before, the nightmares of his parent's deaths broke his sleep soon thereafter, and he woke up in a sweat. Initially confused by the new surroundings, he stared about nervously, before remembering that his old bedroom was far away now. He could hear Garaen and Moraen whispering quietly in the bedroom. Catching each other up on their time away from each other.

Draevan lay there, unable to get back to sleep. Afraid that the nightmares would return again. Eventually he gave up trying and made his way quietly on bare feet to the door leading outside. It was unlocked and made no major sound when he opened it and walked outside. The air was cool but surprisingly mild under the thick canopy of the evergreen ancient tree, that provided excellent protection from the winter wind and snow.

Still nervous about being so high up above the ground, he made his way carefully along the branch opposite Moraen's door. The branch had been sculpted at some point to be flat a long time ago, judging by its well-worn surface. The sculpted section led up to the access points of two suspension bridges anchored to the branch on either side.

The boy reached the nearest bridge and tested it gingerly, relaxing when he found it quite solidly stable, with very little sway to it. Its thick ancient living vines, grown specifically to hold the bridges up and guided between the colossal ancient trees with Elven magic, were extremely strong and durable. Making his way onto the long bridge, he walked to the very middle of it, where he could view the suspended greenhouse garden just below, more closely. Taking care to hold tightly to the safety vines on the side, he sat down and dangled his legs over the edge.

Draevan stared at the suspended garden, taking in the details of the flowers inside. All the colours of a rainbow were represented by their varying petals. He could see a soft mist rising from the garden in the almost mystical light provided by the algae lanterns. Lost in his thoughts while lazily taking in the view, he was startled awake by an acorn hitting the top of his head from above.

"Ouch!" he exclaimed, looking up at the tree's thick foliage overhead.

Seeing nothing but foliage, he assumed that it was just a random dropping acorn that had fallen from the tree, although he was unsure if it was in fact a massive oak tree. Resolving to find out what kind of tree it actually was, he resumed his lazy browsing of the garden once more. As soon as he turned his head away from the canopy, another acorn hit the top of his head!

"Ouch!" he exclaimed, looking up again.

Still, he could see nothing but the foliage, except this time he could hear muffled girlish giggling emanating from above.

"Who's there?" Draevan inquired, standing up on the bridge.

No answer was forthcoming, and the giggling was stifled even further.

"I can still hear you giggling!" he stated, picking up the two acorns that had hit his head from where they lay on the bridge.

The muffled giggling increased a notch.

He chose one of the acorns and threw it up into the foliage in the direction of the giggling.

"Oh!" a girlish yelp of surprise issued from behind the greenery.

Draevan giggled at the sound. "Ha! See! Two can play your game!"

Suddenly the foliage parted and a stunningly beautiful young female elf with long ice-blond hair and exotic slanted light-grey eyes descended slowly using levitation magic. "That almost hit me in the eye!" she stated indignantly.

"I... I... I'm sorry," Draevan stammered, totally awestruck by her literally radiant beauty; her entire form encased as it was by the light-blue glow of the magic surrounding her.

She was dressed in a beautiful figure hugging, shimmering, sky blue dress and matching cloak. The cloak floated behind her as she descended and landed gently, directly in front of him.

"You really should be more careful where you throw things!" she admonished him, as he stood staring slightly open-mouthed at her. "You could have taken my eye out!"

"I... I'm really sorry," he stammered once more, staring into the mesmerising eyes in question. "I... I didn't mean to hit you in the eye. I... couldn't see where you were exactly."

She suddenly smiled the most radiant smile he had ever seen in his life. "That is the whole idea of hiding, silly!" she laughed.

Draevan could feel his face break into a ridiculous grin as he stared at her, already totally besotted! It was a serious case of love at first sight! The big grin felt almost alien to his face after the recent harsh emotional events that had removed any inclination for him to truly smile. She changed that in a heartbeat!

Unaware of the extreme affect she was having on him at the time, the girl grinned back happily. "I was just trying to entertain myself in this incredibly dull place! You looked like you were just as bored as me! What is your name?" she asked.

"I... uh... Draevan," he answered, still feeling tongue tied by the sight of her.

"My name is Myste," she announced confidently. "I'm not from around here. I'm just passing through this boring little backwater on the way to Rillendael."

Draevan's heart skipped a beat at the news that she was also going to Rillendael. "Oh! I... I'm also on the way to Rillendael," he stated with barely suppressed exuberance. "Do you live there?"

"Oh, no! I'm from the capital, Elvendael!" she replied with a slightly haughty tone. "I'm just going to Rillendael with my uncle. He's, my guardian."

"Oh," Draevan mumbled dejectedly, as his heart crumbled at the bad news.

"Do you live there?" Myste asked, oblivious to his crumbling heart.

"I... I'm going to be," he answered.

Myste smiled warmly. "Wonderful! Maybe I can visit you there then!" she stated merrily, lighting his world up instantly again. "It has to be less boring than this place!"

"I'd like that," he stated with shy enthusiasm.

"Good! We'll arrange it then!" Myste exclaimed confidently. "Let's go down and play hide and seek together in that garden over there!" she suggested, gesturing across to the hanging garden.

"Uh... all right," Draevan agreed hesitantly, looking over his shoulder up to Moraen's home. He wasn't sure how Garaen would feel about him leaving the immediate vicinity.

Myste had no such concerns. She floated herself upwards using her levitation magic, clearing the suspension vines before crossing over towards the garden.

"See you down there! If you can find me!" she laughed.

Draevan watched her floating through the air, cloak billowing behind her, like a beautiful bird with a flowing liquid tail, and long slender legs.

Looking around the area for a way to get across to the garden, he caught sight of a smaller suspension bridge. The small bridge connected to it from a platform attached to the ancient tree at the other end of the bridge he was standing on. With one final look over his shoulder at Moraen's house, he ran across the bridge to the other side.

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