

Shaela

“The Underworld”

Book 2

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Preface

Not all that is darkness is evil. Not all that is light is good.

Shaela fell, and as she fell through a darkness, in which even her eyes could not penetrate, she tightened her arms about Talon, terrified by the experience. At one point, she heard someone cry out. She heard it again, then one more time before realizing it was her own voice.

Maybe she had made a mistake. No, she was a monster, and deserved whatever exile awaited her . . . at least the others she cared for would be safe from her hunger.

Closing her eyes, she held Talon tight for fear of falling to her death, burying her face against his chest. He tightened his wings about her, seeming to know what she needed. After a few more moments, Talon looked down upon her and smiled.

“Shaela, Shaela, open your eyes,” Talon whispered in her ear. Slowly she opened her eyes and looked about as his wings unfolded, revealing to her a very foreign and strange world.

They stood within a small clearing in a forest of auburn hue . . . a forest which appeared as though it had succeeded at halfway uprooting itself from the ground. Catching her breath, she looked over Talon's shoulder to behold violet, starless, heavens above, witnessing multiple streaks of black, soundless, lightning that did not fall from the sky, but traveled across it.

“Shaela, you can let go now. Our journey to my world is complete. You are safe.” Slowly she relaxed and let him go.

“Oh, yes, sorry Talon.” She looked about the area, marveling at how different this forest was compared to the jungle.

“This place is very strange,” she whispered, as if to herself, then staggered a bit. Talon balanced her and began brushing her hair back.

“The earthen plane is as strange to me, as this world is to you.” Talon chuckled, eyeing Shaela as if poking fun at her. He began to say something else, but suddenly stopped, becoming serious as he eyed the area suspiciously. Shaela saw the change in his demeanor and looked over her shoulder, as if something

might be there.

“What is it?” she whispered, wrapping her arms about herself, as if suddenly cold. Talon scanned the area in silence for a time, his onyx-black eyes searching this way and that. As he looked about, he snaked his arm up her back slowly and entwined his fingers through the back of her hair. Suddenly he gripped her hair tight and yanked her to the ground, causing her to scream in pain as she hit the uneven surface of the forest floor.

Tears welled up in her eyes and she tried to pull free. She wondered what had come over Talon. Was this the traitorous nature of Vahkrin? A moment later, her thoughts quickly took another turn as a voice called out from their left, hailing them. Quickly she removed the leather pouch from within her trench coat and pulled it open.

Secretly, she took one of the white tablets out and ate it, noticing a hideous insect-like creature approaching, followed by two more of its kind. She put away the pouch and adjusted her trench coat so that the blade she wore was hidden from view. While she could understand Talon, the language of the approaching three, she did not.

They reminded Shaela of the praying mantis insect, yet these were much larger and walked upright as a person. Each step they took was easily four of her strides. Their skin was black, with a glossy sheen to a surface of solid, bone-like exo-skeletal armor. At their approach one pointed their way with a long spear set with a serrated edge. Shaela noticed the blade of the spear was nearly half the length of the spear itself.

“You trespass with an Outworlder, Arsia, explain yourself!” Talon yanked her hair and kicked Shaela in the hip and hissed back at them.

“She's mine, I hunted her down! What I do with her is no concern of yours, Wardenoth!” Shaela did not struggle, but watched on, afraid to move. Her heart went cold as she noticed the tip of the scabbard sticking out from under her leather coat. She hoped they would not see it - yet her hope was in vain. One of the Wardenoth spotted it immediately, spitting out a warning.

“The Outworlder is armed!” Talon let her hair go and sighed, clearly disappointed. He sized up his foes, pulling his wings back behind him, watching as they separated evenly about them on all sides.

“Give us the Outworlder, Arsia, and we will let you live.” Talon laughed, giving them a look that clearly stated, “I'd like to see you try”, then quickly grabbed Shaela about the waist and launched up into the sky. As they rose, the Wardenoth let fly their spears, missing their mark. Talon laughed again, openly mocking them, as he turned, leveling out into a horizontal flight that sped them along the tops of twisted trees, trees which seemed to reach and grope for them as they fled the area.

Shaela held tight to Talon as they flew, all the while wondering at the name they had called him by.

“Talon, is your real name Arsia?”

“No, that is what I am. You are Human, I am Arsia of the Vahkrin race, though at times I find myself a bit embarrassed to be lumped in with such rif-raff.” She remained silent until they landed in another clearing some ways from the area. As she set her feet down, Talon released and faced her.

“Will you forgive me for what I did to you?” She felt her hip and leg and shrugged.

“Yes. It will pass quickly. I caught on to what you were doing. By the way, what exactly is Arsia?” Talon turned about in a steady circle, scanning the area as Shaela looked up in time to see black veins of lightning blanket the violet sky above.

“What brought you to my world?” she asked, suddenly curious. Talon looked down, thinking for a moment.

“I was exploring and never stopped. I find the inhabitants of the Outworld, or Earthen Plane, as some of your people call it, fascinating.” Shaela listened to Talon for a while as he explained many of the things he had studied.

After he was finished, she had no more questions for him, and thought it best to find a secure place away from prying eyes. He seemed to read her mind

and held out his hand.

“Shall we walk? I know this area; there is a suitable place we can go that will be a good shelter for you.” Shaela took his hand and let him lead her through the strange forest and foreign woodlands. As they walked, she ventured to find out some more information.

“I do have one question, if you don't mind.”

“Please, ask.”

“Could you understand me the entire time when we were in the cave?”

Talon shook his head.

“No. The only reason I understand you was due to those enchanted pills. I fear they will not last forever. I should learn the Human dialect, and you should learn as much of mine as you can until your supply runs out.” Shaela readily agreed.

“Okay, can we start when we reach this place you are taking me to? What is it like, our destination?” Talon laughed.

“You are curious about everything.” Shaela noticed the warmth of his hand; a comfort to her in this dreadful place. She could feel his pulse beating steadily through one of the veins in his palm and it made her swoon. If not for her “condition”, it would have been overlooked.

Lagging back she gave Talon some resistance, causing him to slow, and eventually stop. He turned and faced her as she tightened her grip on his hand and closed her eyes, her breathing coming faster and faster as the rhythm of her heart increased. Without thinking, she pulled her hand free and snaked her hands up Talon's chest and about his neck.

Talon froze, his eyes narrowing down at her as she pulled herself up and attempted to kiss him. She could not control what she was doing; it was as if another was forcing her to act. She could feel his heart quicken; feel the blood within him begin to surge with every rhythmic beat. She felt his hands grip her about the shoulders and firmly push her away just as she decided to explore the soft area of his neck.

“Shaela, concentrate. Don't let your desire rule your senses. Fight it Shaela.” She opened her eyes to meet his gaze and shivered. What was she doing? Suddenly her face flushed red as an intense shame filled her.

“Talon, I'm hungry,” was all she could whisper as a shudder gripped her body. An expression of concern twisted his face as he watched her struggle with a passionate and powerful inner turmoil. With a heavy sigh, he quickly reached out and drew the blade from her sheath. Shaela stepped back, fear washing through her as he looked at the enchanted blade and then at her.

“Talon, I'm sorry, I'm trying.” Smiling at her, he raised the blade to his own wrist. Carefully he slid it across the inside, just above the palm of his hand, grimacing as a steadily flow his blood began to pour onto the ground.

Taking a step forward, he held his wrist up to her, dropped the blade and gripped her by the back of the neck, guiding her to drink. Instinctively she reached up and grabbed Talon's hand in both of hers and began taking her fill, her eyes shifting to a pale yellow as she smelled the fresh blood. She took as much as he offered, and when he began to pull away, she held on in the attempt to drink more.

“Shaela, let go.” He whispered in her ear. “Stop.” With reluctance, she released her grip and stepped away, wiping her mouth with the back of her arm, feeling an intense euphoric sensation throughout her entire body. Talon gripped his wrist with his free hand to stop the bleeding and motioned to the blade on the ground.

“Don't lose that blade; it is a powerful weapon. Clean and sheath it.” She shuddered in ecstasy and took up the sword, using her trench coat to wipe the blade clean.

“Thank you Talon.” He smirked and pointed at her.

“I hope that curbed your hunger.” She nodded in silence, noticing he was staring at the blade she held in her hand. Raising it up between them, she looked at Talon, who raised an eyebrow at her.

“Talon, will you teach me how to use this blade?” With a gleam flashing in

his lightless eyes, Talon grinned.

“I think it would be wise that you learn how to use the blade, especially if you are to remain in the Underworld for any significant amount of time.” As he neared her, Talon side-stepped the blade, and reached out to seize her hands in his. Looking down, Talon adjusted her grip on the hilt.

“I can indeed teach you,” he whispered as he ran the tip of his finger along the entire flat of the blade, “for I am a master of such.” Shaela studied Talon as he spoke, admiring the muscle tone of his body, and the way he controlled his wings.

“Sheath your weapon for now. Soon enough we will find a secluded area where you will begin your lessons.” She nodded, taking note of Talon's slanted eyes, so dark, deeper than the black of a starless night. Carefully, Shaela did as she was told and slid the blade back into its sheath.

“Since you are druidic in nature, I think it proper to train you in staff as well. This will take some time, Shaela, and the serious nature of what you are about to go through will, I hope, keep you alive in this world. Without question, are you willing to submit yourself to my every instruction, open your mind to me?” Shaela felt her heart breaking.

“I am,” she confirmed, her voice beginning to tremble. Talon touched the hilt of the blade with a single finger.

“I will enhance this magnificent blade you wear at your hip. For a time, you will grow in power from what I show you. I hope my teachings will temper your Vampiric Hunger as well, or give you the inner strength of will to curb the bloodlust you have been inflicted with.” He took Shaela's face in both his hands and gazed deeply into her eyes.

“Remember, Shaela of the Outworld, I am trying to help you. In the future, you may curse me . . . even despise me, but I am trying to help you survive.” Shaela reached up and brushed Talon's hair back from his eyes, smiling. She noticed his wrist had stopped bleeding.

“Talon, in all I've learned, in all my limited experiences, I have come to the realization that within my once society, Humans are most biased and ruthless . . .

well, no, Ogres are, and they can all die a slow and painful death.” Talon chuckled.

“I respect your unconquerable spirit. It does me good to teach one such as you. I will teach you a little about my race when we arrive.” Talon touched Shaela's hair, then simply walked past her. Quickly she followed him through the auburn forest.

For eight days they traveled, going at a consistent and steady pace into a strange and untamed wilderness. During their march, Talon fed her twice more with his own blood, and twice more she fed from him. Each time her hunger was quenched, a feeling grew within her. She felt light, but not light headed, and when she rested, she felt she did not touch the ground. When she slept, she dreamed but one dream every time . . .

. . . Shaela stood at the center of a raised circular platform of what appeared to be solid diamond. Beneath her bare feet, she could feel the warmth of its surface, which held thousands of intricate symbols. There was a darkness all about her, which stopped at the edge of the pedestal. Anything beyond was simply a mystery. The sound of a man's voice always broke the silence, so cool and calm.

“Why are you here?” She never answered the question . . .

On one occasion, Shaela opened her eyes, coming out of the dream, feeling insatiably hungry. She slowly turned her head, as if yet dreaming, and noticed Talon carving a long, straight, branch of black wood. The tool he used caught her eye; it was a dagger, black as night . . . like his skin, his eyes, his teeth . . . even what should have been the whites of his eyes were total pitch night.

She wondered what type of being he was; the label of Vahkrin did little to inform her of anything but his race. Slowly she sat up, stood, and walked over to him. Glancing up at her approach, he threw her a brief smile, then returned his attention to his work. Kneeling down, she watched as he whittled.

“What are you making?” Without looking up he answered softly.

“A staff.” Sensing the beating of his heart and the rush of blood through his body made her shudder. Talon noticed her body language and reached behind where he sat, retrieving a freshly carved bowl. Reaching into a pocket, Talon pulled out a small vial filled with red powder and opened it. Shaela watched him as he held the vial over the bowl and tapped the side of it with a finger, emptying a small portion of the powder into the bowl. He then capped the vial, placed it back into his pocket and handed the bowl to her.

Shaela cupped it in both hands and watched as Talon took her sword and cut himself. As she watched his blood mingle and dissolve within the powder, the normal color of her eyes melted away to yellow. Soon Talon withdrew his hand and stopped the bleeding by gripping the wound tightly with his other hand.

“What did you put in it?” Pointing at it, Talon looked at her in all seriousness.

“A dried, powdered, herb. It will help to curb the actions of your appetite. It will also help to permanently embed the effects of my blood now coursing through your veins, though such effects would more intensely manifest in you, if we preformed a Bloodpact.” Shaela smiled a little and glanced down at the crimson, warm, liquid. Talon waved his hand at her.

“Drink it up. It will help with your bloodlust.” Shaela raised the bowl to her lips as Talon continued to carve the staff. As she drained the bowl with her teeth, she closed her eyes and sighed, feeling that out of control craving subside. There was no difference in the taste, as she had suspected there would be. After finishing, she lowered her hands and closed her eyes for a few moments, relishing the feeling that flooded through her each time she drank.

“Talon, what will the effects of drinking this be?”

“I don't know; the outcome is different for everyone. Most of the time there are no discernable effect at all.” Talon put down his black dagger and staff.

“There is a risk, as you are not native to the Underworld.” Shaela gave him an inquisitive look.

“Well, I rather experienced risk when the Wardenoth were discussing me.” Talon laughed and looked at his still bleeding wrist.

“Because you are not Vahkrin, they will kill you Shaela. But with my blood, that could be remedied.”

“How?”

“If you were to cut your wrist, I could share my blood directly with you. I would make you less detectable here. Don't think it would change you - you will ever be Shaela. It would merely give you the essence of Vahkrin - what I am - mingled with what you are.” Shaela thought for a moment in silence.

“Who I am?” She chuckled cynically. “I don't know who I am, only what I was.” Talon sat back against the tree and looked at her for a long while, deep in thought.

“Shaela, I only want you to live.” Upon hearing that, she stood, taking up her blade and placed it to her wrist.

“I don't want to die Talon. I accept your offer.” She watched as her own blood seeped out of the wound she slowly forced open as she slid the blade across her wrist.

“Ow, what now?” Talon stood, taking her hand and guiding it directly over the wound on his. As both their wrists came together, she looked at him in silence.

“Shaela, just know I do this to make you stronger, both in desire and control. When I first found you in that cave, and after what you did for me then, I respected you . . . a Human . . . whom I was taught to despise and kill.” Shaela reached her free hand over and gripped both their wrists together as tight as she could.

Slowly she felt a burning sensation flow up her arm, spreading into her shoulder and neck. Her vision blurred as she felt the heat of his blood flood into her head, neck and chest, pumping steadily down into her other arm and hand. Through her stomach and hips the burning sensation flowed, causing tears to form in her eyes and spill down her cheeks as she looked up at him, trembling.

“Do not break apart until you feel it through your entire body Shaela. When the sensation fills your entire body, then let go. I do not know what side effects would inflict you with if you waited longer than that.” She nodded, beginning to stagger as the heat spread down her thighs and crept into her legs. Talon supported her as she felt her feet and toes begin to burn. It was done.

Shaela's vision blurred as she felt the burning sensation increase in its intensity. She grit her teeth feeling the same sensation begin all over again, but this time, it felt like fire.

“Shaela,” Talon stated firmly, “Is it finished?” She did not know why, but as she fell heavily against Talon, she wrapped her free arm about their wrists, securing the connection of their wounds.

“Not yet . . . feet, still cold.” Talon's brow creased in concern as he supported her. Shaela began to fall into blackness as he attempted to withdraw from her. The burning became a searing heat as her vision became blackness. The fire had spread all the way to her feet, just as the warmth did before, causing her to scream. She could see nothing, but felt Talon violently wrench free, knocking her to the ground. Just before losing consciousness, she heard a distant voice, possibly Talon's . . .

“What have you done?”

“Answer the question Outworlder.”

“Let me take her. I can strip her mind of all we need to know.” Said a voice that sounded like a snake's hiss. Shaela peered into the unlighted area about her, straining to see who was talking, but she could not see anything but darkness.

“She obviously does not think this to be real.” There was a murmur about her as she looked down to find herself with but a simple robe clothing her. Her feet were bare as always. She listened to the voices as they continued.

“We should kill it,” grated a deep voice, “it could be dangerous. Has not the council previously determined it has extra ordinary gifts?” Shaela smirked.

“Gifts . . . you mean curses.” There was an uneasy silence that followed her sarcastic whisper. It occurred to her that she was dreaming, and so what could be the harm in conversing with these . . . these . . . whoever they were?

“What is this place?”

“Answer my question, what are you doing here?” She lowered her head and nodded.

“Okay, since this is a dream . . . My name is Shaela, and I come to the Underworld because I was cursed with the . . .

. . . Shaela awoke with a terrible pain to the right side of her face. Talon was on top of her, with her arms pinned above her head with one hand. He raised a hand again. She screamed and began struggling against him in vain. She cried out was about the strike her again.

“Talon, stop it!” Talon lowered his hand and slowly removed himself from her. She lay there for a few minutes waiting for the trees to stop dancing over her, and the buzzing in her head to cease. After she steadied herself, she slowly sat up, narrowing her eyes dangerously at him.

“You keep hitting me.” She whispered quietly. Talon turned his back on her, walked over to a rather large rock, grown over by one of the twisted trees, and retrieved a staff, which was now ink-black. Her eyes opened wide as he walked

back and held it out to her. She stood.

“That is exquisite, Talon.” Holding it out to her, he motioned her to take it. Reaching out, she accepted the black staff, studying it, running her fingers over its entire length.

“This is incredible.” She slowly looked up at him as she stepped close, almost touching him.

“Why did you hit me?” His eyes narrowed down at her threateningly.

“Why do you keep having the same conversation in the same dream?” She was startled by this response. She had never spoken to him of any reoccurring dream. “How do you know that?” Talon laughed.

“You talk in your sleep every time you fall into slumber. Even in the cave where we met, you talked in your sleep.” Shaela felt her face become warm as he spoke.

“Oh, I do?”

“I know a lot more about you than you think, Shaela. I remember everything, even when I was in dragon form.” Blushing deeply, Shaela covered her face with a hand.

“It's alright. You were in trouble, and I wanted to help. I'm glad you showed up on my front door. Not knowing what to say, Shaela shrugged, dropped her hand and looked up at him, narrowing her eyes.

“Why were you hitting me?” Talon stepped closer to her, reached up both hands and began brushing her night-black hair back. Taking in a deep breath, Talon sighed as he picked a bit of the forest out of some strands.

“This council that keeps questioning you are known as the Vuolg. This dream you keep having is not a dream.” The look of confusion she threw Talon clearly stated she did not understand.

“Shaela, I am familiar with the questions of the council, as I've heard it all before. They are a suspicious lot. I believe the Wardenoth we initially encountered went back with the information about you and I. They reported you to the council.” Shaela fidgeted with the black staff in her fingers, thinking about

what Talon had just said.

“How can they make me come to them in a mere dream?” Talon watched Shaela, a sudden anticipation in his dark eyes.

“They did not make you . . . they used the existence of your dreams to hold an inquiry. Had you answered their questions, they would have been more likely to find you.” Biting her lip, she looked around the area, as if expecting a sudden ambush.

“I gave them my name.”

“That is why I had to wake you, and quickly. If it is any consolation, I tried other methods before hitting you.” Shaela looked at him, holding his eye.

“This staff holds power, Talon, I can feel it.”

“Well done Druidess . . . well done. I am genuinely impressed.” Shaela felt the staff, noticing a feeling of dark power emanating into her hand. She turned her attention fully upon Talon and gave him a little smile.

“Talon, please do not hit me.” He glanced away from her for a moment.

“I understand.” Her smile deepened as she returned her attention back to the staff. “Now it is my turn to ask you a question. Why did you not stop when I told you to?” Shaela knew exactly what he meant.

“I don't know. Since I was torn from that which I knew, and my parents murdered, I've wanted revenge. I will absorb, learn and cultivate as much power as I can in order to fulfill my desires. I waited until I not only felt warmth fill my entire body, but burning. Talon, I will take any chance to succeed. Always, I will seek the upper hand. I will inflict pain and suffering on all those who oppress me.” Shaela's voice began to change as her eyes shaded to pitch-black, surprising Talon, though he hid the emotion.

“Talon, I will never again stand by and watch those I care for, or even myself, be the target of cruelty and injustice.” She stepped close to Talon and looked up at him with a cold expression.

“I will make all pay who dare bring fear and harm to those I love.” Turning away, she grinned, her eyes reflecting the black lightning which instantly streaked

across the sky above. Glaring into the eerie woodlands, Shaela bared her teeth.

“This I swear,” she hissed with sudden hate. She then turned her attention to her staff once again.

“Talon, what does this staff do?” He shook his head, trying to get her words to stop echoing in his mind.

“It . . . it was fused with the taint of Arsia. We Arsia are predominately female. I am male, and am a rarity among my kind. We all have the innate essence - the natural gift - of death.” Shaela turned to him in all seriousness.

“Your blood now flows through my veins. What will be the effects of this?” Talon looked Shaela over, from head to toe.

“Shaela, death now flows within you. I'm not sure of its final outcome, but I dare say it might well curb your bloodlust and shield you from detection while here in my world. You let flow much more of my blood into your veins than I would have given you, and there may well be side effects, consequences for such a rash decision.” Shaela shrugged and whispered coldly.

“The current side effects of my existence are more than enough. I will take any chance I have to gain power. With that power -” “Shaela, stop. Your eyes have lost all color . . . they are as ink which blots out the white of the parchment. You need help, for without training, I fear you will only become a monster, a savage who will lose everything in the end. Power is not dominance.” His words annoyed her.

Walking away, she placed a hand on one of the trees, feeling it's life force. No, she did not wish to become the oppressor she so despised. To be a monster is not what she wanted. Grinding her teeth, she looked back at Talon.

“I harbor so much anger, so much hate within,” she growled, touching her chest. “I killed them . . . drove roots through their bodies and watched their pupils dilate as they died. It felt good!” She looked at the staff in her hand, gripping it tight. “I thought it would settle the score; bring peace. I was wrong. Talon, I want to kill all of them . . . all of them!” she raged with a plea her eyes. Talon sighed and held out a hand towards her.

“Such emotions tear down the boundaries of restraint, remorse, respect. Abolish these boundaries and you are free to overthrow and destroy. Come to me, come here.” Slowly, she withdrew from the tree and walked back, stopping before him. Placing a trembling hand in his.

“Talon, please, I do not wish to die. I do not wish to make others afraid. I have never desired that. Talon, I want to live. I want this vampiric curse abolished.” Talon pulled her into his arms, embracing her tight. Brushing the hair from her face, he whispered.

“I will do all I can to help you, but you must trust me. Can you do that, Shaela of the Outworld?” She nodded, embracing him in return, hope torturing and ripping into her insides and heart, once again, just as it always had. After a while, she looked up at him, a gleam in her dark eyes.

“If you promise you will stop hitting me,” she jested emotionally. Talon laughed richly, giving her a look that meant, no promises.

“I will do what I can.” Giving him a look, Shaela smirked.

Talon slowly released Shaela as she took a few steps away, then turned back to him, curious to know something.

“Talon, did you understand my language when we first met?” He shook his head.

“No. Have you noticed that we understand each other now?” At first, she thought Talon was joking, but suddenly understood what he was inferring. She hadn't taken one of those magic tablets for more than a day, yet she was communicating with him perfectly.

“How is this possible?” Talon winked at her as he ran a hand back through his thick black hair.

“After drinking my blood, it was soon apparent you no longer needed them to communicate with me. You have not taken one in a few days.” Thinking and counting on her fingers, she ended with the ninth.

“It's now been nine days?” He nodded, watching her. “It is confusing here, the telling of time. There is no rising and setting of a sun.” Talon held up a finger.

“You were unconscious for two days, so it has been a little longer than nine days according to your time.” Talon sighed, giving her a look that caught her attention. He seemed desirous to say something, and it pricked her curiosity. Nearing him, she marveled at his sleek nature, the heir of nobility he seemed to carry. Talon was kind to her, even when he had not known her, and this had sparked a yearning within her to know more about him.

“Talon, why are you doing all this for me? You barely even know me. It's not that I don't appreciate your help, but it feels to me as if you are more than just being helpful . . . like you are a -” She sighed in mild frustration. “I don't wish to sound out of my head, but to me you feel, well, loyal. Does that make any sense?” The Vahkrin looked up into the strange heavens for a time, his jaw muscles tightening.

“Three more days and we will arrive. Once there, I will train you to fight.

When you are ready, I will take you back.” Shaela placed a hand on his arm, stopping him as he began to walk.

“When I was in that cave, when I first met Cyphis, I was suddenly attracted to this blade, like, like it was calling to me. When I unsheathed it for the first time, it felt right in my hands, like I was not myself then; things were happening too fast. I thought I might have imagined it, but I felt an energy course through me. Later, when I was playing with the blade, it happened again. Every time I unsheathe it, I feel something emanating from it. Can you tell me more about it? It's like I'm drawn to it. Talon, I can't get it out of my head most of the time.” She looked down, placing a hand on the hilt.

“I know this is no ordinary sword. There is something special about it, and you gave it to me, along with this Relic I wear.” She reached her other hand up and touched the flat plates of white-gold, then looked up at Talon who seemed frozen, as if he had been petrified. For a long while, he did not answer her as their eyes locked unblinking. After the silence began to discomfort her, she broke her gaze from Talon and began to walk in the general direction which Talon had started.

“You know something, I know you do. And I will get it out of you, even if I have to, to, grrr! You will tell me!” she growled as she felt his hand slip into hers, taking the lead.

“One day I may bow to you,” Talon stated without humor. She suddenly laughed, finding it funny.

“Who am I to be paid homage to. Still, it sounds intriguing.”

She had just decided to stop and urge him to tell her what he was keeping to himself, when he stopped, gripping her arm, and turning her to face him.

“Shaela, please let me train you for a time. Then, after you can wield this katana with skill enough to survive in this world, I will tell you some things I know about it.” With a deep sigh, she waved a hand and nodded, reluctantly agreeing.

“Promise?”

“Yes, I promise.” Quickly he continued, leaving her standing by herself. Finally, she felt she had set something in motion, though she knew not what. It felt good to know she had something to look forward to, and it pacified her impatience, for now.

The last leg of their trek passed uneventful, until the evening before they arrived at Talon's intended destination. As they concealed themselves among three very large trees, Shaela began a casual conversation.

“Talon, what is the name of this forest?”

“It's called the Vermillion Forest, and the span of its borders is greater in size than the entire continent you were raised on.” Shaela raised her eyebrows at him in surprise.

“What area are we in?”

“Well, keeping it simple, we are in the forest's mid center. Shaela, this vast forest has three main groups of Vahkrin, who ever struggle for dominion and rule.” Intrigued, Shaela had so many questions, but kept them inside her head. Relaxing, she spied about the area, thinking it looked the same as any other area they had traveled through. If Talon had not been her guide in this confusing woodlands, she would have suspected they were traveling in circles.

“Who are the dominant species now?” Talon thought for a minute and then looked about the area.

“The Vuolg, I presume.”

“Who are they?” Talon's brow creased in concern.

“The Vuolg are a race of flightless Humanoids, similar in appearance to the black skinned elves of your world known as the Mirellian.” Shaela shuddered.

“Mirellian are hateful and vile. I've read about them.” Talon chuckled.

“The Vuolg are far more cruel and devious, and are to be avoided. They are masters of fire magic, and wear a simple black band upon their finger. On the inside of their right forearm is a natural blood-red circle, like an ink branding, which is the symbol of their race, making them easily detectable.” Shaela knelt and smoothed out the soil before her. With a finger, she drew a circle as he spoke.

Within this circle she drew the symbols etched into the pedestal she saw in her dream, knowing them well, for she had looked upon them every time she closed her eyes to rest. Before finishing, Talon also knelt, reached over and erased it with the palm of his hand.

“Where did you learn that?” Shaela shrugged, then looked up to see a most serious look. Suddenly nervous, she looked down and began smoothing out the soil that Talon had already smoothed down.

“Every time I rest, I find myself standing on a solid platform of what appears to be solid diamond. That is what I see. Everything past the borders of this object is blackness. The only other thing I know are the voices of those asking me questions, and those making comments now and then.” Talon looked concerned.

“Did you tell them anything of significance, besides your name?” She shook her head.

“No.” Breathing a sigh of relief, Talon let out a sigh of relief and squeezed her hands softly.

“Okay, good. Don't speak to them at all Shaela. As I told you before - and you must believe me - the more information you give them, the easier it will be for them to find you. Shaela, you do not want them to discover your location. They would do terrible things to you.” There was a tone in his voice that scared her badly, for she knew if such a creature as Talon feared for her safety, it was serious.

Shivering, she turned away, setting her back against him for security. Quickly he sheltered her in his wings. As they closed about her, she shut her eyes and let out a trembling breath. The more she learned from Talon, the more she felt exposed and vulnerable in this place. This was far more intense than the feelings she used to experience as a child when told to take the scraps out to the pigs at night, after the last customer had departed the dining room. Even at ten years old - and how her mind seemed to play tricks on her in the dark - that was nothing compared to the feelings and nightmarish images this place awoke in the darkest recesses of her heart and mind.

“I'm scared Talon,” she whispered. Talon lifted her chin with a gentle finger until their eyes met.

“You are safe with me, and you are greater than you give yourself credit for. To be scared is to be cautious, and that shows some wisdom in you.” Shaela smiled slightly, reaching her arms up over the back of his neck and hugged him, whispering a sincere thank you in his ear.

As before, when she was so close to him, she felt that familiar warmth of his blood pulsing through his heart, intoxicating her in its rhythm. She shuddered and released him.

“You hunger.” She dug her nails into the palms of her hands, nodding.

“Yes . . . please.” Reaching down he gripped the hilt of her blade and began to slide it out from its resting place when voices broke the stillness of the forest not far from them. Shaela could not understand them, but from the expression Talon gave her, he did. Placing a finger to his lips, he turned, taking a look as she retrieved the little pouch of tablets from her pocket, opened it, and quickly ate one. Cinching it up, Shaela quickly dropped it back into her coat.

“Talon, I saw someone.” Shortly after she caught a glimpse of movement, there came a voice on the air, sounding quiet and sly. In reply, a deep grating voice replied to the first.

“Well, well, let's see who we have here, shall we?” The second voice sounded like one of those that had been in her dream. Talon pulled back and drew his black dagger and held up two fingers. To Talon's alarm, Shaela slowly stood. Emphatically, he waved her down, but she simply gestured him to stay.

Shaking his head, in a final attempt to sway her, Talon gave a look she did not like. Still, she made her way out from the shelter of the trees, her eyes changing to night as she stepped into the sight of the two Humanoids, one of which was black skinned. The other was a winged creature and of large muscular build, towering easily twice her own height. It growled at Shaela as she stopped and faced them, crouching halfway as it began to stalk toward her. With a quick motion, the dark-skinned man halted its advance.

“Stay your hand Gnolim.” Growling irritably, the cloven-hoofed fiend backed down as the man lowered his hand. He stood still looking Shaela up and down for a moment, and then bowed slightly.

“What brings you here?” He stated slowly, cautiously. Shaela bowed slightly.

“My parents were murdered, I wandered alone and eventually paid another to bring me here so I would never have to look at another Human again. Are you going to kill me?” The man laughed.

“Interesting. Do I need to?” Shaela shook her head, biting her lip shyly.

“No. I don't want to die.” The man laughed again and casually walked her way, followed by the Gnolim, who lumbered behind, glaring at her. Stopping before her, he looked her up and down, grinning, a gleam flashing in his eyes that compelled her to retreat back a step.

“Of all the places to travel, and you do not have a death wish? Why are you traveling in this area? It is death for you to be here.” Shaela looked around, suddenly terrified.

“I'm lost. The one who brought me here, left me alone, taking my pack and belongings. Is there a city nearby? I should book an inn for a few nights and clean myself up. I need a bath . . . and a friend.” The man bowed again, intrigued.

“I am Janth, and this is my servant, Sillik. I can take you to a city, Shaela, if you wish.” As he waved his hand off to the right, she noticed a black band upon Janth's finger, identifying him as Vuolg.

“Thank you, Janth.” The Vuolg snapped his fingers at Sillik, who unshouldered a large pack and handed it to him.

“This will give you some strength until you can get some decent food. Please, sit, eat,” he stated cordially. Shaela nodded and sat down on a large root, positioning herself so that their backs were exposed to Talon.

“Thank you Janth; you are kind. I'm lucky you found me.” Janth sat beside her and handed her some bread and drink. She took it, making physical contact with him. As she did she smiled timidly without parting her lips, sharing with him

the feeling of strong attraction that visibly, instantly, gripped his senses. She felt the beat of his heart quicken, and waltzed with the hunger within.

Taking the offered bread, she set it in her dress and gently rested her hand on his, emanating a dark desire; sharing it with him. Janth blinked, licking his lips as he looked down at their hands, suddenly giving all his attention to her.

“You are Human . . . I . . . I've never met a Human before.” Shaela squinted at him and bit her bottom lip, half closing her eyes as she quietly sighed. Quickly, Janth gripped her hand and pulled her to him, exhaling a quivering breath as their lips met. She smiled, wrapping her arms about his neck and entwining her fingers through his hair. He grinned back at her, seemingly pleased at his luck. Sillik scowled and watched on, a look of disgust in its hateful glare.

“I am Vuolg m`lady.” She smiled and kissed him passionately as a dark shadow rose up behind Sillik, silent as a shadow. Tightening her hold about Janth's neck, she slid her lips softly across his cheek to his ear as he reached up, wrapping his arms about her back. Slowly she teased him, brushing her lips down the length of his ear to an area just under his jaw where she could sense the flow of his blood nearest to the surface.

As she heard Sillik groan, she tightened her grip on him and sunk her teeth deep up into his neck, instantly severing the main artery in his neck. Janth jerked and began to struggle, but her charm countered his escape attempt as she began to feed. She had him, just as the spider snares its victim, yet without webs.

In a feeble attempt to get her away from him, the Vuolg pushed at her, his strength quickly waning as the rhythm of his heart became erratic. With a feeling of ecstasy, Shaela filled her hunger with his life essence. The beating of his heart began to weaken and slow, and as it did, the most wonderful feeling filled her, as if she was coming home from a long, long journey, suddenly surrounded by loved ones. Truly, this Vuolg was amazing.

As he fell into her void of helplessness, she withdrew her fangs from his neck and moved her lips near his ear, streaking the base of his jawline with red.

“I never told you my name,” she whispered, a silver sheen flicking across

the surface of her ash-black eyes. Pulling back, Shaela steadied him with a hand, and gazed into widened eyes of terror. Licking her lips, she ever so slightly threw him a loving, sentimental smile, softly squinting her eyes at him

“Oops,” she whispered, as if speaking to a child who had just made a mistake. Gaping, trying to speak, the Vuolg manage to make a croaking sound. She observed him, throwing him a modest pout, then smiled, exposing fangs that dripped with his own blood.

“Go on, try again. I'm listening, sir,” she cooed, running a hand gently through his hair. Struggling, he shuddered, opening his mouth. It seemed to her, he was trying to say something important, and so she let him attempt to speak. On the third attempt, the Vuolg managed to force out a single word.

“Mercy,” he gurgled as a tremor ripped through his body. Movement behind her quarry caught Shaela's attention. Looking past him, her eyes fixed upon Talon, who observed the scene, his eyes fixed on her. She could see a terrible fascination for what she was doing in his dark eyes. Pleased, Shaela squinted at Talon, then turned her attention back to the man who knew her name, even though she had never given it to him.

“Janth, you were dispatched by ignorant fools, fools who underestimated what they had discovered. In a way, it makes me sad to see such a handsome young man, as you, used as an unwitting pawn. That I hold such importance, as to attract the attention of those in power, flatters me. Janth, I am grateful to have made your acquaintance. You are, no doubt, valued somewhere in your social circle. I'm sure there are those who will miss you. I hope you are without a wife and children. I hate to cause innocents pain. Yet, I must say farewell to you now. I know, if I spared you, you would become a raging monster . . . like myself. I also know, if I spared you, you would never tell me the truth of why they want me so badly. But, you would lie to me; it's your nature.” With a long sigh of regret, Shaela leaned forward and kissed Janth, a tear sliding down her face. When she withdrew, Janth attempted to speak, but failed, his fading eyes widening as she exposed her teeth viciously, like a wolf ready to strike.

Like a starving cat, she pulled him to her and snapped up into the gaping wound of his neck, drawing every ounce of his life essence up into the hollows of her fangs. Desperately, she adjusted her bite, striving for every last drop of life essence remaining within him until, at last, she knew there was nothing left but the shell of Janth's once living body.

When his heart stilled, his hands dropped to the side. As he choked one last time, she withdrew from him, gripping each side of his head, and watched the pupils of his eyes slowly expand to full.

“Forgive me, Janth,” she whispered, letting go of him. As his, now, lifeless body fell back to the ground, Shaela felt a sensation of pure ecstasy fill her body. Her vision blurred as she rose to her feet and sighed, wiping her mouth with the back of her sleeve twice, once with each arm. Sillik lay face down below Talon, who was perched upon the Gnomim, unblinking.

Letting out a breath, she strode over to Talon. Nimbly, he jumped down from his victim, landing before her, sheathing his dagger in one smooth motion. She wiped her mouth again and squinted at him, half closing her eyes, wishing this feeling would never leave. Talon shook his head slightly and looked down at the dead Vuolg.

“You know, you really should avoid the Vuolg -- they are dangerous.”
Shaela nodded.

“I'll try to remember that.” A proud and fierce look flashed across Talon's face as she stepped close to him, her blackened eyes glittering with a deadly dark light. “I promise,” she whispered, licking her lips. Talon cleared his throat.

“We better move on.” After retrieving what valuables Janth possessed, she lifted his hand and took hold of the ring.

“Shaela, don't!” Freezing, she looked over at Talon.

“I want the ring.” Talon quickly came to her, unsheathing his Morgel Dagger.

“If you take the ring off, his body will return to the Vuolg's Receiving Tower. We would, most assuredly, be under instant attack. They easily track the

ring. You have to cut the finger off, then remove it. In that, there is no danger of retribution.” Shaela surrendered Janth's hand to Talon, who quickly cut his finger off, removed the severed finger from the ring and threw it down. Before handing it over, he spoke in all seriousness.

“If you put this ring on, then take it off, you will instantly be summoned to the Receiving Tower. Shaela, that tower is within a short walk of the main castle, wherein resides the King of the Vuolg. Once there, all hope for you will be lost, do you understand me? You will die.” Nodding, Shaela took the ring and slipped into her pocket.

“I understand, perfectly.” Talon watched her with approval. As she finished searching the bodies, they both moved out of the area to avoid any creatures that might be attracted by the smell of blood, not that it mattered; Shaela's beautiful dress and trench coat was stained with Janth's blood.

After a few hours of walking in silence, they both found a suitable spot to relax. While Shaela rested, her mind caught hold of a thought which disturbed her greatly.

“Talon, will I lose my Humanity?” Talon shrugged.

“I don't know; time will tell.” Shaela's face twisted in pain as she buried her face in her hands and closed her eyes, weeping softly. The most intense pleasure had filled her when she had filled herself on Janth's blood, coupled with his death. It was most desirable, and she wanted more. Talon had warned her not to, but she did it. Now that this feeling had subsided, she felt ashamed, as though she had done something terribly wrong. She felt forever cursed to darkness.

She heard Talon approach and kneel next to her, welcoming the embrace he gifted her with. Leaning into him, Shaela rested, finding some peace in his care.

“Talon,” she whispered emotionally, “thank you for all you do for me.” She felt his hand softly stroking her hair as he shifted, pulling her into his embrace, making her comfortable.

“You are most welcome Druidess. Shaela, that man was hunting for you, and would have killed you. You did what you had to do. There was no other way

in the situation you were in.” Though she knew he spoke the truth, she took little comfort in his words.

“Why are you taking so much time to help me?” Talon smiled warmly at her and brushed the tears from her face with a gentle hand.

“We will talk when you are trained, as is our agreement.” She was far too curious about what Talon knew, especially about the blade. Submitting herself to waiting, she lowered her head, sighing.

“Alright, you win.” Talon smirked became silent, submersing himself in his own thoughts as she rested. She felt tired, yet not like the weariness she used to feel. Now her exhaustion was mental. She supposed she slept out of habit, rather than exhaustion, though it was only a thought. Just before she let herself fall into soothing sleep, she heard Talon's voice.

“Shaela, how long will you be staying here in the Underworld?” She thought for a while, slipping into thoughts of doubt and insecurity which seemed to argue among themselves within her head. After some time, she shrugged, raised her eyes to his, giving him an expression of indecision.

“At this point, I cannot say. If I cannot raise my will power to control this Bloodlust, never. If I can master my hunger, my rage, I can go back.” The void within her chest intensified as her thoughts shifted to her fiancé, gnawing painfully at her heart. Lowering her head, she rested against Talon. He was kind and gentle, supportive and wise. In all her dilemma, Shaela had found refuge within the embrace of one of mankind's greatest enemies. Sadly, she closed her eyes, tears beginning to fall.

“I'm so tired of running.” Talon kindly wiped her cheeks, his eyes filled with concern.

“Sleep for a while Shaela . . . we are in no great hurry.” Doing as he asked, she shifted her thin frame more comfortably against him, closed her eyes and let unconsciousness take her.

. . . Shaela found herself standing upon that familiar diamond pedestal.

Within a short moment, she heard a familiar voice speak as she peered into the darkness about her.

“Why are you here?” This time she knelt and pulled the black band from her pocket and held it up between two fingers. As she did, a murmur spread throughout the dark about her.

“I need your help milords.” Her request caused a deep silence to follow, as if she was suddenly alone. As she waited, Shaela felt a sudden pain about her neck, pain, no doubt, of Talon's doing.

“What assistance can we offer?” Shaela felt the wind knocked out of her as she began to struggle against an invisible foe as it attempted to subdue her.

“Find me, please.” Shaela saw the surface of the pedestal begin to fade, and knew she was waking up. Quickly Shaela dropped the ring onto the diamond surface. As she opened her eyes, she saw that Talon had her pinned to the ground, and was violently screaming at her. . .

As she looked up at him with blackened eyes, Talon released her and pulled away, a look of astonishment on his face.

“What are you doing? What have you done!” Bearing her teeth at Talon, she hissed.

“Still hitting me? Talon, I'm tired of being harassed. Prepare yourself for our . . . guests.”

“Our guests . . . Shaela, do you not know who these people are? Have I not told you enough about them?” She stood and turned her attention to Talon, flashing with anger. Snatching up her staff, she could not hold back sudden tears of frustration as they began to flow. The moment she gripped her staff, it was hot, indicating danger was upon them. Snarling like an animal, Shaela pointed at Talon.

“Keep them off me!” With an exclamation of total frustration, Talon snatched his dagger from its sheath, even as the both of them were drawn to movement within the trees, though it was yet a good distance out.

“Move back!” He commanded, as he fell to all fours upon the ground, dagger still in hand. Shaela quickly retreated as Talon instantly began to twist, lengthen and expand before her eyes.

She was getting used to the effects of his shifting into the form in which she had first met him. As he expanded, the thought occurred to her that Talon remembered every moment in the underground. She had pondered it before. At first, she had been embarrassed. Now? Now, she no longer cared.

He shifted into Shadow Dragon form, his dagger absorbing into his right-front claw with the transformation.

As his change to Shadow Dragon was complete, Talon turned his attention to the first of several Wardenoth to appear. Without hesitation, they sped toward the two of them, bent on taking them down. Screaming in fury, Talon lashed out, his tail wreaking death among the band of Wardenoth with staggering accuracy.

Shaela's rage grew as her mind set upon what these creatures would do to her and Hiska if they were overtaken. The Prima would not take them! Her body trembled with rage as she closed her eyes and reached out, feeling the life of the jungle about her. Reaping and harvesting all the energy she could absorb, Shaela opened her eyes, spitting out the words to a spell.

“Agrin Mortala!” The entire jungle, as far as the eye could see, moved and shifted, as if alive, being abruptly, violently, awakened from a deep, peaceful slumber.

As screams of terror split the air about her, Shaela came to her senses, realizing she was not in the jungle, and she was not defending Hiska. Her enemies were not the Prima, but Wardenoth, many Wardenoth -- too many. The spell had not ended the conflict, as she wished, and this frustrated her to no end. As Talon crushed the advance of a group of sickening, insect-like, Wardenoth, she closed her eyes, even as a score of attackers bent their attention upon her.

As they refocused their attack upon her, Talon screamed, backing toward her, shrieking in hate and rage at a single being, appearing as solid darkness.

Slowly, it advanced toward them, its attention bent upon Shaela. Inhaling quickly, Talon breathed a solid mass of fiery blackness up on it, causing it to groan and falter, if but for only a moment.

The pause in this horror's advance was enough to buy Shaela enough time to raise her staff high and cast a spell she had learned in Talon's cave of treasure. "Gargantuan!" she screamed as she pointed at the forest. The moment the spell was cast, a violent tremor rippled through the trees and earth, shaking the forest all about the area.

Without hesitation, the shadowy figure riveted its attention upon Shaela and pointed her way, even as the entirety of the organic life began to rip up from the earth and come together, showering all with debris of rock and soil and organic materials.

"Anchin Morugrin -" Talon roared and leapt upon the being of shadow, knocking it to the earth, disrupting its spell before it could finish, even as Shaela's spell formed into the shape of a massive Humanoid, towering easily ten times her height and three times larger than Talon in dragon form.

Instantly her spell, now in the physical form of her personal servant, turned and swept an arm across the now bare earth, smashing and crushing a considerable number of Wardenoth. Shaela staggered back, in awe by what she had summoned.

As her gargantuan pounded and smashed both limb and trunk upon the enemy, a sudden burst of terrible dark energy ripped through the area, throwing Talon back. Crashing to the ground, Talon twisted and gasped, stunned by his enemy's retribution, unable to regain his feet for the moment. Shaela watched as scores of Wardenoth converged on Talon, bent on his demise.

The shadow which Talon had been contending with moaned as it unsteadily arose, again turning its attention upon her. Shaela felt a dread flow through her as it raised a hand of night, its attention bent upon her. Willing her creation to crush this being, she watched as it begin to cast once again, not seeing the tree-like behemoth raise a leg up over it.

"Anchin Morugrin Achni -" Instantly, the massive foot of the Gargantuan

came down on it, crushing it deep into the earth. Without pausing the massive organic creature continue its assault, joined in by Talon who struggled to his feet and began viciously tearing in to what remnants of their enemy remained.

Soon the battle was over. Shaela looked about her and noticed one Wardenoth attempting to crawl away. Angrily, she overtook it and placed her foot on the back of its neck as it weakly struggled. Raising her staff, she struck it with all her might, crushing in the skull of its insect-like head.

Talon limped to her side, eyeing Shaela narrowly. Concerned, she focused her attention upon him, examining his injury. Shrugging her off, the dragon spun a circle, careful not to trample her, scanning the area for survivors. There were none.

“Well done, Druidess. Well done indeed!” Talon winced, and faltered a moment, favoring his back right leg. “Impressive!” Talon flattered her with his words of praise, even as she felt a great weariness drive her to the ground, threatening to steal her consciousness. Sweat poured down her face as Talon snatched her up and limped away into the forest, not looking back.

As they departed from the scene of the battle, a tremor ripped through the ground as the Gargantuan fell apart, and scattered, all organics returning to their original place, each boring its roots halfway into the soil from whence it was summoned. Within moments, the area stilled.

Shaela steadily faded as she beheld the forest racing past her as Talon sped from the area in great haste. Groaning, she smiled in triumph, then closed her eyes.

Again, she found herself upon the pedestal of diamond, darkness concealing the identity of those who murmured in hushed, angry, tones about her.

“Why are you here?” She sighed and pulled back her hair with two hands, smiling, as if she thought something was funny.

“I don't communicate with those I cannot see.” There was silence in response to her statement. The mocking laughter which escaped her lips echoed through the unseen chamber.

“Why do you not send another attack? It would be fun. But, make sure you dispatch a challenge this time.” A voice answered, barely controlled in its rage.

“You, an Outworlder, have trespassed into our world and murdered our people, and you dare question us?” Shaela spit out an instant rebuttal.

“I could be anyone from any world and you would do the same. I know you people . . . you are the same as all the others. You all, in your struggle to be unique and different, are the same common, twisted trash I am unfortunate enough to meet wherever I go. You dare to communicate with me? You are no more worthy to talk to me, than one of your minion Wardenoth slaves. If you have something of value to say, then say it, otherwise stop wasting my time.” With that said, she began nibbling at her fingernails, as if suddenly bored, while all about her there arose a chorus of outrage. After a time, a man passed through the shadow barrier and stepped up before her on the platform. From what she knew, he fit the description of one of the Vuolg, with the exception that he had pure white eyes.

“Now communicate with us,” he demanded. Shaela could feel an intense amount of energy emanating from him as he glared down at her.

“Yes,” she whispered and held out a hand to him. She wanted to see if he could touch her in her dream. To her surprise, he took her hand and kissed the back of it, answering her curiosity. She looked down at the symbols and pointed.

“I will make a deal with you. We trade questions back and forth; is this acceptable?” He nodded.

“I will ask the first question, Outworlder.” Shaela laughed and placed a hand on his arm.

“I’ve told you my name. I will begin.” Looking down at her hand upon his arm, he shook his head, pushing her hand away.

“My apologies . . . Shaela.” She grinned at him, almost playfully, realizing he was not about to succumb to her charm.

“Okay, my question first . . . why are you so interested in killing me?” There was a murmur all about her, causing her to wonder at the intelligence of those she could not see. She turned her attention fully upon the man, waiting patiently for him to lie to her.

“We do not wish to kill you . . . only bring you in for questioning.” His reply did not disappoint her suspicion. She tipped toed, stretching up and looking into his eyes.

“Okay, your turn to ask a question, and my turn to lie to you. This is fun.” Her enthusiasm obviously agitated the Vuolg, if that's what he was. Gritting his teeth, he closed his eyes and inhaled through his nose dramatically. Opening his eyes, he ask her his question.

“Why are you here?” Shaela winked at him playfully.

“I am here to investigate the intense activity of the hottest volcano known in the Underworld.” He pulled back a little and grimaced.

“Why would you attempt such a journey?” Raising a finger, she stopped him.

“It's my turn, remember?” Sighing in mild frustration, the man held out a hand toward her.

“Of course, how . . . rude of me.” Shaela laughed.

“Okay, since you wasted your question, it's now my turn - again - to ask another . . . and your turn to deceitfully lie and evade the answer.” The man held up a hand.

“Okay, Shaela, okay, can I be frank with you?” She grinned, her eyes suddenly darkening to pitch black night as she felt the urge to feed from his life

essence.

“No. Now, that is the second question in a row you have asked me. You are not playing fair, and I was having such a good time. Don't spoil the moment . . . I enjoy lying, and being lied to. It seems most everyone I meet in your comfortable world is like this. And if I can't beat you, I may as well join you, right?” Before he could answer, she knelt and began looking at the symbols of the pedestal, ignoring him. He knelt down and looked at her in sudden contemplation.

“I think we misunderstood you, Shaela.” In response, a voice hissed from somewhere behind her.

“She has murdered our own, kill her!” Shaela stood, shrugging at the Vuolg and sighing.

“Sir, it is always this way. There will be those who hunt you down, and when defeated, claim they are the victim, wronged and trespassed by their once intended prey.” She leaned close to his ear and whispered, “Leave . . . me . . . alone.” She instantly bit him as hard as she could, ripping a gash into the side of his face. Pulling back from her, he struck her to the surface of the pedestal and backed away, passing out of sight into the concealment of darkness. Cries of protest broke out as she saw the symbol begin to fade into darkness.

“Enjoy the curse,” Shaela called out as she began to fade.

Shaela came to, laying under the overhanging ledge of a cliff. Talon was sitting close by, holding her hand in his, worried as usual. When he saw her eyes open, he took her blade and cut himself, filling the bowl with his blood. Its scent, his life force, was intoxicating to no end, and very desirable. Sitting up, she looked at it, restraining herself from grabbing it. As the bowl filled, she knelt, facing Talon, and pulled her long dark hair back over her right shoulder.

“How is your leg?” Shrugging slightly, Talon shot a brief look at her.

“Sore, but no broken bones - nothing a few days time will not fix. Being a dragon has it's advantages. If not for your forest giant, or whatever you call it, I would be among those of my kind who are no longer of this world.” His comment

made her curious.

“Talon, do you believe we move on after we die?” Filling the bowl to the brim, Talon handed it to her. Taking it, she did not drink it right away. As she watched him wrap his wrist tight with a strip of black cloth.

“Yes, I do,” he answered. Smiling, she drained the bowl quickly as he continued.

“Arsia are solitary creatures, Shaela. We conform to no governing bodies or factions. They would not have us even if we desired it.” She listened, eager to hear more.

“You see, Arsia, in the Vahkrin tongue, means death. I am a rarity among my species; I am male, as I told you. Shaela, I am a born hunter . . . that is what Arsia do; we seek the glory of battle and war.” On one point, she did not understand something.

“What do you mean, death?” Talon stood, favoring his right leg, motioning her to follow. He led her out from under the cliff, down a narrow switchback trail, at the bottom of which loomed the auburn forest. At the base the switchbacks, Talon began turning over rocks until a small rodent attempted to scamper away. With a speed that shocked her, he snatched it up and looked at her.

“Come here Shaela.” Curiously, she neared, wondering what he was going to do. When she got close enough, he pulled his dagger out.

“Notice the insignificant scratch I will inflict upon this creature.” Talon raised the dagger to its foot and lightly cut it, barely wounding it. Instantly the rodent tensed, then fell limp in his hand. Shaela reached up a hand, placing it over the creature.

“I sense no heartbeat, no surge of blood through its veins. Dead,” she whispered in awe, glancing at the blade Talon held. Her thoughts fell to her staff. She looked up at Talon in amazement, completely at a loss for words. Sheathing the dagger, Talon held out his wrist and removed the black bandage.

“In my blood flows death. The abilities I have, I can make manifest in weapons . . . or within a living creature.” Shaela thought on his words, piecing

together, piecing together their logic.

“So within your blood flows the natural essence of death?” Talon nodded, smiling at her as he reached up and tucked a lock of loose hair behind her ear.

“It's not as simple as that, but yes.” He gave her a look that caused her to avert her eyes, her face flushing crimson.

“So . . . your blood now mingles with mine.” She did not know how to put her next question, but Talon seemed to understand, even before she asked.

“Yes. Now you are connected with the essence of death . . . Shaela, you are now Death`Kin.” He placed a finger under her chin and lifted her head. “Shaela, I have given you a great and terrible gift, which I will teach you how to cultivate.” Shaela suddenly embraced Talon.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you.” Shaela did not see Talon's face take on a shocked, confused, look as she expressed her gratitude. Slowly he wrapped his arms about her and held her tightly to him.

She was still confused about everything, but knew he would keep his word and educate her. All she had to do was be patient, listen and learn. As she embraced him, she felt Talon smell her hair. She suddenly realized she had changed . . . was changing. She was no longer the Human girl that Hiska had found and rescued in the jungle.

It was nearing a full moon since she was parted from him, and she felt empty inside. She knew Talon could not fill that emptiness, but he was helping her, teaching her, gifting her with power.

“Talon, teach me this power . . . teach me to use it, please.” Talon parted from her and retrieved the black cloth he always used to wrap the wound on his wrist. Carefully, he began to bind his wound in silence. As he tucked the end of the bandage in between his wrist and the wrapping, he gave her a sober stare.

“I will teach you, but you need to understand there are many gifts within the fearful realm of death, and that not all the gifts are bad, nor are they all beneficial. By guiding you, we will be opening a door, possibly one which I am ignorant of. I cannot prepare you much for what you may experience. Are you willing to chance

such a journey . . . to step into such a realm of death to learn what might be found within you?” Shaela felt the chill of truth in his words. This could end it all here and now. In the dragon's lair, she had begged Talon to kill her. But now she wanted to continue on; make things better.

“Talon, you know what has happened to me. I am of the impression that nothing happens for no reason. I will not lie to you . . . I want power, and as much as I can gather. I want it, crave it, I don't know why. I am weary of others taking advantage of me; exhausted from being scared. I care not what this training will bring me to. Simply put, I live under constant threat . . . threats I fantasize of crushing.” Without another word, Talon led her back up the switchbacks and under the overhanging shelter of rock.

Once they were under the natural overhang of the mountain, Talon turned and knelt down upon the ground, motioning her before him. She knelt facing him, making herself comfortable, positioning her body so that her knees almost touched Talon's.

“All I can tell you is not to resist . . . whatever happens, you need to become one with the experience you have. Shaela, many have died in the very thing you are about to attempt. Do you still wish to . . . commune with Death?” She took in a deep breath and let it out, nodding, suddenly very nervous.

“Yes.” Talon leaned forward and gently touched her forehead with a finger and closed his eyes, mumbling under his breath words she could not understand. She strained to hear what he was saying, but could only hear about half of it.

A noise abruptly echoed through the cave, as if the roots of the mountain itself had suddenly shifted in the deep. The cave seemed to melt away, leaving her kneeling in a pitch-black void. She gasped and reached for the ground where she should have been kneeling, to feel nothing beneath her. Panic struck as her vision dimmed and faded away to the point where, even with her vampiric sight, she could not see her hand before her face.

Remembering Talon's counsel, she focused on remaining calm. She

steadied her breathing with even inhales and exhales. As she calmed herself, to her horror, Shaela felt something touch her cheek, followed by a sudden feeling of being touched all over. She flinched, almost screaming in terror as she resisted the urge to flee and escape. Each touch invaded her, as if she were in the midst of a group of people who cared less about her dignity.

She grit her teeth as something flowed in through her mouth, sliding down her throat, only to exit a moment later. The experience was so invasive, Shaela attempted to shift, hoping it would stop. As she moved, she was seized upon by something which paralyzed her so that she could not move.

She groaned, despair weakening her resolve to continue. Just as she nearly gave up hope, it withdrew from her, sliding out from every pore of her skin like ten-thousand times ten-thousand hand-length needles. She could feel tears streaming her face as she forced herself to remain erect and motionless. Trembling, she waited to see what was next. Then, after a time, a calm voice whispered all about her.

“What desirest thou?” She cried out, sobbing, and thought of the question asked, then quickly forced her emotions down so she could answer. The scenes of her childhood vividly played out in her mind, followed by her experiences, one by one, up until the present. She knew what she wanted . . . she knew very well. With trembling lips, she closed her eyes and drew in a quivering breath.

“Death to my enemies . . . mercy to the innocent . . . justice to the guilty.” She waited, shivering suddenly, as if she were freezing to death. Then, once again, she heard that same whisper.

“Would you take revenge?” Shaela quickly nodded, a sensation of focused darkness filling her mind. Her eyes faded to black, though none could have seen it where she was.

“Yes.”

“Why?” She knew why, and it raged her to answer such a question.

“All that violate need justice done upon their heads.” Shaela was abruptly seized and twisted about in the void of blackness as she felt those penetrating

needles invade her entire being once again. She screamed, agony torturing her body as she felt the probing and caressing deepen to her very bone structure, as if her skeletal frame were suddenly exposed to the pricks of numberless probing pins. It seemed to go on and on forever before, finally, once again, withdrawing, leaving her weak and drained.

After a moment, to her dismay, it began again. She felt like her entire body was being molded and sculpted. The second time was less painful than the first, yet still the void was filled with her screams. She felt her body fall to pieces as those invisible hands ripped and pulled at her from the inside and out at every angle.

After a time, it stopped, leaving her shuddering in terror as streams of sweat cascaded her entire physical frame. She felt cold, like ice, and wrapped her arms about herself, trying to find some comfort and security in doing so.

“Oh mother, father,” she whispered remorsefully, “I wish I had the power to undo . . .” Shaela sobbed out desperately. “I need you both so very much.” Again she felt those hands violate her, but this time there was no pain . . . only soothing caresses. She raised a hand and touched one and felt her fingers interlock with the fingers of what she thought was another person's hand. As this happened, she felt the other's fingers course through her hair gently, almost lovingly. After what she had just experienced, this was unexpected and welcome. Sighing in relief, she leaned her head into each caress, finding comfort as she wept in silence, wondering who it might be.

Her curiosity drove her to reach up and feel for the source, for she could see nothing in this pitch blackness. Running her fingers along the fingers interlocked with her own hand, she followed them to the hand and up an unseen arm . . . an arm which seemed very real, like her own. She raised herself up as she found the shoulder, followed by a slender neck and jaw line. She could feel long hair draped over a person's shoulders and continued feeling over the entire structure of a body which she realized was female just as she. Shaela smiled and touched her face.

With no more fear or reservations, she reached up and embraced the woman

before her, who returned the affection. As she held her, the woman whispered in her ear.

“I am confident you shall have what you desire.” Shaela smiled and kissed her on the cheek, whispering back.

“I desire us to be together forever.” The female began to slip through her arms, sliding and turning her back to Shaela, slipping into her, uniting with her body. Shaela gasped, a feeling flooding through her she could not describe. Her mind staggered as a sudden weariness gripped her.

Then, that voice came to her, again, whispering like the unified voices of a thousand souls.

“What desirest thou?” This time she understood the offer and smiled darkly as she pulled her loose hair back from her face.

“I desire to go back . . . to save my family. I desire most of all the power to walk with death . . . as an equal.” She wanted much more than that, but thought it unwise to ask.

“Shaela, open your eyes . . . Shaela.”

Ever so slowly, Shaela opened her eyes to see her mother looking down at her.

“Well, well, look who decided to wake up; the birthday girl. Welcome to the land of the living. Your father has breakfast almost ready . . . you hungry?” Shaela sat up with a start and grabbed her mother's hand.

“Mother?” Her mother looked down at her and smiled as if humoring Shaela.

“Yes, I am. Shaela, wake up, we must be on the road in an hour.” Shaela jumped up and threw her arms about her mother, squeezing her tight.

“I love you so much. I want you to know that.” Her mother gave her a sentimental, if not confused, look and smiled happily.

“I love you too, Shaela,” she stated, returning with a big hug. “You better save one of those hugs for your father, or he will be jealous.” Shaela looked over at her father and let go of her mother slowly, smiling brightly.

“Oh, I have enough to go around.” Her father laughed and stood as she approached him, spreading out his arms to receive her. Shaela practically tackled him.

“Whoa child, don't push me into the fire! We have a long road today through the jungle, so get yourself ready to go.” His voice lowered as if he were telling a spooky ghost story by a fire late at night.

“I hear there are ghosts that haunt the woods at night in the jungle.” Shaela let go of him, a cold feeling coming over her as she remembered this day four years ago. She looked at the vegetables, eggs and pork cooking in the skillet and pointed.

“You gonna' burn our breakfast?” Shooing her away, her father sat back down to tend to the cooking, throwing her a wink. Although this was only a dream, she welcomed it, watching her mother pack up for the day's ride.

“Shaela,” her mother called out, “will you feed the horses, please?” Happily, Shaela walked to the back of the wagon, where the hay and grain mix

was stored. She grabbed two of them, one for each horse and quickly approached them. Instantly they reared up in terror, their ears laying back. One struck out at her, just missing her head. She dropped the feed and retreated back a few paces to find her father at her side, shielding her with himself and calming the horses with soothing words. As her mother rushed to her side, Shaela gave her mother an innocent look.

“I don't know what has gotten into the horses, but come and help me. Let your father tend them. I don't need my girl killed on her own birthday.” Shaela followed her mother to the wagon, where she watched her open one of the traveling chests. Pulling out a fresh set of clothing, she handed them to Shaela.

“Here, put these on the drivers seat, and then get yourself something to wear for today. It's cloudy, so why don't you wear the red dress your father bought you last year?” Shaela took the clothes, and jogged up to the front of the wagon, wondering if this was a actually a dream, real, or a mix of both. Whatever the case, if this was a dream, she never wanted to wake up again.

Setting father's clothes down, she began to make her way back, but stopped to watch him tend to the horses. She was always fascinated by horses, and had always wanted one of her own.

He had already gotten the horses calmed down. She watched them eating the food she had dropped. Catching her spying on him, he waved her over. With a huge grin, that she covered with both hands, she approached. As she neared, her father grabbed a plate and loaded it with an overabundance of breakfast.

“Hey beautiful, will you take this to your mother and then come back for yours?” He gave her the plate, then gave her a high-spirited wink.

After they had satisfied their hunger, Shaela went to the back of the wagon and climbed in, spotting a smaller chest to the side of the three larger ones. Settling down in front of it, she ran her hands across its outside surface, reminiscing the day she had gotten it. Her hands trembled as she caressed its fine craftsmanship. Was this real? Closing her eyes, she bowed her head and steadied her breathing, fear beginning to increase her anxiety. She felt the top of the chest

and then slowly rested her hands upon the two latches in the front. Nervously she guided each inward, causing the locking mechanisms to release.

She remembered the dress she had chosen on that day, and thought if she chose another one, maybe things would turn out differently. Lifting the lid, she opened her eyes to see all her most prized personal affects, along with the long black satin dress she had gotten for a gift just before leaving home.

She thought about wearing something else. Maybe, just maybe, things really would take a turn for the better if she chose a different outfit. Biting her lip, she looked at it, picturing it tattered and in ruin from the time she spent wearing it in the jungle.

Oh, to wear it, just once more before this dream faded away would make her happy. Yes, she would wear it again. If this day ended like it had before, she would change the outcome. This beautiful black satin dress had nothing to do with history.

She pulled it out and set it aside, spotting her old hand mirror, causing her to freeze for a moment in contemplation before slowly, reluctantly, reaching for it. As she took it up, she found that her hand was shaking. Apprehensively, she turned the mirror so she could see herself. Within the mirror's reflection, she searched for the scar on her left cheek . . . and found it. Frowning, she raised her upper lip and tilted her head back to behold hollow fangs; fangs for piercing and tearing.

As she looked at her image, sadness weighed heavily upon her heart. She barely recognized the girl staring back at her.

Once upon a time a girl used this mirror who was young and free of the dark cares of the world. Now, a beautiful vampire stared back at her in sadness, her expression no more than a shell of what she once was. Tears began to fall steadily down the face of the vampire in the mirror's reflection as she sat her back against the side of the wagon, watching her as she wept for the loss of what once was. After a while, she reached over and let the mirror fall back into the trunk. She did not wish to see it again as long as she existed.

Slowly, she undressed, put on new underclothes, then slipped the black satin dress over her head, letting it fall, thinking the color fit for this occasion. After pulling it down, and securing it, she wiped her face and slowly climbed out of the wagon as her mother came around the back and stopped, suddenly admiring her daughter.

“Oh, Shaela, that dress is so beautiful on you. You are so gorgeous my dear.” Shaela looked into her mother's eyes and nearly began to weep.

“Thank you mother,” she stated, feigning a flattered tone. Her mother hugged her, then waved her off as she climbed into the back of the wagon to ready herself for the day.

“It won't be long,” she stated in a flat tone, trying to sound positive. Another hour and they were rolling along towards the jungle border. Feeling more than haunted, Shaela watched the edge of the jungle as it slowly came into view.

“They have no idea what they are walking into,” she whispered, a hopelessness creeping into her mind. Shaela looked up, watching the bows of the first line of trees pass overhead as they crossed into the border of the Ever`Shade Jungle's border.

Within the jungle, they moved along the permanently shaded dirt road. She looked up at her father, who, noticing her attention on him, wrapped a strong arm about her, pulling her close.

“Don't be nervous Shaela, we are only passing through the western most edge of this big jungle. In a few short hours we'll be right back out into the sun.” Shaela laid her head against him, distracted by every small noise in the area.

What was happening? Why was she here? This was indeed what she had asked for, but was it possible to be thrown back in time to this moment? Her thoughts turned dark as the wheels of the wagon ground along noisily on the path below them.

She kept a vigilant eye out, watching for movement, never blinking. As the minutes rolled into an hour, she sat up, peering ahead and from side to side for what she knew was about to happen. Her hands clenched, causing her

knuckles to turn white. She felt a change in the air as the wagon thundered on. Why couldn't the wheels be silent!

“Shaela, honey, are you alright?” Her mother’s question startled her, causing her to jump. She threw a sharp look at her mother and hissed.

“Shhh!” Her father stopped the wagon and turned to her.

“My dear, do not address your mother like that. We know you are afraid, but -” Shaela tuned his voice out and slowly stood looking around, eyeing the mood of the horses, which seemed normal. Her father gave her mother a look, shaking his head, suddenly concerned.

Snapping the reins, he set the horses into a walk once again, forcing Shaela to steady herself as she continued to scan the area as they rolled on, focused on what she knew was about to happen . . . again.

After another three hours of travel, Shaela began to think they might get through the jungle this time without mishap, but kept an unwavering watch nonetheless. Her focus was mainly upon the horses, observing them without letting herself become distracted, remembering the first signs of the terror that followed their odd behavior.

It was only a few moments later when the horses began to get nervous, stopping dead in their tracks and laying their ears back as they pranced in place. This was exactly how it began four years ago. Her father made a clicking sound and snapped the reins, but they stomped in protest, refusing to move forward. At once, both reared up halfway and threw their heads back, snorting in fear, as Shaela's eyes shaded to black.

She saw them this time, before they reached the road; three ogres, emerging from the jungle, lumbering straight for the wagon. One of them changed direction and approached the horses, raising a large club. She heard her mother scream as her father frantically whipped the reins, suddenly desperate to break them into a run.

Like a cornered animal, Shaela growled at the Ogre closing in on the team of horses and abruptly leapt over them, landing between them and the monster,

snarling at it in such a fury as to draw the attention of all three. Changing direction, the three Ogres now bore down on her.

“This time,” she called out loudly, “this time it will end different!” Through clenched teeth, she sucked in a breath and screamed in hatred at the ones who had killed her life. Backing one step she threw a hand out, fingers spread wide.

“Agrin Mortala!” She shouted as tears of fury and hatred fell freely from her eyes. Abruptly, the earth about the ogres exploded, sending soil and rock flying everywhere as a mass of roots sprang from the ground in a circle about her enemies, instantly weaving and snaking together to form a dome-like cage. In an instant, all three Ogres were caged.

The Ogres bellowed out in fear and rage as they beat in vain upon their sudden prison. Spinning a quick circle, Shaela looked for more of them, but found none. These were all of them.

For an instant, as she spun about, scanning the area for more danger, she caught the stunned looks of her mother and father. There was no time to explain, and so turned her attention upon her imprisoned foes, facing her parents would-be-murderers, snarling like . . . like a . . . like a monster.

Shocked at the sound of her own voice, Shaela realized her father and mother could hear her. Regretfully, she realized they were not only terrified of the Ogres, but of her. Yet, she could not, would not, stop now. She could save them both!

Slowly, Shaela walked up to her prisoners as they stood back to back within their confinement, bewildered, angry and afraid, painfully aware of the two, whom she loved and respected most, watching.

Wrapping her fingers about the roots of their cage, she grit her teeth, then hesitated. Not wanting her parents to see what she could do, her purpose to end them here, now, diminished, then faltered altogether. What she had become, she needed to hide. They had seen too much already. She had made a mistake in the way she reacted, but there was no going back now.

Frustrated, she stepped back, waved her hand, dismissing the roots,

choosing not to destroy them. As the roots snaked their way back into the ground, Shaela narrowed her eyes dangerously at them, baring her teeth, and hissed like some unnatural predator, sending into their minds the thought of death. Without hesitation, all three of her foes retreated back into the jungle in haste, vanishing.

After she knew it was safe, she turned, realizing she had some explaining to do. As her eyes fell upon the mother she loved, and a father she adored, she beheld their bewildered expressions, instantly lamenting the impulsiveness of her actions. Even the horses gazed at her in silent fear, their ears laid back, cowering back against the wagon.

It broke her heart to realize she was now being seen as a stranger, not a daughter. The thought cut her inside like a knife, physically paining her. She raised a trembling hand to her parents in desperation as she began to sob like a lost child.

“I need to explain. We need to talk. Please.” Her father slowly nodded, looking over at the torn earth, as her mother glanced at her husband, then slowly back at her.

Shaela walked around the horses and over to the side of the wagon. Silently, she climbed up and sat between them once again, feeling very awkward and out of place. Once seated, she smoothed out her dress with trembling hands, wondering how - where to begin. Slowly, awkwardly, she carefully told them everything from the beginning, leaving out the vampiric curse, and Talon, who was a Vahkrin from the Underworld. After more than two hours, she ended her tale.

“How I got back here, I do not know,” she whispered through her tears. Her mother started crying suddenly as her father, in contrast, chuckled soberly.

“So, we should have died. Shaela, do you know how fantastic this story sounds? But, but the evidence is, you knew the attack was going to happen. How could you know such a thing if it never happened before?” Falling into silence, he stared at her in wonder. Shaela, wiped her tears away with both hands and looked up at him, not knowing what to say. Her father shrugged helplessly and grabbed

the reigns.

“Well, shall we continue?” Shaela laid her head against his arm and closed her eyes, suddenly exhausted, tears of regret steadily streaming her face.

“I didn't mean to scare you; I just wanted to save you and mom.” She looked over at her mother and threw her arms about her neck.

“Don't be angry with me, please.” Her mother, the most wonderful person in the world, looked at her, wiping the tears from her face with both hands.

“Oh, my darling, I could never be angry with you. I love you so very much. We are both so proud of you.” Shaela closed her eyes and squeezed her mother tight, never wishing to let go. Sobbing in relief and happiness, she tried to relax. They were alive, they were alive.

“Let's just go home, please? Let's go home.”

Shaela opened her eyes, finding herself embracing Talon, who was gently holding her in his arms. Looking around, she discovered she was yet within the Vermillion Forest. Slowly she pulled away and looked around, taking in a quivering breath as the memory of what had just occurred provoked fresh tears, that began to stream her face.

Looking at Talon, she shook her head despondently. Shaela's head began to clear as he stood motionless, as if waiting to see what she would do.

She felt different now, very different. She wasn't sure what had just happened, but it was an experience she would never forget, though she desired to. Her mind fell upon her parents, driving the pain of their loss deeper into her heart. She didn't understand the dream, but at least she was able to talk to them once more . . . and that made it all worth it.

The curse in all this, was that the terrible wound of losing them became fresh once again. Now, whether she liked it or not, she had to begin the grieving process all over.

Like some helpless child, Shaela broke down, sobbing uncontrollably. Closing in on Talon, the earth beneath her feet felt unsteadily, the last of her

mental confusion fading away. Shaking her head, she sighed and wiped her face, forcing her emotions under control.

“What just happened, Talon, was beyond anything I can describe. I don't know what to make of it. Now what?” She looked to him in earnest, yearning for him to make sense of it all.

“Now I teach you how to use the blade and staff you have. Looking to the staff, she sighed heavily, and took it up. With her free hand, Shaela gripped the hilt of her sword and gave Talon a look of resignation.

“I'm ready.”

6

For the next fortnight she trained with the katana, using a replica, crafted by Talon. For the next fortnight after that, she trained with a perfect replica of her staff.

After the four weeks had passed, Talon spoked with her one night as she drank a bowl of his freshly offered blood.

“Shaela, you are doing well. Tomorrow we will continue with the blade. Now that you know the mere basics of each weapon, it is time to begin a more serious training.” Shaela looked at Talon.

“I thought you were going to tell me I was finished,” she stated in all seriousness. Talon laughed, shaking his head as he secured the bandage about his wrist.

“Each of the two weapons alone would take you ten years to half master, and only if you were a quick learner. Shaela put down the bowl and wiped her mouth, feeling euphoric and rather hazy. She thought it odd, that, when she forced the blood from another, a feeling of power enveloped her. When it was offered freely, the precious liquid brought on a far superior sensation.

Standing, she walked over to Talon and sat beside him, laying her head against his arm. She sighed quietly, closing her eyes, exhausted from the endless workout of the day. Talon folded a wing about her and positioned himself to accommodate her for comfort. As she curled up in his arms, Shaela reached up and touched the side of his face, smiling as she closed her eyes.

“Talon, how much longer will you train me? The dreams, the interrogations, have ceased.” Talon brushed the hair from her face.

“When you need to go back, I will take you.” She reached up, taking hold of one of his horns and pulled his head down to her. For a moment she looked at him, studying every feature of his face. Squinting her eyes at him, she pulled him close and kissed him. What she did surprised him, but he did not pull away. As they parted, she mouthed the words, “Thank you”. Resting her head upon his arm, her eyes slowly closed. As she fell into slumber, she heard him whisper, “You are

welcome, Outworlder”.

She slept in a dreamless state, as she usually did now, not bothered by the other Vahkrin. The interrogations had stopped after she had wounded one of them. At first she was excited; maybe they had backed off. Talon seemed disturbed when she told him they weren't bothering her anymore, but to her this was a relief. She did notice, however, he kept a more constant watch over her. In fact, Talon seemed obsessed that she be in his line of sight at all times, which she did not mind.

The training became difficult, but not overly painful or brutal, as Talon had warned. As she slipped into a dreamless state, her last thoughts were of their kiss. She should never have done it. She had been under the effects of fresh blood, which always clouded her judgement. It had been a mistake, but it was done, and that was that.

Commencement of sword training lasted quite some time, though, as Talon informed her, she was a quick learner. Staff training was equal in length, and as simple as the blade. All he had to do was show her once, and she never forgot, though she needed to refine each technique with repetition and focus. In this, Talon was astounded. One morning, as Talon instructed her, he stopped practice.

“Shaela, you are gifted with the spirit of war. Whether you like to believe it or not, there is more to you than meets the eye.” Wiping sweat from her face, she kept a steady bead on his stomach, watching his breathing.

“You keep say that, but you never tell me what it is.” Talon lunged in with a perfect bludgeon to her mid-section. Just prior to his movement, she witnessed his breathing change, and his balance shift. Stepping off the line of his attack, she used her staff as a secondary shield, ending up safely at his back-side. Running a forefinger down his back, she whispered, “Your dead.” As he turned to her, he lowered his staff, well pleased at her learning.

“You have learned far more than any I have ever instructed in so short a time. In the past six months, you have learned as much as one who has trained for ten years . . . and not just with the blade.” Shaela was pleased at his

acknowledgments. It felt good to know she was doing so well.

“Shaela, if you would allow me, I would like to add another aspect to your training. I perceive something in you which has been granted by your experience within the blackness of The Dark.” It was as if a lantern suddenly lit in her mind as he spoke. She knew then what it was that was aiding and molding her in the prowess of combat.

“Talon, please, teach me more.” As if he thought her request humorous, Talon chuckled, then put down his practice weapon, motioning her to do the same, which she did.

“We are done with the main focus weapons, for now.” From this moment on, Talon began to instruct her in the arts of weaponless body combat. Shaela enjoyed the lessons immensely, pushing herself to the limit with every lesson.

As with her training in the Resting Grounds with Mother, the many days turned into months, which rolled on as if in a dream. She lost track of time in this world where the slight dimming of the sky was the only indication of night.

Talon became as lost in time as she, also craving the training that increased her abilities beyond what she should normally be able to learn.

Time steadily rolled on, seeming, to her, only a few short months.

Seven years passed in a haze of controlled, restrained, combat sessions. They must have been hidden deep within a secluded area, for they were never discovered by their enemies.

As each year passed, Talon became less and less protective of her. At times she would wander the woods alone, some times for days, enjoying the solitude.

One morning, after a full night of intense combat training, she found her feet taking her slowly through the twisted and half-uprooted auburn woods. As she drifted along, she found herself thinking aloud.

“Well, Shaela, you did ask for what you are getting. You were granted the art of dealing out death.” She stopped suddenly, as if surprised. “Of course! When I was asked my desire, I pictured in my mind the legend and horror of the

dreaded Reaper.” At once, it all became clear. Sitting down on a large root, the impact of her granted desire began to weigh heavy upon her. Pondering the last few years, she recoiled inwardly, yet, in the same moment smiled within. A darkness touched upon her then, and she waltz with that darkness within her. The feeling was not unlike what she experienced when in the presence of The Great Willow. Smiling with satisfaction, she perceived the consequence of her choice while within The Dark.

“There is no way I cold have learned all this so quickly . . . no way.” The thought not only frightened her, but tempted and seduced her innermost desire.

“Even so, I must remain me. No one - nothing - controls me.” Thinking back, she recalled the Ever`Shade Jungle, and a certain love within. As if forcing herself free of a spell, Shaela shook her head.

“It's been a long time since I arrived here in this forest; I need to get back . . . so many things to do,” she stated as she pictured Hiska, old and bent as she arrived back in the jungle too late. Such an image, dreadfully dancing in her mind, began to panic her.

Leaping to her feet, Shaela began to sprint back, then abruptly stopped dead in her tracks.

“I have not mastered my Bloodlust - my curse. What about that? I cannot go back; I would destroy him and others.” Slowly turning in circles, she watched the trees revolve about her as the hope of returning home dimmed and faded, like a spark in the stillness of morning. Desperately Shaela sought for a solution, yet in vain. As if struck by a hammer, she realized she could not return, not yet, most likely . . . never. Anger welled up within her as she thought about that wagon ride she took with her father and mother so long ago.

“Why did we ever go on that stupid trip!” She screamed, tears instantly flooding her eyes. Looking at the canopy above, she grit her teeth and screamed viciously, mourning, her eyes instantly shading to black.

Unwise and careless, Shaela broke the first rule of the Vermillion Forest . . . silence. In answer to her unearthly screams, came a growl from behind. Without

hesitation, she ripped her katana from its sheath. Spinning, she raised her blade, bearing her teeth.

“Well come on,” she called out, “let’s do this. Come on!” Her challenge was met without hesitation as a six legged reptilian clambered over and through the roots, it’s attention bent on taking her down. She noticed its length was at least five times her height.

“Good, a challenge!” Without hesitation, Shaela met the creature head on. Whatever it was, she had not learned of this breed yet, and so assumed it was venomous. Better to be safe than sorry.

As the two came together, it raised up on its back four legs and hissed. Without hesitation, she dropped her blade and launched up into the soft area, just under its jaw, clamping her fangs into the softer area.

In the end, the shriveled husk of the lizard wavered, then fell to the side, its life quickly ebbing. Walking over, she picked up her blade and turned.

“You are one of the lucky ones.” Returning, she raised her blade and quickly beheaded it. In a state of euphoria, Shaela stared at the body, a sudden regret filling her. Pointing at the corpse, she openly accused it.

“I never wanted this! I never wanted any of this! While you are allowed to depart, here I must stay.” Raising her blade, she stared at it, seeing a distorted image of her own reflection as she silently wept. For the longest while, Shaela stared at it, a deathly calm beginning to take hold of her.

After quite some time, she let loose a quivering breath, and slowly turned the blade’s point to her chest, just over the heart. She hesitated for a short moment, then began to fall foreword, bent on impaling herself. It was just as she began to descend, when a calm voice spoke from behind.

“Might I suggest a different course of action?” Startled, Shaela spun about in shock, catching her balance as she looked into the trees here and there to see who had spoken.

“Show yourself. I can't see you,” she whispered, sheathing her blade. There was no reason to defend herself, as it simply no longer mattered. Again, that

same, smooth voice floated through the area.

“I heard your cry, Maiden of Death.” Shaela scoffed quietly.

“Maiden of death. I have no purpose, no direction in this “gift” bestowed upon me. All I perceive is I can destroy, kill, ruin. What is the purpose in that?” The voiced softened to a loving tone.

“That is the reason I have come to you, Shaela. If you were satisfied with being a monster, I would not have made myself known to you.” Intrigued by his choice of words, Shaela looked about the area trying to discover the origin of the voice. She felt no presence, no heartbeat, nothing.

“Please, I would know with whom I speak,” she whispered.

“That is more like it. I respond to respect. Therefore, I shall fulfill your desire, Maiden of Death.

A man, tall and stern, walked from the forest directly before her. It was odd that he also wore a black trench coat as she. She noticed a blade at his side, a katana, as was her blade. She was taken back by his features, lean and strong. Especially, she was taken by his eyes, so dark and penetrating, contrasted by his pale skin. He bowed formally, to which she bowed in return.

“Who are you, sir?” She whispered, fighting a sudden desire to embrace him, she knew not why. He smiled, strode forward and boldly took her hand in his.

“I will show you.” Suddenly she was standing with him on that familiar diamond pedestal, causing her heart to nearly fail.

A sudden demand echoed through the chamber.

“Who are you! Speak!” Pulling Shaela close, he stepped into the darkness around them as fear flooded her senses. She felt doomed as they stepped forth, beyond the obscuring black veil, to reveal many standing about them with shocked expressions twisting their faces. Some were Vuolg, others were races she did not know. They all drew weapons and faced the two. One Vuolg, with a scar on his face pointed accusingly at Shaela.

“Take her!” Shaela panicked, her whole body becoming cold as a dozen

advanced upon them. The stranger she was with raised a quick hand and shouted.

“I am Bane, Master of the dead! Put up your weapons and cease your harmful designs upon this woman!” All present stopped dead in their tracks, half of them instantly dropping one knee, lowering their heads in utter submission.

The tone of this man’s voice penetrated her soul so deeply, she felt inclined to drop to her knees in submission as so many others did. She refused, eyeing the Vuolg she had viciously bitten. This same Vuolg stepped forth, bending to one knee.

“Milord, I, I did not recognize you. Forgive me.” Bane glared at the others until all were subdued under his gaze. He then turned to Shaela.

“This woman, who now serves me personally, has never had a design upon any of you, or your kingdom. She has been caught up in a destiny not of her choosing. I know some of you . . . you serve my design. Know that I do not lie . . . it is forbidden to deceive my own followers. You know I speak the truth.” A handful of various race types, including the Vuolg she had wounded, instantly nodded, acknowledging his statement. Bane looked down at her and smiled.

“I am sure they will no longer pursue you.” As he spoke, a thick-boned, winged creature, the same race as Sillik, whom Talon had defeated, lumbered foreword, challenging Bane openly.

“How do I know you are who you say you are? What proof do you have?” The Vuolg instantly backed away, joining the others in the chamber as Bane turned a smile to the massive Gnohim Vahkrin challenging him, a deadly gleam igniting like a black flame in his dark eyes. The Vuolg shook his head at the challenger and whispered sharply.

“Kurish, back down,” he almost pleaded. Kurish curled a lip, sneering at him and turned his full attention on Bane, who looked up at him.

“You need proof of who I am? And if I am who I say, what then would you do?” Kurish looked at Shaela and snarled.

“She has murdered some of us . . . she must pay for her actions. If you are who you say you are, prove it. All I see is a stranger, confederate with a filthy

Human outlaw!” The Gnomim screamed at Bane and reached out to take him. As Kurish reached for him, Bane made no motion to resist; only looked at his assailant, deathly calm. Before Kurish made contact with Bane, he stopped and simply fell to his knees screaming without sound, his face twisting in sudden horror. Kurish fell back and turned, frantically clawing his way to the exit of the chamber, as if his worst nightmare was upon him.

After Kurish departed, Bane glanced casually about the chamber at the stunned crowd.

“Kurish will recover in a few days. He is a weathered and honorable warrior, worthy to remain on the council.” A few of the Vahkrin nodded in stunned silence, even as a robed Vuolg female with a black staff entered into the chamber.

“What is the meaning of this!” The moment she set eyes on Bane, she swiftly approached and knelt, her flame of wrath vanishing instantly, replaced with revered devotion.

“Milord, forgive my intrusion.” Bane smiled fondly down at her and stooped, placing a hand under her arm, gently raising her from the floor. Once she was upon her feet, he embraced her tenderly.

“Elestra, it is good to see you. How long has it been?” The beautiful Vuolg embraced Bane in return, dropping her staff, tears of joy filling her eyes as she whispered, “Too long, far too long. I was hoping I would see you again before I passed out of this life.” Bane parted from her and placed a hand on the side of her face.

“I am sure we will see each other again before the day when I will escort your spirit to the halls of my kingdom.” She wiped her eyes and nodded, smiling. Bane glanced over at Shaela.

“Elestra, this is Shaela. I will be leaving her here with you for some much needed training. It is my hope, you will prepare her for when I return. Elestra looked at Shaela.

“I would be honored to serve.” Shaela was suddenly terrified. She needed

to get back to Talon for more training. As if reading her thoughts, Bane turned his attention fully upon Shaela.

“Elestra will continue your training now. Elestra, would you allow a friend of Shaela to stay with you during the time she trains?” Without hesitation came her reply.

“Of course milord. They can stay with me.” Pleased, Bane turned and drew near to Shaela's new master, whispering something she could not hear. Elestra nodded a few times and then looked at Shaela, her eyes widening, almost in disbelief. When Bane pulled away he kissed her on the cheek. Then, with a warm smile Shaela's way, Bane simply vanished, leaving all within the chamber in wide-eyed wonder.

Shaela suddenly realized she was alone with those who sought her life not an hour before. She also noticed all their eyes were fixed upon her.

Shaela walked beside Elestra as she always did when they were without the walls of the castle. For the past seven years she had personally taught Shaela in the darker arts of necromancy, which had, at first, revolted and disturbed her greatly. After the first year, Shaela somehow accepted such blackened magic, and had actually learned a few spells of her own . . . of course always under the direction of Elestra, who was severely strict.

As they walked, she ignored the many native Vahkrin staring at her, some with obvious murder in their eyes . . . as it usually was. Yet, Bane had made a decree. Whoever he truly was, Shaela could not help but see the respect, even fear, he shed into them.

She glanced at Elestra, who looked over at her and winked subtly, causing Shaela to beam a smile.

“Control your emotions, Shaela. Never let others read your intentions by what they see in your body language.” Elestra's voice was smooth and serene . . . soothing to the ear.

The Vuolg were behaving themselves, now that the Jahtha of the Dead had given a strict decree that she come and go as one of them, and not to harm her.

Also, through Bane, Shaela had extended Talon an invitation to come to the Vuolg's stronghold to keep her company as the High Sorceress tutored her. To her deep regret, he had graciously refused. She remembered his words to her in private upon parting. 'You have done well in your training Shaela. I will not go to the citadel of the Vuolg. My place is out here, free, in the wilds. She recalled her heart breaking as she embraced him at their parting.

'Will I ever see you again?' She whispered through her tears. Talon winked and smiled at her, smoothing her beautiful, ink-black hair back. She loved it when he did that.

“My blood runs through your veins . . . we are forever connected, you and I. Even though we two be separated by the vast distance of our two worlds, you can

always call on me . . . do you understand that?' She sniffed and looked at their feet.

“I think I do.” She embraced Talon as Bane patiently waited down by the border of the forest.

“Now go, and I will always dream of you, Shaela of the Outworld. Go.” She walked away from Talon and towards Bane, who looked upon her with open approval.

Coming out of the memory, Shaela's smile faded as she glanced at a mentor who had taught her for the past seven years. In those years, Shaela had grown more than fond of her. As she kept pace with her, Shaela gave her a curious look.

“Elestra, where are we going?” Elestra whispered softly as they approached the southern most part of the city, where they came to a stop before the southern gate. Turning on Shaela, she took in a deep breath, then exhaled slowly.

“Shaela, our time is gone, my promise to Bane fulfilled. I am taking you out of the city as instructed by him who is Master of Death. Once outside, I will leave you, and the gates will be closed, shutting you out.” Her mentor's words instantly sent a chill of panic through her.

“No, no, I don't want to leave. Why can't I stay here?” Elestra sighed and took Shaela's hands in hers, squeezing them tightly.

“Shaela, as much as I have grown fond of you, you cannot stay here. You know you do not belong in this place. You knew the time would come when we would have to say goodbye.” Shaela suddenly wept and embraced her Vuolg master.

“Not yet, not yet,” she begged. Elestra stroked Shaela's hair and whispered in her ear.

“You and I will always be good friends. Do not jeopardize that with disobedience. If you find your own way back here, after you leave, you will always be welcome in my home. Here, this is for you; I made it myself.” She loosed herself from Shaela, reached about her own neck and unclasped a chain, set

with the carved flat three-quarter circle of bone, giving it the appearance of a crescent moon.

Shaela watched through her tears and panic as Elestra held it up so she could see that the bone medallion was carved with many runes upon its surface. Walking behind Shaela, she reached over her head, laying the amulet upon her chest, then fastened the chain. As she adjusted the chain, Elestra whispered.

“This is the symbol of my house. When you come to visit me, show this to any Vuolg you encounter, and they should let you pass uncontested.” She gracefully walked back around Shaela and stopped, looking deep into her bloodshot eyes.

“You must do this, or you will pass up critical opportunities to grow in the future. Let the hand of fate guide you now, so in the future, when you learn more of yourself, you will have no regrets. Bane knows what is best for you at this time. Just know if it was my decision, I would have you stay. You are the only Human I have ever met, in who's company I find pleasure.” Shaela burst into fresh tears, feeling as though she was being abandoned.

“Why is it always like this? Why is it always goodbye? Must I lose everything and everyone I love again and again?” Tears welled up in Elestra's eyes in response to Shaela's desperation. It looked as though her resolve was weakening, yet she held to her decision by her silence.

In parting, as they both shed tears of sorrow, Elestra took Shaela by the hand and continued walking until they came within arms length of the great gate. Stopping before the grand gates, Shaela noticed the Wardenoth patrols all about. She hated them. Elestra must have noticed the death-glance she gave the Wardenoth, for she narrowed her eyes and smiled slightly.

“Open the gate!” Elestra commanded. Instantly six Wardenoth worked the mechanisms in silence. The right side of the gate boomed as it separated from the wall's structure and ground smoothly open until there was just room enough for Shaela to pass through. Elestra signaled a stop and turned to Shaela.

“Goodbye Shaela, may your path remain under your feet. You have an

incredible gift no Human in all my recollection has aspired to. Use it to your advantage.” Her words confused her, but she dared not inquire the specific meaning of them. Talon had told her some things, similar things - cursed riddles - never embellished upon. They knew something about her, and it burned her mind, like fire, at their silence on the subject.

One last time, Shaela embraced Elestra, feeling utterly abandoned and lost, like a child who has been separated from her mother while in a busy market place.

“I’m scared Elestra,” she softly wept as she tightened her embrace about her master. Elestra enveloped her in a strong embrace, nodding.

“I have been scared before, Shaela. Meet your fears head on, and never give in to them. Go, your destiny awaits you. We may meet again.” Shaela let go of her master slowly and wiped her eyes. Before reluctantly turning away, she whispered aloud the feelings of her heart to her best friend.

“I love you.” Elestra’s eyes widened, as if suddenly shocked. But then the stunned look on her face melted away as her lips parted in a sentimental smile.

“I love you too,” she whispered in return, tears suddenly streaking her cheeks. Shaela glanced out the gate nervously, took a breath she slipped out into the Vermillion Forest. Instantly the gate began to grind upon its foundation, and then shut, echoing for a moment along the wall behind her, leaving her facing the wilds of a dreaded land. Facing the half-uprooted thickness of trees, she mildly scoffed.

“When I was first lost, you would have devoured me, bones and all. Now? Try,” she challenged. The challenge was not met, leaving her satisfied that the Vermillion Forest knew its place. Since coming to the Underworld, she had grown in power considerably. Walking to the nearest tree, she set a gentle hand upon one of the twisted roots.

“What now?” She thought aloud.

“Now you go home.” As if expecting him, Shaela turned to face Bane, suddenly grinning from ear to ear as he graced her with a formal bow, his dark eyes smiling upon her. He neared, holding out a hand, which she gladly accepted.

“Shaela, you have indeed exceeded my expectations. It has taken you a mere seven years to advance twenty in the art of necromancy; a feat in which very few achieve. The gift you sought has been mantled upon you.” Shaela squeezed his hand tight, holding on in fear he might slip away. As if she feared he might suddenly vanish, she embraced Bane tight.

“Please don’t leave me. In all this, there must be purpose, yet I am blind to it. Just, please, I beg you, don’t go away.” Wrapping his in his arms, Bane sighed.

“Shaela, there is within you much potential. Rarely do I witness the rise of darkness in a soul such as yours.” Shaela was troubled at his choice of words.

“Bane, I am not evil . . . I never will be. I can't.” He chuckled shortly at her and squeezed her tight.

“I said darkness, not evil.”

“My curse . . . will I not fall weak to it, thus destroying those whom I love? Bane, I can enforce much within the realm I left years ago. If I cannot control myself, I will cause many to shut and bar themselves into their homes in fear.” He nodded.

“Yes, you no doubt could.” With that he smiled, showing her that, he too, was like her, a vampire. Her eyes widened as she perceived that Bane understood her fully.

“Shaela, I give you the power of Blood Mastery. You have proven more than worthy of it.” He pulled her close to him, taking her head in his hands. Looking down into her eyes, Bane grit his teeth.

“Don't ever fear me Shaela . . . trust me.” She nodded helplessly as her vision blurred and balance wavered. Gently he bent down, tilting her head to the side as she willingly cleared her hair back from her shoulders. She knew what he was doing and longed for it with all her soul.

“I trust you,” she whispered as he gently pierced the soft area of her neck, sinking his fangs into her flesh. It was painful, but the feeling of his attention upon her outweighed the pain he was inflicting. After withdrawing his bite, she reached up and touched her neck. As he steadied her, she looked at her hand. To

her astonishment there was no wound, no blood.

In a single moment, she felt herself enlightened, as if a shadow had passed away from her mind. To her relief, the ever constant hunger to feed vanished. Bane brushed her neck with his fingers and smiled as he gripped the border of his cloak with one hand.

“I am sure you will be alright,” he whispered as he brought his cloak about her entire body, enveloping her within pitch darkness. Suddenly, she could no longer feel him. Rather, she found herself standing upon uneven ground.

The darkness about her slowly melted away to reveal the gates to the city where she had been raised.

Confused, shocked, bewildered, Shaela gazed at the gates to a city she used to live in. Taking a step back, she looked about the area, trying to spot Bane.

“Bane, Bane, this is not my home. Bane!” she whispered sharply, involuntarily raising a hand to her neck where Bane had bitten her. The only answer she received was the wind blowing through the area, caressing her hair. Gritting her teeth, Shaela growled.

“Bane!” Still, no answer came, frustrating her all the more. Why was she here? Why would he bring her - suddenly she froze, remembering the experience she had with her parents. Then, something occurred to her. Her family might be at the inn, alive.

Beginning to tremble in fear and excitement, she approached the outer gates, dreading to go in, compelled to continue. As she stopped at the entrance, she took hold of the large handle of a side entrance, taking in a deep breath. Just as she was about to pull it open, two men stopped her.

“Who goes there! What business do you have here!” Looking up, she set a hand against her brow, blocking out the rays of the moon.

“I grew up here. I need in, sir,” she stated, not being able to think of a better line on the spur of the moment. Truthfully, she did not know what to say, and suddenly felt as if she were a spy amidst enemies who might find her out. One of the guards left his post and soon opened the door, eyeing her with little expression. After a moment, he waved to the guards manning the wall above.

“Let the pretty lady pass,” he called up, then turned, motioning her in. “There are you are miss. Don't walk without the gates at night. There are predators.” Stepping aside, he motioned for her to enter. As she passed him, she felt his heart beating, instantly perceiving his attraction for her. He would make an easy target to feed on if she needed the sustenance. Shaking her head slightly, she countered the thought and smiled pleasantly at him, not parting her lips.

“Thank you sir,” she whispered.

“For you, anything,” he replied with a pleasant smile. She entered the city

of her birth and quickly realized it had not changed much. There were new structures, and a few avenues and alleys, but she knew her way about, as if she had never left.

Taking a deep breath, she followed the main street for a while, passing by the bakery she used to frequent as a youth.

Following the main street just a little further, she turned by the jail, crossing the walkway as two guards whispered amongst themselves in the doorway, instantly causing her heart to go cold, halting her dead in her tracks.

“Let's just take the mancat out of the city tonight and leave him. If he dies, it's not our fault. We need to get this over with.” The other guard shook his head.

“This isn't right. That mancat did nothing to warrant what we've done to him. He's innocent and you know it. If I was in authority, I would nurse him back to health and send him on his way.” Glaring at him, his partner quietly scoffed.

“Sympathizer. You border treachery with your mouth.” One of the guards held up a hand, spotting Shaela on the walkway listening.

“Can we be of assistance miss?” Shaela turned, feeling her heart grow ever colder. What if who they were speaking of was - she approached the guards, thinking quickly. Taking in a deep breath as she stopped before the two men, she suppressed her sudden impatience and anxiety.

“Mancat? How did you capture it?” The guards looked at each other and shrugged.

“Long story. It just walked up to the gate and requested entrance into the city. Of course, the guards allowed it in; easier to capture that way.” Shaela's anxiety began to rise. It suddenly occurred to her why Bane had brought her here. The Prima would not approach a Human civilization unless they attacked. She considered the facts, coming to the conclusion that this mancat they had jailed up inside was Harritt Catur. Controlling her emotions with some difficulty, she covered up her concern by laughing slyly.

“I'd pay you each a black-gold piece to see this creature. I just want to look at it.” The guards shrugged at each other and waved her inside the jail. As she

entered, she handed them each a coin, which they accepted eagerly, shutting the door behind. One guard stayed at the door, while the other lead Shaela into a wide hallway and turned the corner, stopping before a thick wooden door with a barred window.

Standing on her toes, she looked in through the bars. As she did, she could feel her heart beginning to increase in its rhythm. As she peered into the darkened cell, her eyes quickly adjusted from blind to that of the brightest a day could be without the sun appearing. Before her on the floor of the prison cell, was the undeniable form of Hiska, laying upon his back.

Lowering herself, she took a few deep breaths, trying desperately to calm her emotions as tears began to build in her eyes. The guard looked at her, concerned.

“Are you alright, miss? Is this too much for you?” She nodded, then shook her head, looking at the door in earnest.

“Did you do this to him?” The guard shook his head.

“No, I'm not allowed to go in there, and I'd never even harm a kitten for any reason, even as a guard. What they have done to this creature is cruel and unjust. I don't care what the differences of our two races are. Besides we started the conflict. All was going well between us until the new Governor squealed his way into office. Then, like flash-fire, our treaty went up in smoke,” he whispered, glancing down the hall. Shaela felt the easy rhythm of his heart; the sure sign he spoke the truth. Swallowing hard, she pulled out a handful of black-gold coins.

“I'll buy him from you. I want him as a slave.” The guard looked at the coins and blinked, his eyes widening at the small fortune she gripped.

“Woman, I would give the mancat to you for half that much, but I would be kicked out of the regiment, maybe even sent to the stockades.” Shaela walked away and looked out the front window of the jail in silence, taking note that night would soon be giving way to pre-dawn.

Bane had brought her here at the right time. From Hiska's apparent condition, it was imperative she get to him soon. Shaela was thankful she had

been taught the arts of healing as well as necromancy, but her study as a Healer was cut short and very limited. Sighing, Shaela turned to the guards; people she grew up with. She couldn't just kill them in cold blood, unless there was no other option.

“Sirs, I'm going to tell you something, and I need you to not only believe me, but take me serious.” The guards looked at her now with a sudden somberness in their countenance.

“That mancat in there is dying. I need him to not only live, but to be set free.” One of the guards drew his blade as the other looked at Shaela and then his partner, a worried expression etching into his face. The armed guard pointed at the door.

“We can't do that, and you need to leave.” The other guard held up a hand to both of them.

“Why, what is the mancat to you?”

“He is my fiancé. Sir, put away your blade. There is a greater reason why he must be released.” The guard scoffed, looking at her with a sudden cold gaze.

“What reason, cat lover?”

“That Harritt Catur you have captured is the first born son of the Mother Mystic of the nation of his species . . . you have managed to capture a prince. Do you not see the problem with letting him die? Do you wish to bring on sudden and abrupt war by your actions, or lack of actions? Sirs, if Hiska dies many on both sides will die.” Her words seemed to sink into their heads. Both looked suddenly unsure, hesitating. The guard without his blade drawn turned to the other.

“What are we doing here?” The other hesitated, looking at Shaela.

“What if she lies?” Shaela kept her hands in plain view, showing no aggressive behavior, knowing if she made a mistake here, events would take place which could be avoided.

“Sirs, Hiska wears Guardian Robes, can you not summon the Guardian Guild Master to verify what he is? Please, if he dies . . .” One of the guards cut her off.

“I know of no Guardians Guild here, but our Governor could fix this situation. He is our military leader also, and can make the decision.” She noticed the countenance of the guard she had offered the handful of gold to fall at the mention of the Governor. This was a bad turn of events, one that would probably turn against her.

“Please summon him, but I beg you to be quick about it.” One guard left quickly at a run, vanishing out of the jail house. After departing, Shaela stared at the other guard, impatient, as long moments of uncomfortable silence crept by. Finally, she could stand it no longer.

“Please, allow me to go and heal him. If he dies, terrible things will begin to happen.” The guard hesitated, thinking a moment, then nodded toward the hallway.

“Hurry,” he urged, and quickly walked down the hall, halting before the wooden door as he pulled out his keys. It was nearly impossible for her to remain patient as he found the right key, but she managed. If Hiska died, she would turn the dust thick with the blood of all but one guard, beginning with the Governor. No, she would not do such a thing. The guards were cooperating and doing their sworn duty. Just then, the front door of the jail burst open, and a voice boomed out loudly.

“What is the meaning of this!” The guard unlocking the cell door stood and turned as a well armored man came around the corner and approached them both. The guard stiffened up straight and quickly placed a fist to his chest, saluting his superior.

“Sir, we are tending to the wounds of the prisoner.” Cynically, the tall man looked Shaela up and down, frowning.

“Why?” The guard looked at Shaela.

“She claims to be the mancat's fiancé, and says the mancat is a prince of his species.” The guard's statement was met with sudden laughter as the Governor stepped up before Shaela menacingly, his laughter changing to an instant frown.

“What the guard says, is this true?” Shaela nodded, causing the man to

grimace in disgust as his eyes flooded with abrupt hatred.

“Those monsters have continually hindered the progress of this city. They are filthy and vile. Now, get out before I lock you up for good!” Shaela stood unmoving, watching him banter like a dog. After a moment, he shrugged, as if not caring, and drew his blade on her.

“You are under arrest, outcast traitor. As for the monster in the cell, open the door!” The nearest guard fumbled with his keys, glancing at the Governor anxiously, and opened the door to the cell. Realizing what was about to happen, Shaela reached within her trench coat, wrapping her fingers about the hilt of her katana.

“Sir, please don't do this,” she stated calmly, a deadly gleam darkening within her eyes. Ignoring her, the tall, muscular man walked into the cell, narrowing his eyes at Hiska, sneering as Shaela and the two guards watched on.

In a breath, Shaela unsheathed her blade and stepped into the cell as the Governor raised his blade to strike. Setting the tip of her blade to his neck, she growled hatefully. Behind her, she heard one of the two guards draw his long blade. The other backed quickly down the hallway. The pulsing of his heart informed her of his reluctance to be in this situation. He was scared.

“I did say please,” she whispered, a deathly focus and clam washing through her. Quick as a snake, the man turned, struck her blade away and attempted to drive his through her mid-section. Shaela side stepped his thrust and parried the attack of the guard behind her. Instantly, her eyes faded to deep, obsidian night.

“Negotiations are at an end!” She hissed. With widening eyes, the guard backed out of the cell as Shaela stepped over Hiska protectively.

“She’s a witch, get her!” Their superior commander growled as his guard continued to back out into the main area of the jail, vanishing from sight. Looking around, he spotted a bow and quiver hanging on a hook just within the guard's station. Snatching it up, he seized and shouldered the quiver, then pulled an arrow, knocking it. Leaping back into the hallway, he drew a bead. The problem was, his commanding officer, and fellow guard, were between he and his target.

Backed into the corner of the cell, Shaela defended against an onslaught of attacks. She could see the guard in the hall watching the fight as he kept a steady bead her way. At this point, she was merely defending, for she did not wish to kill anyone. As she moved between the mancat and the two trying to kill her, she could see he had a clean shot on her, but the arrow never flew.

When the mancat had come to them, it did not resist as the Governor came on a daily basis to beat him. The most disturbing truth was this mancat was a Guardian. He had heard stories of the honor of such men and women, who were selfless, unbiased, willing to sacrifice themselves for another.

As his commander stepped out of the way, bearing down on this woman, hacking at her in a terrible fit of rage, he made the choice not to take the shot. He was a protector of these people. If he shot her, he would be breaking an oath. Thus, he feigned difficulty in gaining a safe shot. He did not wish to hit his commander in chief.

Shaela thought his attacks crude and uncoordinated. As she backed away from the jail cell, she tried one last time to negotiate with this maniac, fearing Hiska would not survive another night here.

“I need the mancat. I'll pay you a fortune for him.” That must have gotten his attention, for he instantly broke off the attack and stepped back, breathing heavily.

“How much?” he panted. Shaela glanced at the other guard behind him, sensing doubt flowing through him. She sensed the other guard at the other end of the hallway, bow drawn and aimed at her. The man with the bow was unsure also, the fast paced rhythm of his heart, tinged with the unmistakable scent of reluctance, plainly manifested in her senses.

She desperately wanted to avoid killing anyone. If she did, there would be trouble. She also knew, she could not defend forever.

“I will give you a chest of black-gold . . . about one-thousand pieces.” The

man pointed at the sword she was holding.

“I want your blade and all your belongings as well. If the monster is so valuable to you, you would not think of refusing my demands. Do we have a deal?” Shaela's heart went cold at his words.

“You wish to disarm me and take the money,” she whispered, hate beginning to rise up within her.

“My sword?” He nodded.

“And that pretty staff on your back . . . everything you have.” The last demand shocked her. Narrowing her eyes like a predator, she hissed at him.

“Sounds to me like a hostage demand. I tried to reason with you, Human, but it is useless. You could have been wealthy.” Shaela stepped forward, releasing a passionate feeling upon the man, stripping him of his will to harm her. Within a breath's time, she knew he loved her.

“Command them to cease this fighting. Without hesitation, he sheathed his blade.

“Cease this fighting!” Confused and shocked, the guard within the cell reluctantly put up his sword.

Quickly kneeling by Hiska, she could feel his heart beating, but it was faint and weak. Taking a deep breath, she chanted a few words and laid a palm to the center of his chest. As she concentrated, an aura of blue luminescence surrounded him for a few moments, and then faded into his body.

It wasn't a powerful spell, but it was enough to heal his hurts and stabilize the rhythm of his heart. She regretted not learning more of the healing arts while with Elestra. If Hiska died now, it would be her fault. The thought crossed her mind to bite him; infect him as Cyphis had infected her. Of a truth, this would save him.

“No, no,” she whispered, kissing him tenderly, “not that, not yet.” Looking at his lips, so parched and cracked, she grit her teeth, refusing to give into emotion. Now was the time for action, not weakness.

“Please bring me water and towels.” Her plea sent the guard within the cell

running down the hall as she inspected Hiska from head to foot. He was swollen in many places, and it looked as though his left knee had been badly damaged.

“Why would they do this to you? Why?” Narrowing her dark eyes dangerously, she thought on the reason for doing this to him. Humans were no better than the Prima. Holding him tenderly, she waited for the towels and water. As she waited, she felt the sudden weakening of his heart.

“No, no, Hiska, stay with me . . . I need you,” she whispered, panicking as she looked to the Governor.

“Do you have a Healer in this city?” He nodded and smiled at her, yet confused by her care for the mancat.

“Go, bring a Healer here, now. Run!” The militia commander turned and fled with all speed out of the jail, shaking his head as if a bug had wormed its way into his ear, a strong indication that the charm was wearing off. He was stronger than she had given him credit for. It would have been wise to reinstate a fresh charm upon him, but, since he was gone, it was too late. She knew there was about to be no little trouble. It did not matter. Hiska had to live at any cost. Shaela looked up at the two guards watching her.

“You each have honor. I suggest you leave the area. Thank you both for doing what you could.” One of the guards knelt by her, placing a bowl of clean water on the floor, handing her a few towels and keeping one for himself. The other retreated back down the hallway and vanished from sight.

“Let's get him cleaned up.” Taking the towel from him, Shaela shook her head.

“I am sure you need to leave. When the Healer arrives, the charm I set on your superior commander may well be worn off. If so, there will be trouble.” He quickly snatched the towel back and submersed it in the bowl of water, then wrung it out.

“If I call myself a protector of this people, and leave you now, then I will be abandoning my post. I did not shoot you because you spoke the truth. Milady, your actions deafened my senses with honor. I'm staying to help.” Looking at

him, Shaela watched him gently clean Hiska's wounds. The man had not even reacted to what she had done; he saw what she did to his commander. He simply remained true to his duty. Taking another towel, she dipped it in the water and moistened Hiska's mouth.

“You know, I may be hung for this.” He looked up at her with a sudden expression of sadness in his eyes. “I don't want to die.” His words shocked her as the memory of those same words spoken, echoed in her mind. Grabbing Shaela's arm, he looked deep into her eyes. “But, even if chaos and treachery combine against the good, to the end, I will be true to my duty.” Shaela suddenly harbored a profound respect for this man's devotion.

Together, they cleaned Hiska's wounds. She tried to heal him again, but it was of little effect. Glancing down the hall, Shaela sighed heavily.

“What is your name?”

“Bryant.” He somberly stated.

“Bryant, they are probably gathered outside, waiting. I wish I could have taken him before all this happened.” Bryant grimaced in regret.

“I am so sorry. Forgive me.” Shaela stood.

“You were doing your duty, nothing less.” Shaking his head as he stood, he smiled at her.

“Maybe I can go talk to them.”

“No, negotiations have ended Bryant. When the fighting begins, keep your bow in hand as a sign that it is you. Do you understand me?” He forced a chuckle.

“No, but I will.” Shaela ran to the corner of the hall and peered around it carefully. She was not surprised to see many guards and robed figures out the front window. Sighing heavily, she closed her eyes and raised her hands. Instantly she could feel a variety of organic life all about the area; enough for what she needed to do. With reluctance, she whispered the word of a spell that would launch an attack on the very city in which she was raised.

“Gargantuan,” she whispered, a profound regret ensuing at the scene which

followed. The sudden screams of the dying cut into her heart as her spell scattered and crushed her enemies. In horror, Bryant remained speechless as he watched on in horror and disbelief. Coming to his senses, he snatched up his bow, holding onto it with a firm hand.

As the battle raged, the Gargantuan spell-servant drew the militia's attention from the jail. Taking the opportunity, Bryant slung his bow over his back and quickly ran to Hiska, lifting him up with Shaela's aid. Quickly they departed, heading for the now unmanned front gate, which they passed through uncontested as the battle raged on behind. As they left the city, Shaela looked back to see many reinforcements rushing to the fray.

As they carried Hiska through the gate, she looked behind and spotted the Governor barking out orders to his troops. Narrowing her eyes in hatred, she focused upon him, willing her spell to attack. Not wanting to see the outcome, she turned toward the wilds as a loud tremor shook the ground. The Governor was ended.

“We need to get out of sight,” she said, throwing Hiska a worried look. Without answering, he helped carry her fiancé into some hedges, beyond which spanned a small twisting dry creek bed. It wasn't near the main road, yet not far enough.

Shaela thought about the bounty which would most likely be on her head now, and inwardly scoffed. As they traversed the sandy creek bed, she and the guard carefully moved Hiska away from the city.

“You know, I grew up in this city. Now I find myself leaving it, most likely never to return.” Bryant was surprised and stopped a moment to reposition himself under Hiska's arm.

“You grew up here?” She nodded.

“Bryant, I am so sorry for all the trouble this is, no doubt, going to cause you.” Taking on most of Hiska's weight, Bryant shrugged, as if he could care less.

“I would have done the same thing you just did. What is your name?”

“Shaela.” Bryant stopped and looked at her.

“Shaela, Shaela . . . hey, didn't you used to come into my parents bakery and buy bread from us?” She nodded, and suddenly smiled brightly at him, exposing her fangs unknowingly. Ignoring her teeth, the guard pointed at her.

“I remember you now. You used to come get the order for the inn. Most of the time, you got it yourself, so you knew it would be perfect.” He laughed and continued bearing Hiska out into the wilds, stumbling once. Regaining his balance, Bryant began to reminisce

“I wondered what happened to you and your family. I thought you moved away in the night. Shaela, you have fangs,” he stated, killing her smile.

“Bryant, we never moved away. We were attacked by Ogres in the jungle. My parents were killed. I escaped, only to find myself a captive prisoner of this Harritt Catur we are helping. The rest of the story is very long, and took me through some dark times - but not all were dark.” Bryant stopped again and reached over and gently squeezed her arm.

“Like now?” Shaela nodded.

“It seems to never end.” He threw her a sympathetic look.

“I will always remember you and your family. Shaela, if you ever need a place to stay, or hide, come to the bakery. I will always love you.” Startled, she looked at him in surprise. Maybe she misunderstood.

“What?” Bryant cleared his throat nervously and restated.

“I meant I will always help you . . . that's what I meant to say . . . help you.” His face flushed crimson as he looked away and continued down the creek bed. She glanced at him, recalling how Bryant used to have the inn's order ready, always putting in an extra sweet cake just for her.

“Bryant, I'm flattered, and thank you for the offer.” He nodded, not looking at her, and pointed ahead.

“There is a bend up ahead, just under that crop of trees. We should find suitable shade for Hiska. The sun can't be doing him any good, nor you.” Shaela understood what he meant and nodded.

“For Hiska, yes, but I'm okay.” They reached the area Bryant had selected

and stopped, resting Hiska against the bank of cool earth in the shade. In earnest, she looked at Bryant, gripping his hand in hers.

“You should slip back into the city unnoticed. Stepping back, he took a long look at her, then bowed formally, a pained look crossing his face.

“This day will haunt me for as long as I live.” With that, he turned and bolted back toward the city as she rested her head against Hiska's shoulder, fearing he would not live to see tomorrow.

It had been a long time since she last saw him, but she remembered it all too clear. She had gone into the water with Jewl, leaving him behind. Then she simply vanished from his life. Raising her lips to his ear, she softly spoke.

“I never wanted it this way. I had to leave. I'm so very sorry.” Gently she caressed this neck and ears, remembering how it used to be between them.

“I hope you still love me.” Looking down at the borders of his Guardian Robes, she noticed her name in silver rune-like letters along the entire edge of the garment. If he had given up, she supposed her name would no longer be visible. Little comfort came at seeing her name, for if he died - no - when he awoke, Hiska might continue on as her Forever Guardian, yes, but distance himself from her in terms of their betrothal.

“I left to save you, milord. For you see, I had become a monster. Had I not departed, I would surely have acted as such, ripping our lives apart. I am so very sorry it had to be this way. For you, this was not fair.”

After a few minutes, there was a distant crack of thunder from the direction of the city. She instantly lost the connection of her spell as the ground beneath her trembled slightly, signifying the Gargantuan's defeat.

Closing her eyes, she wrapped her arms about Hiska, waiting for the spell's exhaustion to overtake her, as it had before when her Gargantuan had finished its work. Surprisingly, it did not grip her half as much as the first time she had cast it. Still, she was weary in mind and body. Sweat trickled down her temples as she rested, hidden from view against the bank of cool earth.

Carefully, gently, Shaela lowered His head into her lap as he struggled for

breath. Placing a hand over his heart, she closed her eyes and became still, feeling the rhythm of its beat. It was consistent, but weak. She supposed this was a good sign, and took some comfort in it. Hiska was strong; he would pull through - he had to.

She noticed his Guardian Blade was missing. It was probably back at the jail, under lock and key, or maybe on a mantle piece within the Governor's mansion, set as a sick trophy of his victory over a non-Human.

Sighing wearily, she relaxed and began running her nails gently through Hiska's ears. Being here with her fiancé was not real to her. It had been over fourteen years since she last saw him, and much could have transpired to change the present relationship between them both in that much time.

Closing her eyes, Shaela leaned forward, resting her forehead on the side of his, feeling soil filter down onto her neck. She was home, and that was a beginning. She meditated as she rested, feeling the physical connection with Hiska as she held him.

As she became aware of the daily sounds of life, she suddenly realized twilight was coming on. She had slept the entire night through. Thinking about all that happened, she quietly whispered, "Thank you Bane." Exhausted, Shaela fell again into a light slumber, ceaselessly running her fingernails through Hiska's fur as she waited for darkness to once again fall.

Shaela slowly opened her eyes as the moon began to crest the opposite side of the creek. Placing a hand on Hiska's back, she focused on his heart, noticing it was beating slightly stronger. Still, he was unconscious and his breathing labored. She had no water to give him, or wet his lips with. She rested the side of her head against his and whispered.

“Well, it seems you and I have landed ourselves in a bit of a mess.” She noticed his badly swollen knee.

“If I move you, I fear your injuries may get worse.” Whispering the words to the only healing spell she knew, she ran a hand over his body. Again, a bluish light covered him. This time, to her dismay, her spell did very little to heal him.

“I'm sorry,” she mourned, “that is all I can do for now. Don't give up Hiska, don't leave me. If you die, nothing will matter.” She tried to speak again, but lost control of her emotions. Grinding her teeth together in frustration, she felt a deep-set regret in the choice she had made to leave.

After a while, an idea came to her. If she could brace his leg with some arm-length branches, and tie them to his leg, she could move him without causing him more injury. She could use strips of her clothing to secure the branches. Yes, this could work! Gently, Shaela pulled herself out from underneath Hiska, laying him down ever so carefully, making him as comfortable as possible.

As she gathered the necessary wood to make a splint for his knee, she growled in frustration at the lack of materials she had to work with.

“Mother,” she sobbed, “help Hiska. He needs your help.” A few moments later, she became aware of six beating hearts not far up the creek bed. Shaela froze. Whoever it was, approached at an alarming pace, nearing the last bend in the creek before coming into sight.

As quickly as she could, she leapt over to Hiska, placing herself between him and those who approached, ripping her katana forth as she snarled. Taking a quick glance back at Hiska, Shaela decided there was no other way to save him; she had to bite him. Shuddering, she turned to the others approaching, determined

to commit death upon them. After killing them, she would save Hiska, or at least half his life.

As she witnessed the six spring around the corner into sight, she found it was not who she expected. It was not a patrol of guards, but six jungle panthers, one of which was the size of a horse. At a deep hiss from the large panther, they slid to a stop. The large cat raised its head up proudly, taking Shaela into its gaze.

“Shaela, I am Shae`Hur, and am come at your plea to Talisen, your Mystic Master; my ever loyal apprentice. Instantly, Shaela dropped her blade and knelt to the ground before the Kazar of the panther species, placing her forehead to the sand, hands out just beyond her shoulders, fingers spread wide. She froze, excited and terrified, at the approach of The Great Panther.

She heard it pad foreword and stop, its breath washing over the back of her head and neck. Gently, she felt it touch the back of her head with a single claw, signifying his acceptance of her submissiveness. She could now rise.

Slowly she raised up and found herself looking into the Giant Panther's green eyes. Completely taken by its majestic and noble presence, she stared unblinking as it gazed upon her.

“We will take the Mystic's son to her. First, go back into the city and recover Hiska's blade. We will wait for you here . . . be swift.” As she stood, Shaela reached out, snatched up her blade, and sheathed it.

“Yes master,” she stated obediently. Turning back, Shaela broke into a sprint toward the city gate, not even wondering how she was to accomplish this task. If the high master of her order commanded it, she would do it, even if she had to storm into the city and take it by force.

After a few minutes, as she neared the entrance and crouched out of sight, noticing a large number of guards keeping safe the opening to the city. She thought about the situation for a moment, then thought better than to try getting in the front gate. No, this would not do. With that many, she would be slowed, giving them the upper hand of bringing in reinforcements against her.

Looking along the outer wall, she decided to skirt the city to avoid any

unnecessary confrontations. Time was of the essence, as Hiska's life depended on haste. Veering from her course, she ran parallel along the city wall until she came to a place where she stopped and looked for the easiest way up and over. It didn't take long before she spotted an area where a crop of trees grew close to the wall. Pointing, she softly whispered.

“Agrin Mortala,” gently willing the roots of the trees to carefully do her bidding. The ground by the wall suddenly split open as roots snaked up out of the earth, crept slowly upward over the wall, securing themselves about the top. As quickly as she ascended the wall, she descended the other side. Before reaching midway, she jumped, softly landed and backed against the roots, walking both ways to make sure had not been spotted.

Closing her eyes, Shaela felt for the beating of any hearts nearby, sensing none. Like a living shadow, she made her way along the walls of many structures, toward the jailhouse. With perfect stealth, she made her way through a familiar part of the city, then broke into a run as she spotted her destination.

Reaching the rear of the structure, she stopped and looked around. She did not sense anyone near, so quickly rounded the corner from the back of the jailhouse, slowly sliding along the wall towards the front. As she approached the front corner, four heart beats came to her attention. They were outside the front door, stationary.

She was not surprised to discover more guards had been posted here. Still, this was going to make it more difficult to get in and out without attracting unwanted attention.

The thought of Hiska in his present condition, laying in the dirt of a creek bed, half dead, compelled her to take a deep breath, draw her blade and simply walk around the corner. Four startled guards turned their attention to her, drawing their swords as she quickly fell upon them, instantly cutting two of them down, and parrying an attack meant to decapitate her.

A silent rage instantly welled up within her as she focused her attack upon the third guard. As he fell, pierced through the neck, he clawed helplessly at her

blade and then exhaled his last breath. Pulling her blade quickly from the dead man's neck, she turned to see the last guard sprinting away in terror, calling out for assistance.

Quickly, Shaela turned to the door and kicked it open in one fluent motion. Entering in, she spotted two guards who were ready, blades drawn. Instantly, the two rushed her with a battle cry, attempting to run her through. Like a cat, she nimbly leapt over them, striking one in the face with her blade, cutting him deeply, and thrusting her fingers into the right eye of the other, invoking cries of pain from them both.

With a sweep of her katana, she dispatched the guard with the sword wound to the face. The other, she spared, kicking him in the ribs without restraint, instantly subduing him. As he doubled over, he dropped his blade to the floor. With a flick of her foot, Shaela kicked it out of his reach, then slammed her heel down on the back of his hand as he gasped for air.

It was then, she realized one of their blades had struck true. Lifting a heavily bleeding arm, she growled in frustration. Yet, still, she felt no pain. Pulling up her sleeve, she watched as the wound knit together, soon leaving only her blood as a sign that she had been wounded.

“Nice hit, peasant,” she whispered, then focused on the guard. Knowing the heel of her boot would inflict torment, should she break the skin of his hand, she grit her teeth, exposing what she was. The boots were a gift from Elestra the first year she was apprenticed to her.

“These boots are crafted from the Shalsa Bloodworm, native to the Arbian Desert within the Underworld. If I break the skin of your hand, you will feel an excruciating torment for the remainder of your life. To see you writhe in agony forever, would be grand, but we haven't that much time to spend together.” The jail guard strained under the weight of her heel, struggling for breath as he eyed his hand in sudden wide-eyed terror. Rolling her eyes, she placed the sharp of her blade to his neck.

“The mancat's blade, give it to me, or I will end your life as the others.” She

waited a few seconds for him to get control of himself. Gathering his senses, he held up his free hand, yielding to her. Taking the heel of her boot from the back of his hand, she lifted her blade, forcing him to regain his feet. Slowly standing, the man raised his hands, mortal terror plainly etched into his eyes.

“Be quick, the mancat's blade, give it to me.” With shaking hands, the guard fumbled for his keys, singling one out as he walked over to a cabinet behind the main desk.

“Okay, okay,” he stated, his voice shaking badly. Following, she watched him attempt to fit the key into the lock three times without success.

“Quick!” She snapped, the sudden urge to devour him boiling within. Taking a deep, terrified, breath, the guard forced his hands to stop shaking. Within a few moments, he managed to fit the key into the lock. Turning the key, Shaela heard a snapping sound as the lock unlatched. Quickly opening the two doors of the cabinet, he reached in and retrieved a scabbard and sword. In haste, he handed both to her.

Snatching it from him, Shaela smiled in satisfaction, then kicked him in the chest as hard as she could. As he fell, she struck him across the head with the pommel of her blade, instantly rendering him unconscious. Hovering over him, she sensed his irregular heart beat. With cold eyes, Shaela struck him in the collar, satisfied at the snapping of his collarbone.

Turning, she surveyed her handiwork, then calmly strode out the front of the jailhouse. Turning to the right, she slipped into the alley and calmly headed back the way she had come, even as a guard patrol thundered toward the front of the building, not ten paces behind her. After a few moments, she sprinted back to the wall, over which she had entered the city.

As she dropped to the ground outside of the city wall, she looked around, hearing multiple alarms being raised. Waving a hand, she dismissed the roots back into their rightful place and fled at a great pace back to her mancat.

Soon, she returned to the place where she had tended Hiska. As she stopped before The Great Panther, she bowed herself down to the earth. Touching the

back of Shaela's head, the great black panther hissed.

“Follow,” it stated in a smooth, commanding voice. The five smaller panthers followed as the great cat picked up Hiska by the back of his robes and made its way within the cover of the ravine. Shaela followed, struggling to keep up with their pace. They raced on into the night until the last farmhouse, on the edge of the wild, was left behind.

As the sky began to lighten, the giant cat shifted the direction of their flight, cresting the side of the ravine, and headed for a crop of trees to rest for the day. As they entered, The Great Panther gently released Hiska to the ground as the five other cats spread out to even points about the area, keeping watch as Shaela cast a healing spell upon Hiska. After the spell was complete, she placed a hand gently upon his chest and frowned. To her dismay, he was weakening, and there was nothing she could do about it. Walking to the great cat, she shook her head despondently.

“Is there nothing we can do for him?” she stated, beginning to fear for his life. The giant panther turned on Shaela.

“You vanished. Where did you go?” With a glance at Hiska, she dared not withhold the slightest information from him. From the beginning, Shaela told her story. As the sun warmed the trees, she concluded her tale.

“Shaela, you have more power over death than you realize.” She threw a curious look at Shae`Hur, not understanding.

“What do you mean?” The great cat hissed and abruptly cuffed her, knocking her down.

“If I knew, I would tell you.” The power of the cat's strike hurt, though it had not used its talons. She raised up into kneeling position, biting her lip.

“Talon said I was linked with him.” Laying down before her, Shae`Hur began cleaning its paws, seemingly uninterested.

“No, it's not that. Talon can help in this situation, but try everything you can think of before calling for him.” Shaela felt the cat knew what she should do, and it frustrated her. Closing her eyes, Shaela began to meditate, clearing her

jumbled mind of distorted thoughts.

She thought of every spell she knew, but only one single spell was for healing. She thought about the void she had been within . . . that dark place in which she had been changed. The thought caused her to shudder. Did she have the ability to send, or take Hiska there? If she did, would he be prepared to face such a trial? Talon's instructions had saved her from catastrophe in that black expanse of the dark, but would her decision to take him there be the end of him?

Opening her eyes, she moved over to Hiska, looking down upon him sympathetically, watching his labored breathing. Could she take him there? Taking an unsteady breath, Shaela placed a hand on his head, gently running her fingers through one of his ears. She could feel it, sense it, Hiska was on the brink of death. This gave her only two choices. She could curse him with Bloodlust, as Cyphis did to her, or take him into that blackened void, where, Talon had informed her, many did not return.

Closing her eyes, Shaela pictured total, utter, darkness. She did not have the heart to bite him. No, she could never do that. Making up her mind quickly, she decided to bring him into the realm of Death. She hesitated, not knowing how to open the door to this place, yet she had to try.

Relaxing, she thought upon the words Talon had chanted long ago. To her surprise, they came to her mind naturally, as if she had known them all her life. As she uttered the words, she willed herself to go with him as she reached down, embracing him tight. As the last of the words fell from her lips, Shaela noticed Shae`Hur's eyes widen.

Blackness took her vision away, causing her to shudder as the memory of her experience played out within her mind. Maybe, just maybe, this time would be easier.

It was not.

She felt the probing and painful caressing, exactly as before, though she also felt invigorated by the experience. She felt Hiska's body, reminding her that

he was yet with her. She moved, clutching at him as if she were hanging off the edge of a cliff, and put her lips to his ear.

“Hiska, blend with it . . . don't resist anything. She repeated the same thing three more times, feeling the physical hands of darkness itself moving over her entire body. She grit her teeth.

“Let it have its way with you.” She heard Hiska groan and knew what he was going through. Suddenly she realized her mistake and quickly found his hand, gripping it tight as she slid the nail of her thumb across his wrist, slicing the area just above his palm. Quickly, she did the same to her own wrist and placed her wound to his, holding both their wrists tightly together. Weakly, he struggled as her blood mingled with his, flowing into his veins.

“Don't fight it Hiska . . . don't fight anything. Accept it . . . I don't want to lose you.” Reaching out with her senses, she detected his pulse rapidly increase. Thinking back, she remembered how long it took for the warmth to reach her feet. She judged the time, and when she thought it was enough, she parted her wrist from his.

“I know I left you Hiska, but it was to save you from a fate worse than a broken heart. Please forgive me . . .” Instantly, all became still . . . his heart stilled to silence and her hands slipped through his body as he faded away. Soon she was alone in the void, a feeling of emptiness filling her, stripping her of any hope to save him.

Laying back, Shaela wept bitterly and let herself go, losing all conscious thought.

Slowly, she came to, her eyes refusing to give her enough clarity to perceive more than shadows and dull light. To her right, the sound of steady breathing caught her attention. Instant pain shot through her neck as she slowly turned her head to see. As through water, dimmed by the touch of night, she struggled to see a pitch-dark face, though she could not perceive what, or who, it was. The only distinguishable trait were two slanted eyes of intense green. As if wandering within a valley of unnaturally dense fog, the confusion filling her mind shielded her from the frightening appearance of what gazed upon her.

Slowly turning her head back to what appeared as a deeper darkness above, she licked her lips and opened her mouth, trying to speak as she desperately blinked to rid the haze from her vision. Then a stern, yet vaguely familiar voice broke the silence.

“Gather your senses child.” She heard that voice before, but could not place it in her memory. Gritting her teeth, she strained her eyes to see.

The feeling of needles pricked her neck and shoulders with even the slightest movement, forcing her to softly cry out. Relaxing, she panted, exhausted by the exertion. Laying still, she became aware of laying upon something cold; something she could not describe.

“Dreaming,” she mumbled. Closing her eyes tight, she waited a minute before opening them again. Blinking a number of times, she fell to frustration after attempting to simply lift a hand to wipe her face. Struggling, she tried again, only to find herself bound firmly to what she perceived as a flat cold surface of something hard.

Opening her mouth, she sighed, then turned her attention back at what appeared to be a large cat-like creature. She could see it now, as through a haze. Instantly, she panicked and attempted to sit up, yet, once again, found she could not move. Something held her down upon the stone beneath which she lay. She tried to free herself, struggling against her bonds, but failed. Crying out, she struggled even the more, terrible pain shooting through her entire body with the

effort.

After a lengthy, desperate struggle, she lay suddenly still, growling in frustration as she fought to catch her breath. With a finger, she probed that which held her bound, slowly coming to the realization at what held her down.

“Where am I?” she whispered. As if suddenly startled, her eyes widened. Turning her attention back to the huge cat, she locked eyes with the first thing she recalled, though the memory was nothing more than a visual image.

“Ask him,” the huge cat stated. Shaking her head, she tried to get the blur out of her eyes and mind, even as the sound of something she could not see approached. Looking back at the cat, she found it was no longer there.

“Where am I?” she whispered, confused.

“My watch over you is ended,” she heard it reply as its voice faded into the distance. Then, it was gone.

Turning her attention back to what approached, she began to panic. Straining her eyes, she heard the sound of steel cutting through the foliage, growing closer and closer. Shaking her head, she blinked hard, as if by so doing she could force her sight to clear.

Straining, Shaela looked to the stone upon which she lay. Even through unclear eyes, she could see it was etched with symbols. Vines had grown up about the stone, and about her body, encasing her within the hands of nature itself. This was unnerving, as well as confusing. Again, she desperately fought to be free, but it was no use. What held her down was too strong to break by sheer force.

Forced to wait and listen to the growing sounds of something closing in on her, she grit her teeth, frustrated and afraid. Whatever it was, she could not manipulate the position of her head to see it.

After another failed attempt to be free, she blew out a deep breath, quietly groaning. Consigning herself to whatever fate this would bring, she closed her eyes and waited.

As she stilled, the chopping abruptly ceased, replaced by an intake of breath, as if another was in sudden wonder and surprise. Though she could not see

it, she felt its heartbeat . . . the heartbeat of a creature she knew, but could not mentally picture.

Opening her eyes, she waited, and as she did, the face of a panther appeared above her, softly hissing and it drew close. Blinking away the haze still plaguing her vision, she strained to see it as its face drew close, staring down at her with intense green eyes, frozen, as if time itself had stilled it.

Green eyes; she knew one with green eyes, though the memory was dim in her mind, like an illusive dream that evaded the grasp of her conscious thought. Desperately, she yearned to remember, recall what she knew she should be so familiar with. Gazing upon this creature, his name slowly surfaced in all the confusion of her thoughts.

The mancat let out a heavy breath, then hastily began cutting away the thick vines and roots, beginning at her neck and shoulders. As he loosed her, she could not help but notice his hands trembling, as if he were stricken with some terrible disease. Frantically, he worked his way down, desperately releasing her.

As her arms came loose, she reached up a hand and touched him, the memory of his face becoming, now, more clear. As she made contact with him, he froze for a moment, then continued cutting her loose. As he relieved her of the remaining vines, she slowly sat up, feeling her body rebel against every movement.

As the remaining vines were cleared away from her legs and feet, she struggled to remember more, raising her hands before her, feeling confused at the sight of them. She felt so strange, so very strange. Her thoughts fell upon the cat she had seen only moments ago. It seemed so familiar to her as well.

Unsteady, she struggled to her feet and staggered. Catching her balance, she arose, standing on the stone, upon which she had awoken, and stared down at the mancat as it came before her. Slowly, she placed both hands gently over the tops of both his ears, leaning into him for support. As he looked up at her, she gazed deeply into his eyes, giving him a slight smile, slowly recalling who this wonderful, brave, valiant, protective, loving, nurturing mancat was.

“Hiska. Your name is Hiska. I know you. I know you,” she whispered as tears began to form in her dark eyes. Hiska squinted his eyes in silence, tears sliding down either side of his face. Slowly he sheathed his blade, wrapped his arms about her waist and lifted her from the stone. Turning, he gently set her down. She had caught sight of the intricate runes upon his blade, and noticed something peculiar about his clothing. Upon the entire border of his black robes, a name appeared. Running a finger over the name, her eyes slowly widened.

“My name. My name,” she repeated in astonishment, memories unfolding like the pages of a book in her mind. Glancing up at him, she recalled when she had last seen him . . . within The Dark.

“I thought you died.” Hiska shook his head slowly and touched her face.

“No, you saved me.” He ran his claws through her hair and began picking out the tangles. As he worked her hair free of all the foliage and snags, she leaned back against the stone platform and closed her eyes, remembering the many times when he had groomed her. Sighing, she began working her nails through his ears to the back of his neck. When he was done, she opened her eyes, quietly laughing, then pulled herself up and kissed him. When they parted, she leaned back and softly whispered.

“Where have you been?” In response, he hissed, shaking his head.

“I was about to ask you the same question.” She laughed.

“I know, but that's why I asked you first.” Amused at his lack of humor, she grinned, even as more memories began to flood back into her mind. Steadily, she remembered more fully who she was; who she was with again.

“Hiska, why was I on this stone? How long have I been here? Why was I -“ Hiska nuzzled her, interrupting the flood of questions.

“You have been here, in the Heartlands, for seven full years.” His voice lowered to a whisper as he neared her ear. “Many decades ago, Mother crafted the alter you awoke upon. She had us bring you here, to make sure you would remain safe as you rested from what you did for me in the dark.” Raising up a hand, she began playing with his razor-sharp fangs, suddenly deep in thought.

“Rest? Hiska what would make me have to rest for seven years?” She gazed up at him with a look which meant she earnestly wanted to know. Raising a hand, Hiska pulled her hand away from his teeth.

“You took me into . . . blackness. I survived the terrible dark . . . your blood coursed through me, giving me strength. You saved my life. After, you had to rest.” She remembered, slowly nodding as that terrible scene began to clear in her mind.

“Yes, yes, I found you with the Humans. Oh, Hiska, they did terrible things to you. They paid for their cruelty, and reaped the rewards they sewed for themselves.” She began to say something else, but Hiska placed a single talon to her lips, stopping her.

“Thank you, Shaela,” he stated, then removed his claw from her mouth. She smiled.

“You are most welcome, Hiska. Shaela, that's my name. I could not remember until you just now spoke it, even though it appears upon your robes. Placing both hands upon his chest, she looked at him, suddenly troubled.

“As you came to me, Shae`Hur departed. I think he has been watching over me the entire time I've been here.” At her statement, his eyes opened wide in surprise.

“It's true. When I got you out of the city, he carried you back to the safety of the jungle.” Stroking his wonderful ears, a feeling of sadness bit into her heart at what she had become. She needed to tell him. Now, more than ever, honesty had to be foremost in their relationship . . . whatever that relationship might be. Terrified, she closed her eyes for a few moments, building up the courage to enlighten him on what she now was. As she opened her eyes, hundreds of scenes played out in her mind, beginning with that surprise birthday trip so long ago, and ending in the present moment.

Patient and focused, Hiska gave her his entire attention, not moving, not speaking.

“Forgive me,” she whispered, seeing instant concern at the sudden turn in

their conversation. Before he could inquire what she meant, she slowly exposed the nature of what she was. Without any hesitation, he stroked her hair, then embraced her in the tightest embrace she had ever been gifted with.

“I am yours, you are mine.”

They traveled for seven days, making their way to the Sacred Grove, enjoying each others company and catching up on the news of the Ever`Shade Jungle. Shaela learned he had never given up his search for her. In return, Hiska listened to Shaela's tale, amazed by her experiences.

He was impressed by the level of her stealth and surefooted nature. He had always covered for her, protected her, but now it was different. She seemed to blend into the shadows, as if she was born to them.

As they arrived at the border of the Sacred Grove, Shaela noticed the ground, the trees, even the plants were perfectly intact and green, as if the hands of time and death had no sway in this part of the world. She was left in wonder at the perfect order by which everything grew here, marveling at the richness of the area, especially the scents. Here, nothing had changed.

“This place is amazing,” she whispered as she touched the peddles of a sky-blue rose. Embracing Shaela, Hiska whispered to her.

“Shaela, you are beautiful . . . a gem among gems. Do you still wish to be my wife?” Looking up, she nodded without hesitation.

“Yes, more than anything. Even though you know what I have become?” Hiska ignored her question and smelled her hair, inhaling deep.

“Call her now.” Terrified, she remembered the dreams in which she killed him. Banishing such foolish thoughts, she looked about the area and found an area where the mosses grew thick. Kneeling, she made herself comfortable. If he did not care what she was, then it did not matter.

Shaela was not exactly sure how to call her mentor and friend, yet she would try. Focusing all her thoughts upon Mother, she sent out a yearning for her to come to the Sacred Grove. As quickly as she did this, a strong sensation burned within her heart, telling her in no uncertain terms, she had been heard. Mother was coming! She felt a link, a strong sense of communication, one she had never before experienced, take hold within her.

Standing, Shaela looked at her fiancé, suddenly realizing what was about to

occur. She was being married to the man of her dreams. It was not sudden, and she knew full well what she was doing. She had thought about this moment many times in the years, previous to her lengthy sleep, yearning to be in a family once again.

While training with Talon, she nearly gave in and remained with him. Yet, something deep within her would not let go of the man she saw standing before her now. Though not Human, he was gifted with a noble heart. He was honorable, with unyielding integrity. When she first met him, she was terrified. Now? Now, she felt so deeply in love with him, she would give anything to have him in her life.

Shaela stood there, so taken by him, she didn't realize he was speaking to her until he spoke again. She blinked, coming to, rather taken back and embarrassed.

“I'm sorry, what did you say Hiska?” Chuckling, Hiska shook his head.

“I have to say it again, do I?” She nodded and squinted her eyes at him, to which he stepped up to her and repeated.

“You are so beautiful.” Feeling a sudden heat in her face, Shaela lowered her head. Slowly, she looked up at him, pulling back her hair.

“Thank you.” She smiled, slipping back into sentimental thoughts about him for a while, losing focus on the present as he stared at her in obvious admiration. After a long silence, she looked at him.

“I guess I will have to do without the white silk dress.” Hiska chuckled softly and raised a finger.

“A friend of yours brought a large chest of treasure to mother as you slept upon the shrine. You have no lack of dresses. I like the black one, though you should wear the one you like.” He brushed the side of her face tenderly. “My dream has come true -- you are back.” Shaela's eyes sparkled like two dark, flawless jewels, realizing just how much he cared for her. Truly, he was wonderful.

They spent the night outside the Sacred Grove. Shaela curled up against

Hiska, as she always did, as he watched over her. She fell into a light slumber, having no dreams she could recall, and when she opened her eyes, she was relieved to find she and Hiska still in the same place. Looking around, she noticed mother and her Guardian in front of them, waiting patiently.

“Mother!” Shaela leapt up and threw her arms about the Mystic's neck. As the Mystic embraced her in return, she whispered.

“It is good to see you also, Shaela, Daughter. I see you are still breaking laws.” Shaela nodded eagerly, grinning from ear to ear. The Mystic paused for a moment, then continued.

“I brought your belongings.” As they parted, the Mystic motioned to her Guardian, who walked to the nearest tree and retrieved a large and small pack. He also brought Shaela both her staves, as well as the katana Talon had given her. Placing her belongings at her feet, he bowed formally and handed her the weapons. Shaela beamed a smile at him, then threw her arms about his neck and squeezed as tight as she could. Embracing her gently, the Mystic's Guardian whispered, “It is good to see you, Shaela.” Shaela laughed for joy.

“It is better to see you, sir.” He chuckled and glanced at his Ward who nodded once. Turning his full attention on her, he pointed at the blade, drawing Shaela's attention to it.

“That blade was crafted just prior to the beginning of the Thousand Year War, also known as the Age of War. It is called Noth`Kur Aegis, meaning Shadow of Eternity” Shaela looked at it in wonder.

“What does that mean?” She asked, eager to know more.

“The one who is allowed by the blade to reveal it, will become linked with it, becoming one until one or the other has passed on into the confines of the next world. It is rumored that the one who wields the Noth`Kur Aegis taps into, and can wield, the blade's enchantments.” Shaela unsheathed the blade and looked at the many runes upon its surface. As she marveled at it, that familiar energy flowed into her being, just as before. Quickly she sheathed the blade and set her weapons against a nearby tree.

“Thank you sir. I'll look into it later. Right now, I have a more important matter to tend with. I need a dress.” The Mystic's Guardian blinked at her in surprise as Mother chuckled. Waving her to follow, she led Shaela away from the two Guardians, and into the trees.

“Bring the packs. I will help you with this grand and most important task.” Shaela grabbed both packs and followed, glancing back to see mother's Guardian pick up the blade, but not unsheathing it. Once out of sight, she hurried and caught up with the Mystic, stepping in line beside her.

“Where are we going Mother?” she curiously asked. The Mystic stopped and poked Shaela in the mid-section with a talon.

“You are filthy. I am taking you to a nearby stream so you can bathe and make yourself presentable before him. Any other questions?” Shaela shook her head, becoming instantly submissive.

“Good.” With that Shaela was led to a stream not far from where they were. When they arrived, Shaela lowered the packs to the ground, seeing a pool before her. Mother helped her to undress and motioned her to get in the water after pulling some soap out of the smaller pack. Approaching the bank, she tested the water with a toe. It was cool, but not too cold, and so she waded in and began washing herself of what she realized was seven years of dirt. She grimaced seeing the water cloud with what she washed from her body. Glancing up at the Mystic, who was currently rummaging through the larger of the two packs, she made a sour face.

“Ug!” she bluntly stated, to which Mother gave her a look.

“Wash again, then come here. We are not in a hurry, so take your time.” Shaela flicked water at her and submersed quickly, avoiding any retribution, should there be any. She held her breath for as long as she could, but soon realized, to her astonishment, she was not running out of breath. After a while, she slowly stood and looked at Mother, who narrowed her eyes at her.

“Clever girl,” she hissed. “Stumbled upon something, did you?” All in wonder, Shaela nodded, but also became concerned.

“Mother, what is happening to me?” The Mystic shrugged slightly and waved a hand about the area.

“There are many things in this world which hold wonder and awe, even in my eyes. Are you so surprised to discover you are half living, half dead?” A confused look from Shaela provoked a sigh from the Mystic. “Shaela, you are a Vampire, one of the living dead, even though you endure the light of the sun. You are clean enough, come here.” Stepping out of the pool, Shaela felt a sudden chill and quickly made her way over to mother. As she approached, the Mystic handed her a towel.

“Thank you,” she whispered, suddenly plagued by a myriad of dark thoughts which brought on too many questions. Before she could ask even one, Mother ruffled her hair a little.

“I have an idea. Let's think about other things for now. You have a young man at the border of the Sacred Grove waiting for a bride soon to be. We will talk about these things later. Until then, live in the present. However, Shaela, I do agree with you.” Puzzled, Shaela looked in earnest at the Harritt Catur Queen.

“With what?” The Mystic pointed at a few beautiful dresses she had pulled out and arranged on a clean canvas. Looking at them, Shaela bit her lip.

“That's not what you were referring too. You read my thoughts.” The Mystic snickered and waved a hand over them.

“What dress will you wear?” Dropping the subject, Shaela brightened up as she looked them over. For the present, she forced out all questions and concerns, banishing them from her mind. Pointing to the black silk dress, she looked at the Mystic.

“That one. Hiska said he would like a black dress.” Mother didn't answer her, but motioned to the towel she held.

“Dry yourself and get ready. You will find everything you need in the large and small packs.” Shaela hurried and dried off, then began tediously picking and choosing what she would wear for the occasion, aided by the Mystic, who seemed to be enjoying herself.

Soon, fully adorned in her wedding dress, she held still while mother brushed her hair out. She chose a single black lace ribbon to bring her hair back, securing it with some help. When she was finished, she took out a sweet smelling perfume and looked at it, remembering how it made Hiska sneeze. Deciding against it, she put it away.

After meticulously packing everything away, she grabbed the packs and began to lift them.

“Shaela, leave those to me. You should not carry them while in that dress. Indeed, you are a beautiful young woman. I am pleased you call me Mother.”

“Mother, I am nearly thirty years old.” Mother stopped what she was doing and looked at her, nodding.

“Vampires age well.” Shaela lowered her eyes, feeling shamed. Mother quickly changed the subject.

“Where did you get the blade?” Shaela turned away as Mother made sure the lacing at the back of the dress was secure.

“A dragon gave it to me. Well an Arsia Vahkrin in the form of a Shadow Dragon.”

“Ah, yes, Talon came to us at great risk to himself and gave me the chest to give to you. I found it amazing, as well as alarming, he should know where to go, as well as who to give it to.” Turning, Shaela looked at her.

“Mother, I never told him where you live, I swear it.” She raised a hand to Shaela quickly.

“I know, I know. He told me the same, assuring me you were innocent of divulging anything to him that would in any way betray my trust. No, he explained how he found me, and I will not bore you with such mundane details.” Shaela took her hand and smiled, sighing in relief.

“Mother, the day I met him, he had me in his mouth . . . of course he was in dragon form.” The Mystic smirked.

“Always making friends, aren't you?” Not quite knowing how to respond, Shaela smiled.

“Mother, is it wrong to be in love with more than one man?” An abrupt look of concern crossed the Mystic's face.

“Do you love this Vahkrin?” Biting her lip, she nodded.

“Yes. Mother, I love Hiska. I am marrying him, for that is what I want.” Mother brushed a bit of Shaela's hair into place and gazed at her with eyes of amethyst.

“There is nothing wrong with falling in love. You have chosen, and that is your business.” Mother then checked the lace at the collar of the intricate dress, smoothing it out in places, circling her.

“You know, for a Human, you are wearing a very simple wedding dress, and the wrong color. It is very regal, but not really what your species wears to such events.” Shaela shrugged.

“I like it, and I know Hiska likes black.” Mother lifted the packs up over her shoulder and motioned her to follow. When they arrived, the Mystic put the packs down and retrieved the Noth`Kur Aegis from her Guardian. Turning, she walked over to Shaela and fastened it about her waist.

“I command you to never let this blade leave your person again. Do you understand me completely?” Rather taken off guard, Shaela nodded as she adjusted the belt the way she liked it.

“Thank you Mother, for everything you do.” At that moment, Shae`Hur appeared from the density of the jungle in silence. All four of them lowered to the ground in the proper fashion, greeting their master. One by one the great panther touched each on the back of the head with a gentle paw. As he touched them, they arose and waited in silence until all were standing. The Mystic knelt and raised her hands out to each side.

“Shae`Hur, I beg admittance into the Sacred Grove to join Shaela and Hiska together.” Shae`Hur nodded once.

“Granted.” With that, the magnificent panther came before the four, exhaling a breath upon on each of them.

“Come,” the great panther stated as he casually walked into a part of the

jungle where none dared trespassed. They followed him into the Sacred Grove as the Mystic's Guardian collected up the packs and Shaela's staff.

Once within, they traveled for three hours. Shaela felt as if she were in a dream. Everything here was wholesome and new, as if the hand of atrophy had no power here. Thick layers of moss blanketed the forest as far as the eye could see. A peace settled over Shaela as Shae`Hur stopped and turned.

“Shaela, you are the only Human to ever come into the Sacred Grove. I welcome you, and give you the name of Shadow Daughter.” With that spoken, he neared Shaela's face and inhaled. A mist flowed from her into the mouth and nostrils of the great cat as it drank deeply of her breath. Then Shae`Hur spoke again.

“Breath in steadily . . . deeply.” Shaela exhaled and slowly began to inhale as commanded, and as she did so, Shae`Hur exhaled a mist of darkness into her face, which entered into her mouth and nose in a steady ghost-like stream of blackness, causing her to stagger. Reaching out, Hiska steadied her. When it was finished, the great cat looked at her.

“It is done. Now I give you both my blessing. Keep the laws of my people.” With that, Shae`Hur backed up, turning his attention to the Mystic, who stepped up to them.

“Hiska, my son, Shaela, my daughter, are you both in agreement to be united and loyal to each other as long as you shall endure this mortal life? Both nodded in silence. With as much will power as she could muster, Shaela resisted the urge to cry, failing miserably. The Mystic squinted at Shaela, taking both her and Hiska's hand, and placed them together.

“From this day forth, you are bonded as life companions.” She embraced each affectionately.

“Congratulations to you both.” She then walked away, taking her Guardian's arm in escort fashion as he bore Shaela's belongings. Shaela watched the two walk away, Shae`Hur falling in beside the Mystic who placed a hand upon the great panther's back.

They vanished into the jungle, leaving her alone with Hiska, who squeezed her hand gently, drawing her attention.

Turning to him, she wrapped her arms about his neck, smiling through far too many tears of happiness.

Once again, Shaela had a family.

Three days later, they both stood at the edge of the Sacred Grove. Shaela knew she and Hiska had to leave before the day was over, or unwanted consequences would follow. Even so, it was a law she regretted having to follow. Walking back into the Sacred Grove, she put a title to it . . . Deathless.

She felt his hand slip into hers and squeeze, bringing her out of fond thoughts. Glancing up at Hiska, she leaned into him as he led her back. As they arrived, Shaela was surprised to see Mother waiting for them.

Quickly setting down their supplies, Hiska formally bowed to the earth. Quickly, the Harrit Catur Mystic touched his head, then embraced him. Taken off guard by her sudden sentiment, he slowly wrapped her in his arms, nuzzling the side of her head.

“Hiska, you could not have found a better wife in all of Utaemia. I’m so happy for you both.” Hiska looked over to Shaela, who watched the scene as if stunned.

“I am sure I captured the right woman,” he whispered. Mother snickered at the jest as Shaela smiled, keeping silent. When she was within arms reach, Mother embraced her lovingly in silence for a long while as Hiska turned away and retrieved her apprentice dress and staff. When Mother did not let go, Shaela gave up parting from her and squeezed her tight, suddenly realizing something was wrong, very wrong.

“What is it Mother?” Only after Shaela asked did Mother let go.

“My Daughter, for that is what you are, I did not want to spoil your wedding nights, and so waited until you came back. As you already know, over the past few years, the Humans have grown increasingly hostile. One fortnight past, a large number of them were seen amassing just outside the city, I assume against us.” Shaela’s heart went cold inside as Hiska walked back over to them and handed Shaela her apprentice dress and staff. Taking them both, she threw her husband a charming smile.

“Thank you Hiska,” she stated, then looked back to the Mystic, who

continued.

“I would have waited a few more days, so you two could get used to the newness of your betrothal, but it seems we are rather pressed for time.” Shaela turned her back on Mother and started untying the front of her wedding dress.

“Mother can you please help me? I’m not used to this.” While they both quickly worked the dress loose from her, the Mystic continued.

“There is another matter of urgency as well.” Shaela could not imagine what could be worse than the news she had just been given.

“Dare I ask?” Mother slipped the apprentice dress over Shaela and smoothed it down as she grimaced at the back of Shaela's head. Shaela caught a sudden expression from Hiska, who froze in sudden trepidation. Turning, Shaela looked at Mother, at Hiska, then back again.

“What, what is it?” her voice quavered slightly in fear and sudden anxiety as her Mother bore into her with those icy-blue eyes.

“Shaela, your father is with the force readying themselves to come against EverShade Jungle. Shaela wavered, feeling her heart skip a beat.

“What? He is dead.” Mother shook her head.

“That was undone by you Shaela.” Shaela staggered, using her staff to steady her balance.

“How do you know all this? How could you possibly know this?” Shaela looked at Hiska, visibly trembling, then back at Mother, narrowing her eyes.

“Where is your Guardian?” It was more a demand than a question. “Where is she Mother?” Shaela stepped back a pace and looked around.

“She was sent to the border to help the others keep the Humans at bay.” In a single breath's time, Shaela unsheathed and plunged her ancient katana through her Mother. Her attack had been so swift, the woman who claimed to be her Mother had no chance to react. Hiska, himself, only had the space of time needed to blink.

Mother staggered back, screaming unnaturally, as if a multitude of voices were suddenly filled with pain and anguish.

“Hiska, Metha shin (Hiska, kill it)!” She snarled, forcing the hilt of her blade to the left, then cutting upward with all the force she could. Even as the their enemy's cry echoed through the Ever`Shades, it began to shift and stretch, molding quickly into something other than the form of the Harritt Catur Queen. With no hesitation, Hiska ripped his blade from its sheath and fell upon it, striking it multiple times, driving it back from his Ward.

In the space of time it took to take a single breath, what appeared to be living shadow hovered before her Guardian, her husband. As it moved to the side, evading Hiska's ongoing attacks, it bent its attention upon Shaela, focusing on her. Shaela leaped back from what appeared as a mass of shifting darkness.

Shaela's eyes instantly shaded to black as she bared her teeth, snarling at it as if she were a predatorial beast. Hiska kept between she and the shadow, keeping it at bay, landing multiple strikes against this unearthly foe. As Hiska's Guardian Blade cut through the apparition-like creature, it groaned, eyes burning deeper than the darkness of its body. Retreating from Hiska's onslaught, it lifted an arm her way, dripping with what Shaela could only describe as liquid shadow.

“You are doomed,” it cried in a thousand screaming voices, then rolled to the side, just avoiding the edge of Hiska's blade. Swiftly, before her Guardian could strike again, the apparition raised up like a dark vapor, and moved toward her. With incredible agility, Hiska cut their foe off, shielding her perfectly. Shaela knew what this thing was, and the recognition of it caused her heart to nearly fail.

This creature of terror was known as a Shadur, and came from the Underworld. She had no time to wonder how it had found her. While she had made some powerful, influential, allies and friends in the Underworld, she had also made enemies. This was one of them. Once the Shadur focused its sight upon its victim, it never forgot. Like bloodhounds, these creatures could track a shadow through the planes and dimensions with ease.

“No options, Hiska. It must be destroyed!” She spit as she felt a power begin to emanate within her. Then something occurred she never before

experienced. Pointing at the this living shade, she uttered words which came to her, though she did not understand them.

“Mekka shurin Uldarin!” She cried out, even as it began to fade away. Hiska's blade ripped through the creature's neck as laughter filled the morning air. As it dissipated, like steam in the still of a windless morning air, Shaela suddenly screamed and clutched at her throat, gagging violently, as she began choking on something that slid down into her stomach.

Dropping her katana, she fell to her knees, holding her mid-section, gripped with a terrible wave of pain. The earth began to spin as a flood overwhelming nausea gripped her, causing her to gag as something moved within her, struggling, as if trying to be free of her stomach. Falling forwards, she gagged again.

“Hiska, Hiska!” she desperately cried as thick strands of saliva began to drip from between her clenched teeth. Instantly, he was at her side, supporting her as she hung her head, gagging. As she screamed, Shaela felt something bite her from within, causing her to instantly convulse and vomit.

In despair, she cried out, revolted, shuddering in disgust as she retreated from the mass she had just created upon the ground. Shuddering, she spit several times, wiping her mouth with the back of her arm. In desperation, Shaela searched the area, growling in frustration, trying to locate an enemy she could no longer see.

Hiska quickly snatched up the Noth`Kur Aegis as he moved back with her, giving her his support until she relaxed. Crying out, Shaela gagged, then screamed, gripping her mid section. She then fell to the ground, still as stone.

Hiska made her comfortable, kneeling beside her, keeping watch over her as his mind spun, not understanding what had just happened. Feeling as though he was being watched, Shaela's Guardian turned his head, his ears flicking this way and that, searching, muscles tense, ready to spring into action. Scanning the density of the jungle about them, his green emerald eyes bore into every possible hiding place.

As he searched, Hiska felt a presence suddenly behind him. Spitting out a curse, he spun, lashing out with his blade. Shae`Hur evaded his attack, as he backed away, hissing frightfully, hackles rising in a terrifying display. Instantly, Hiska bowed himself to the ground in submission. Without hesitation the Giant Panther touched him on the back of the head, speaking in great earnest.

“Arise Guardian and bear your bride away from this area, now!” Hiska did as he was commanded, sheathing his blade and snatching Shaela from the ground. Glancing at their packs, he hesitated.

“Leave them! Just take her weapons! Go!” The great panther screamed, its hackles extended fully as it turned away from Hiska.

“I will take care of them!” Shae`Hur growled as it looked to the spot where Shaela had passed out. Bearing its teeth, Shae`Hur hissed, then filled the jungle with a terrible scream, lowering flat to the ground as something stirred within the dirt before him. As Hiska ran, bearing his wife, he heard Shae`Hur call out to them.

“Go to the Resting Grounds!” Hiska raced from the area, even as Shaela opened her eyes and looked back. In horror, she gasped. As Hiska bolted into the jungle, fleeing the scene, Shaela held out a hand towards the area, crying out, “It's mine, it's mine!” Struggling, she violently attempted to be free of Hiska, forcing him to overpower her as she spit at him, hate twisting into her face.

It wasn't easy, but he managed to retain her weapons as well as force her under control. As he constricted her body within a powerful embrace, she screamed once, as if a sudden weight had driven her to the ground.

At that moment, she closed her eyes and became limp. Hiska stopped and forced the scabbard from her waist and strapped in about his own hip. Snatching up her staves, he strapped them to his back, picked her up and sped on.

As they fled, Hiska heard the terrible screams of both The Great Panther and another creature abruptly engaged in battle. Birds and animals fled past him, scattering in the direction he faced, ignoring their natural fear of him as the sounds of a terrible confrontation raged and echoed through the jungle behind. It was not

often that Hiska felt true fear, yet, in truth, this was one of those moments.

As the sounds of the battle faded behind, relief began to flood his senses. Whatever it was their master had engaged was unwholesome. Its unnatural cries plagued Hiska's mind with a terrible panic and fear, along with seemingly every creature as he witnessed a literal exodus of all life from the area.

After a few hours, Hiska stopped to rest, panting heavily, trying to catch his breath and steady his mind. He placed Shaela carefully down upon a flat area of the ground and crouched beside her. Shivering, he looked back, eyes wide with apprehension. The battle had not ended suddenly, but had raged on viciously behind him until the sound of it faded away.

Without warning, Shaela lashed out and bit Hiska, then fell as if asleep. Recoiling, he looked down at her, placing a hand to his arm, feeling the pain of the deep bite she inflicted upon him.

No sooner had he moved back, than she stirred. Ready to subdue her again, he cautiously watched her. Slowly she turned her head and smiled at him with an innocence that reminding her of when he first captured her.

“Hiska, what's wrong?” Upon asking, she gagged, doubling over in pain, then fell unconscious. It was at that point that Shae`Hur entered into the area.

“Do not bow to me, not now.” Hiska noticed the many wounds the panther had received, some of which were deep and oozing blood. Growling in anger Shae`Hur looked at Hiska.

“I command that Shaela be taught the spell of Revealing. The amulet and sword must be revealed by her. It is time.” The huge black panther backed into the thickness of the jungle, whispering.

“She must reveal them.” Blending in with the normal shadows of the jungle, Hiska watched the King of the Ever`Shade Jungle vanish.

Without waiting, Hiska picked up Shaela and continued making his way quickly through the jungle, instinctively knowing the direction towards the Resting Grounds. As he ran, she moved, stopping him. Looking down at her, she seemed pale, far too pale for her fair complexion. As he looked down upon her

she, once again, opened her eyes, walking around as if searching for something. She struggled out of his hold and slowly stood.

“Hiska, I can go on foot.” She took a few steps and gagged, feeling a wave of nausea rise. “Okay, maybe not. Hiska, what's wrong, what's happening to me?” Badly frustrated, Hiska shook his head.

“I do not know, but Shaela, you must be told everything. Since you slept, the Humans have made war upon us. I suspect the man of shadow was sent by the Humans, though I could be wrong.” She thought about it, knowing she had killed some of them when she rescued Hiska. It angered her to think about them.

“Humans are as filthy as Ogres,” she seethed, connecting the Vahkrin attack with the information Hiska was giving her. It didn't make sense. There was no proof of the connection between the Humans and this last attack.

“Humans hired that Vahkrin? Hiska, are you saying the Humans and beings from the Underworld have formed an alliance, and are attacking our jungle homeland?” Hiska nodded, then shrugged.

“I have heard Mother, and others of different species, speak in council many times as you slept. Shaela, the jungle has been attacked numerous times in the last seven years.” Shaela felt a sudden chill at his words. She wrapped her arms tightly about herself, lowering her head.

“They are insane. What would be the purpose? What is wrong with them?” Shaela looked around at the beauty of the jungle. “I think I know what can be done to stop this madness Hiska.” The mancat looked at her, tilting his head slightly, listening.

“I think I can walk now, but slowly, and with some help. He offered an arm, which she took, and slowly stood to her full height. “Yes, I think I can manage it for a time.” She noticed the bite on Hiska's arm and pulled it to her, examining it closely. “You are hurt.” Hiska chuckled.

“I will be fine; it is not deep.” She looked at him and smiled, concerned.

“You always say that. I've never met anyone like you. All I can say is that I could not have said yes to a better man among the Humans or the Harritt Catur.”

He shifted uneasily and sniffed, pointing the way, provoking her to laugh, then gag. As they walked, her stomach began to rebelled.

Hiska watched Shaela as they traveled, paying particular attention to her as she stumbled through thick areas of undergrowth. She seemed fine for a few minutes, but her strength began to waver and her stomach threatened to tie itself in a knot if she did not stop and rest.

Hiska was soon carrying her again, nimbly making his way over logs and through the thick density of the woodlands. As he carried her, she thought of the high King; he would listen, he would help them. Nishane Asmond was just and true in all things, so the legends stated. All her life, she heard of how good and honest he was. She closed her eyes. The problem was, Nishane Asmond was not the King of this continent. Still, she had to try, for where he walked, power aided him.

It was after three days of him carrying her she no longer felt ill. Hiska seemed bent on keeping her in his line of sight, even to the point of being annoying. She noticed her name was no longer showing on the border of his Guardian Robes, which shocked her.

On the third morning, as she rested within the security of his embrace, she took the hem of his robes in her hand and fidgeted nervously, working up the courage to apologize to him, only she didn't know how to begin. It was a guilty conscience that compelled her to say what she wanted to say.

“Hiska, I need to tell you a few things which have been eating at me for a long time.” He nuzzle her lovingly, making her cry. At length, he placed a hand over her heart and whispered words she would never forget, even should she live until the last age of the world.

“I love you Shaela, that is all I care. Now, what do you need to tell me?” She smiled slightly, studying his eyes. Sighing, she shook her head and intertwined the fingers of both her hands in his.

“Hiska, when I left you, I was trying to protect you from the very same fate I have become a victim of. While in those deep caves, I was bitten by a Vampire. I

felt that if I did not leave, and as close as we were to each other, I would have destroyed everything we were . . . are.” Hiska looked at her, instantly shocked at her words. Narrowing his eyes, he extending a talon and raised it to her mouth, gently lifting her upper lip. As he did, she smiled for him, showing him the truth of her words. As he lowered his hand, tears began to roll down her face as she waited in silence for him to say something.

Hiska grunted at her, fully extended all the talons on both his hands and began raking her long beautiful hair, starting from her brow and ending at her back. Enjoying this sudden pleasure, she closed her eyes.

“Hiska, I met a man in the Underworld who eventually brought me back, and just in time to rescue you from our enemies.” Hiska abruptly stopped combing out her hair. She could feel a sudden tenseness in him and rolled her eyes, though he did not see. Looking up, Shaela reached up, placed a hand on the side of Hiska's face and shoved hard. Hiska shook off her hand, glaring at her, his face marked with open jealousy. Scratching him under the chin with a single nail, she grinned.

“I spent seven years with a male Arsia Vahkrin as well. What do you think we did in all that time? Would you care to guess?”

“Shut up, Shaela,” Hiska whispered quietly, obviously perturbed. Laughing all the more, she nuzzled in against him and sighed.

“If I was a traitor, Hiska, I would have never returned. I do like the jealousy; makes me feel special and wanted.” Her Guardian threw her a sharp glance, wrapping her tight in his arms.

“I am yours, you are mine.”

“With all my heart and soul, Hiska. Never ending loyalty. I am yours, and you are mine. Don’t you ever doubt that.” Satisfied, Hiska relaxed, remaining silent for quite some time. Feeling the urgent need to speak her mind, Shaela reached up and wrapped a hand about Hiska's head and began scratching his ears.

“Hiska, listen to what I have to say, then judge me for abandoning you. After I departed the Earthen Plane, my journey took me into the Underworld,

where I met others as Talon trained me. Some of them tried to kill me.” She took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly, evenly.

When she began her tale, Hiska was openly suspicious and jealous. Yet, as her story progressed, he became intensely interested and involved in the conversation, asking questions now and then. Within a few hours, Shaela fell silent, having finished her tale, leaving out no details.

“Hiska, I am so sorry for the pain I caused you. You have been ever loyal to me. I do not deserve you.” She fingered the border of his robes and sighed heavily.

“I wish my name would show itself once again. I wish I could repay you for all you have done for me.” Hiska looked down and placed a hand over hers. Slowly, her name reappeared in silver runes beneath her hand, spreading both ways along the entire border of his enchanted robes. Hiska sniffed, playing with her fingers.

“Shaela, all you had to do was say it. After you bit me, your name faded. I thought you had turned on me.” As if he had just slapped her, she grabbed his arm.

“How are you not turned? How is this possible?” Hiska tapped his blade and robes.

“The Guardian is immune to the bite of the Lycanthrope and the Vampire.” Shaela sighed in relief.

“I’m so sorry I bit you -” “You have paid me back ten-fold for what little things I have easily done for you. You are mine; I am yours. Shaela, you have gifted me with a wife, filling my life with solid meaning. You have made me whole.” Bursting out in emotional laughter, she threw her arms about his neck and nuzzled him with a bit of force.

“I love you,” she laughed, kissing the side of his face. He repeated the same and stood, gently lifting her to her feet. Once up, Hiska looked about the area and blew out a breath.

“Shall we continue?” he asked, offering her an arm. Slipping her hand

about his arm, she pointed in the direction they should go. As they began to travel, Hiska seemed puzzled about something.

“What does it mean you have Vahkrin blood flowing through your veins?” She shrugged and sardonically replied.

“I suppose it means I am now a horrid, evil, creature. What are your thoughts on this?” Hiska smirked, ignoring her for a while.

“Hiska, you now have Vahkrin blood flowing through your veins as well. I had to do it, or The Dark would have consumed you.” She grinned up at him, to which he continued to ignore her.

A little more than a week later, Hiska and Shaela entered the Resting Grounds. Hiska called for the Mystic and was instantly answered by a large number of Prima Catur, who rose up silently from the tall grasses all about them. Hiska spit out a vicious challenge, ripping his blade from its sheath as Shaela pointed to the forest about them and began to cast a spell.

“Stop!” The Mystic's voice echoed like thunder through the area, forcing all to cover their ears in the attempt to block out the pain of her cry. Abandoning the spell, Shaela turned in the direction of Mother's voice as the Mystic sped from the trees towards them, her Guardian close at hand.

She raced along the tree line and stopped before them both. Hiska instantly dropped to the ground, bowing in subservience and respect, dropping his blade and placing his forehead to the grasses beneath him. Quickly, the Harritt Catur Queen touched the back of his head.

“Rise up, we must council. Follow me . . . all of you.” As Mother turned away, her eyes smiled at Shaela. Picking up his blade, both Hiska and Shaela broke into a run, passing within arms reach of several Prima Catur, who stared at the both of them without blinking.

Soon they found themselves in company with Mother, her Guardian, Hiska, an old robed Prima with half a left ear, and a number of others, among which she recognized as Kron, the Centaur who had come to her long ago. With perfect formality, Kron bowed. Smiling back, Shaela bowed, suddenly thrilled to see Jenthra, as well as Jewl!

As Jenthra bowed, Jewl threw her a surprised look, then burst into tears. Shaela discreetly waved at Jewl, feeling more than relieved to see her well.

After brief greetings, all became dead silent. Shaela felt very nervous at the presence of the Prima Catur, and wondered why they were here of all places. Walking over to Jewl, she stopped, looking her up and down.

“Not a day over twenty,” she whispered, then threw herself into a tight embrace, laughing.

“I thought you were dead,” Shaela whispered, not wanting any of the Prima to hear. Jewl, sighed and kissed her neck.

“I am so happy to see you. Please, forgive me, I beg you.” Placing her lips to Jewl's ear, she returned Jewl's affection with a kiss.

“There is nothing to forgive. We are both well, and that is all that matters. Did you bring any of that golden drink with you?” Snickering, Jewl squeezed Shaela tight.

“Yes,” she stated with a tinge of mischief in her voice. The Mystic secretly rolled her eyes at her Guardian, causing the corner of his mouth to reveal the slightest smile. Hiska greeted Kron formally and began speaking with him in a hushed tone. After a while, the Mystic turned to her arch enemy, holding up a hand for silence, drawing all eyes to her.

“Shaela, Hiska, this is Silvara from the Prima Catur Clan. Silvara, this is Shaela, and this is Hiska, her Guardian.” The old Prima stepped back and looked at Shaela directly. Reluctantly, Shaela approached Silvara, slowly, cautiously. As she neared, Silvara eyed her seemingly without emotion. She bowed in respect, remembering her manners, as well as their attack so long ago. Without hesitation, she spoke, seeing he was unwilling to speak to her.

“Milord, I am sincerely surprised, yet honored, by your presence.” The old Prima bowed slightly and whispered.

“I have indeed heard of you, and it be my pleasure to finally meet you in the flesh.” Shaela forced a smile and continued.

“Thank you. I see we are brought together -“ The old Prima held up a hand, cutting her off, then looked to Mother.

“May I have a few minutes alone with Shaela?” Mother gave her approval, beckoning Hiska to her side. Reluctantly, Hiska obeyed, narrowing his eyes at the old Prima once in an open warning. Ignoring him, Silvara offered her an arm, which she accepted, not daring to offend him.

As they departed, the entire gathering watched in silence as Shaela glanced back to see fear in Hiska's face. After they were out of sight and alone, Silvara

turned to Shaela, glaring at her.

“Child, what do you wish to tell me?” Shaela was taken back his question. Removing her arm from his, as if suddenly aware the old Prima might poison her, she stared at him.

“You are perceptive milord. When we were introduced, I yearned to tell you that I wish, with all my heart, our people could live in harmony.” The Prima cackled rudely, sending chills cascading over her arms and neck.

“Human, we will never condone any action that will establish peace between your people and mine.” Shaela thought for a moment, her brows creasing together.

“Then why are you here?” Why have you come to the Resting Grounds?” The old Prima looked around, as if expecting some form of treachery to occur.

“Don't trifle with me Shaela. You Human's infiltrate and disease everything you come in contact with. Do you not think I know why you have wormed your way into the trust of the Harritt Catur?” Shaela's face paled.

“Milord, I am the wife of a Harritt Catur. I have killed Humans to rescue my Husband out of their filthy hands. I do not wish to attempt to sway your judgement, but know this, I am not in league with them.” Silvara waved her comment away, sneering at her contemptuously.

“Sacrifice to gain the ultimate victory.” Shaela stopped the debate instantly by not replying to his ludicrous comment, knowing Mother had invited him here for a reason. Instantly she unbuckled her blade and handed it to Silvara.

“So you know I speak truly, take this blade as a token of truth milord . . . it has not yet been revealed. From what I know, once revealed, it will bond with its owner, granting the one who possesses it power beyond what he or she has.” Silvara looked at the blade for a moment, then slowly, cautiously, reached out and took it. He then unsheathed her katana and, in great curiosity, studying the runes etched upon its surface. As Silvara studied each rune, his eyes widened in disbelief and shock. Slowly, his cold eyes fell from the blade to her. With some difficulty, he swallowed.

“Where did you get this blade?” She looked at it in wonder, as she always had, and gently grazed two fingers slowly over the runes.

“It was a gift from an Arsia Vahkrin, in who's company I spent a number of years in training within the Underworld.” A sudden wonder filled his eyes as she nodded solemnly his way, lowering her hand from the blade she had been warned never to lose. She was taking a terrible risk.

“I only want what is best for our people milord. My ties with the Humans I was raised with is severed and dead. I speak the truth, and if I must sacrifice what I prize highly to prove it to you, so be it. We are at war with each other, yes, but I will never let those filthy monsters invade our homeland. Any who dare try, sword or no sword, I . . . will . . . kill.” She spit out the last word with such vicious hate, she began to tremble as her eyes shaded to black.

Witnessing this dark transformation, Silvara froze, wary of the change that transformed her countenance from innocense to a threat.

“I was going to reveal the blade, and begin a never ceasing hunt for those who would bring to end the peace of our people. Milord, if you wish to take this blade in trade for giving me the chance to prove what I say, then accept it as a covenant of peace between you and I. I do not need this blade to make enemies fear and avoid the EverShade Jungle.” Shaela bowed slightly and departed from the presence of Silvara, returning to the others in silence. As she returned, all eyes fell upon her as she neared, followed by Silvara, who had concealed the blade within his robes.

During the next few hours a grand council was held, in which time each present gave ideas on how to best deal with the situation at hand. All present were heard as all present listened and gave their opinions on the matter. The issue seemed clear, as everyone seemed united in the fact that the Humans needed to be put in check.

Hiska was allowed to speak, yet declined, as did his father. Soon the Mystic rose and gestured toward Shaela, who was listening carefully. All eyes fell upon her as Mother sat down in silence, watching her with unblinking eyes. Shaela had

no lack of what to say.

“Before we go to war, I wish to travel to Gaunten and request the immediate assistance of King Nishane Asmond. I'm sure if he was informed of our current dilemma, he would intervene. His decree is final, and would minimize retaliation against us, should we take matters into our own hands. In any case, we must end this madness - a madness my once people instigated. If lives are spared, and this conflict is settled, the better off we are. If I cannot recruit his favor, I will lead the assault against the Humans until they surrender, or become extinct.” She sat down, hearing a murmur spread throughout the gathering until Mother held up her hand.

“What do you say on this matter, Silvara, High King of the Prima Catur.” The aged Prima stood and slowly looked around.

“First, before I divulge to you my own course of action, I wish to ask the Human woman a question.” The Mystic nodded. Silvara turned to Shaela.

“The journey to Gaunten poses two difficulties, of which I would like to know how you would overcome them. First: The time it would take would be well over a full year to travel there and back again, in which time this conflict could well be over. Nishane Asmond rules the Zurkel Mainland - this is the Tchurdjen Westlands. Second: He is a Human King, and not to be trusted. Why would he side with us?” Shaela stood.

“To answer your first question, I can summon an ally and personal friend to fly me there and back in but a fortnight's time. As for him being Human, is he not a just King?” The Mystic rose up in silence, interrupting as she slightly raised a hand, signifying she would speak her mind. Silvara nodded, giving the Harrit Catur Queen permission to speak.

“King Nishane Asmond is not Human, but Sandarin, an ancient race thought to have been wiped out during the Age of War long ago.” She then sat down in silence, nodding at Silvara. Shaela looked at the Prima Catur King, holding out a hand.

“Give me one fortnight, and I will beseech the King, who claims authority

over all the lands from the borders of the northern shore to the south, and from the east to the far reaches of the west. He is also confederate with the King of this land as well. In fact, if I am not mistaken, they are trusted friends and allies. If I fail, I will, myself, infiltrate into the ranks of my once people and wreak havoc among them until they either withdraw their design on our home, or until I am killed.” She looked at Mother, then the others in silence as she sat down, waiting for a response.

Silvara remained standing in his own silent thoughts for a time as all eyes turned upon him. Shaking his head slightly, he opened his robe and brought forth the blade Shaela had given him. He walked over to her, grabbed her hand, placed it back into her possession and turned to the others.

“It seems I may have misjudged this Human female. I agree with her offer.” Shaela smiled at him, stood, and fastened the belt and scabbard back about her waist, highly relieved, though she did not show it. Mother threw her a dark look, mingled with shock, as well as relief. Ignoring Mother, Shaela looked up at Silvara.

“Thank you,” she whispered. He turned to her and smirked.

“Let us all see just how loyal you are to our homeland. If you are not back at the end of one fortnight, I will lead a march against our enemies, ending their tyranny. They will never harass another living soul in this jungle again. I hope you will all support a justified movement if it comes to it.” Silvara glared at them all as he returned to his place, sitting down in silence, leaving all stunned at what had just occurred. Mother pointed at Shaela.

“Bring your ally before the council as quickly as you may. We wish to judge for ourselves if this ally of yours is worthy of the task you wish to accomplish.” Shaela nodded, knowing full well she was doing this to satisfy the others present, for Talon had previously come to Mother.

“Yes master. Milady, just so it is known, this ally I speak of is Vahkrin.” Quickly Mother stood and pointed at Shaela.

“Be that as it may, bring this Vahkrin before us and we all will judge if this

dweller of the Underworld can stand worthy to aid us. Shaela, I wish to interrogate your ally . . . now. Go!” There was a cold subtlety in her voice that stilled the movement of all but Silvara, who narrowed his eyes at Shaela as she arose.

“Yes Mo - master.” Mother raised an eyebrow at her as Shaela stood and withdrew from the council, walking into an open area just within the border of the jungle. She liked how Mother had been so stern with her. It was a good show.

Once a suitable area was picked out, she climbed upon a stump, created by the Humans. For the first time, since she had rescued Hiska, she felt numb. If these Humans wanted war, she would be the first to draw their blood. Indeed, she already had. Sighing, she shook her head and began to meditate upon contacting Talon.

“I wish I had done it differently.” She whispered sadly. “Bane, I need council . . . I need help milord.” She looked about the area, surprised to see him standing nearby, gazing toward the city. His sudden presence nearly caused her to nearly fall from the stump. Catching her balance, she looked at him and smiled.

“It's you,” she whispered in total admiration. Bane threw her a smile in return.

“I notice it is you as well.” He winked at her as she chuckled, resisting the urge to go and embrace him. She looked over at the others, who were not far away, watching her.

“Can they see you?” Bane shook his head, unconcerned.

“No. I do not often show myself openly. Shaela, after all this mess is cleared up, I will come for you. I wish to take you on a journey.” Shaela became suddenly worried.

“Master, am I in trouble?” she asked, throwing him a charming smile. Bane chuckled, returning her affection.

“No, but you need guidance, Shaela. If you do not keep yourself in check, I suspect you will devour others in your lust for power.” Jumping down from the stump, she walked to Bane. As she neared him, Bane, the Jahtha of Death, held

out a hand to her. Taking his hand, Shaela waited to see what would happen next.

“Thank you.” Lowering her head in submission, she could not help but smile as she detected a feeling that washed through her, entirely overcoming her senses. Slowly, Bane released her hand, his fingers sliding through hers.

“Shaela, when I am near you, the attraction you feel is the Essence of Death -- of which you are evolving into. I will explain some things to you, and I need you to listen carefully.” She nodded and glanced at the others, who were standing as before, waiting. Bane looked at the others, perceiving her concern.

“Shaela, what we will speak of now, and all the time I will spend with you, is but a moment for them.” Confused, Shaela stood in wonder, gazing into Bane's eyes.

“How can this be?” She whispered. Bane tucked a lock of loose hair behind her ear and smiled down on her.

“I am Bane, Jahtha of Death. I did not gain my position and title without first learning some tricks.” Shaela felt tears begin to cascade each side of her face, though she knew not why.

“Jahtha?” Bane nodded patiently and looked to the horizon, slipping into a waking dream.

“I was once like you, or like you were, a mortal being, living my life as it was meant to be. Then something occurred, setting me upon a course, complicated by yet something else and so forth until I am now what I am.” Shaela thought about it for only a moment before responding.

“Like me.”

“Like you, yes. Shaela, I became immersed in the workings of Death so deeply, I became as if I were Death itself. But, even in this, I retain my honor; a difficult road for us who travel Death's Path. I delved into the arts of necromancy, like you, and began to understand how Death weaves its webs of destiny among the beings of Utaemia. I grew in power and wisdom, eventually becoming great in the realm of what others fear most above all else. Others greater than I aided counseled with me on this path. I listened and learned, applying their teachings

and advice. Eventually, when my power was great enough, I earned the title of Jahtha. Do you understand what I am saying?”

“I think so.” Bane sat down on a stump and looked at her.

“The reason I was drawn to you was due to your evolutionary bonding with the Realm of Death. Shaela, when you were in the Void of Darkness, what were your thoughts?” Shaela recalled everything, shuddering at the memory.

“I envisioned the fabled Reaper, the cloaked entity bearing the scythe.”

“That, Shaela, is the path you willingly chose in ignorance of the consequences. That path leads to war and destruction. Bane pointed to the north, towards the city she was born and raised in.

“It has already begun. You fueled it when you attacked the city and killed the Governor. Now that Governor is a martyr - a most powerful influence and weapon a faction can have.” He stopped suddenly, a look of care etching into his face. Comprehending, Shaela lowered her head and wept.

“What of my parents?”

“You already know the answer to that.” Shaela felt the strength leave her legs. She collapsed to the ground and cried out, hopelessness tearing at her insides. She felt Bane take her up into his arms and hold her as she writhed in inner turmoil and pain.

“He lied to me. He told me my father was with the Humans who were marching to war against us.” She buried her face in his chest and wept as he held her, caressing the back of her head.

“My dear, I only told you this so you would have closure, as well as more wisdom in the choices you will make in the future. Eventually, you will find the strength and courage to move on and let your father go. Shaela, it is time to move on. Yes, you were lied to.” For a long while, she wept bitterly as Bane supported her. After a time, Bane pulled her gently from him and wiped her tears away.

“Shaela, I am your mentor now, if you will have me.” She nodded and sniffed, grateful that Bane would take the time to help her understand. Exhausted, she looked deep into Bane's eyes, struggling not to fall in love with him. She

forced a little smile. It wasn't much of a smile, but it was the best she could do.

“What do I do now?” Smiling brightly, Bane caressed her hair, openly enjoying her.

“Watch yourself Shaela, you may just work your way into my favor.” As Bane had held her, she had felt a small part of her begin to heal.

“I must admit, you are quite likeable. Oh, and you bit me - I remember - you bit me.” Bane laughed.

“I admit, I did. I had to empower you with the will to resist you Bloodlust. I also gifted you with an endurance against the sun's power.” She thought a moment and then realized she was still being held by him. She also realized she was still holding him about the neck. Slowly, she forced her arms to release. Bane chuckled and released her as well, again, a look of seriousness in his demeanor.

“Shaela, the first thing I want you to remember is to never take the life of another if at all possible. This will be against your evolving nature, but it will be possible.” Confused, Shaela shook her head.

“I tried, but when - ” Bane held up a hand.

“Just practice self control. In the end, if you master your gifts, I will take you to me. Shaela, I need to tell you one more thing, and I doubt you will like what you hear.” Bane sighed, as if hesitating, making her uncomfortable.

“Bane, be straight with me. What is it?” He looked back at the others, still waiting for her as before.

“You will never age, but your husband will.” A cold wave washed through her as she looked over at the group. Spotting Hiska, she now realized he would one day pass on into the next world, leaving her behind and alone.

“But I gave him my blood . . . he was in the void . . . he's alive . . .”

“A gift from you. You are not Arsia, nor do you have the power to grant a Deathless existence, save it be you feed from another and let them live. Shaela, you are Deathless, Hiska is not.” She sat down and thought for a moment.

“I can't die?” Bane shook his head.

“Of natural aging, disease and sickness, no, but you can be killed. Don't pretend you are invincible.” She thought on his words, her mind catching on a thought she was reluctant to speak of. Bane watched her as she worked up the courage to talk about something she had never spoken of to anyone but Hiska.

“Children. Bane, can I have children?” Bane suddenly shifted uneasily and shook his head slowly, reluctantly, causing her to hang her head and burst into tears.

Bane's demeanor clouded with sorrow, a look of understanding darkening his face. The mighty ruler of the grave looked down upon this once Human, witnessing her heart break before his eyes. With all the power he possessed, he did not have the power to solve this one problem.

She felt worthless. She was an only child, and knew it would be through her to carry her family name and lineage into the future. Now that she could never have children, her family line was broken; her name would vanish forever. Of all the information given her, this stabbed her more deeply than any attack she had ever experienced. She would remain young while Hiska would age and pass on before her very eyes. The magnitude of this was too much for her to bear.

Looking up at Bane, she saw the truth in the look he now gave her. She did not, could not, blame him. She had gone with Jewl. All this was her own fault. The sudden weight of what she had done - what she now was - began to torture her. With all her soul, she yearned to go back in time to bring everything back into its proper order. She missed her mother and father.

Bane looked upon her with a solemn expression, watching her inner struggle. Slowly she stood and cleared her throat.

“What now milord?” She stated emotionally through clenched teeth, trying to retain her composure and control. He looked at the others, who were yet waiting for her.

“You should willingly embrace what you have chosen. Do what you can for these people. Use your power to help put an end to this escalating conflict and then return to the love of your husband. For a season, you will find happiness and

joy with him . . . if you both pass through this trial unscathed.” She blinked, fighting back the tears and she glanced at Hiska.

Nearing Bane, she wrapped her arms about his neck, clenched his hair into both fists and kissed him. Allowing her affection, he embraced her, smiling.

“I will come for you in the end.” Shaela suddenly came to, standing upon the stump, the vision, or daydream of her kissing him, vanishing. As she turned her attention to Bane, she found herself alone, being watched in earnest by the others who were now moving about, just as before.

Walking about, she scanned the area, but saw no sign of Bane. She wished this had never happened. Closing her eyes, she meditated, reaching out to Talon with her thoughts, calling to him.

“Talon, I need your help.” Wiping her still flowing tears from her face, she pleaded. “Please Talon, you said we were linked, that if I ever needed you, you would know it; you said we were connected. I’m at the border of the jungle, just into the jungle at the Resting Grounds. You need not fear coming here, I made sure of it. You are expected this time.” Shaela sat down on the stump, frustrated. What was she doing wrong? Talon never told her how they were connected; he merely stated they were. She should have learned more about this connection. Looking over at the others, she noticed they were talking to each other, though she could not hear them.

Shaela waited.

Within a few minutes a point of light formed before her, startling her. Watching it, she stood, hoping it was him. The point of light stretched and expanded slowly until she could see the figure of a winged man within the light. Slowly he materialize until she could see him clearly. Then the light melted about his feet as if it had suddenly changed to liquid.

Shaela smiled and attempted to hide the fact that she was crying as the light diminished to a faint illumination upon the ground, slowly fading away, leaving but a few sparkling points of light, like tiny stars all about him. He looked at her and bowed. In return she walked over to Talon, hardly resisting the urge to

embrace him. She hadn't realized just how much she had missed him as his eyes softened upon her approach.

“Just so you know, we are not alone. Thank you for coming.” He adjusted his wings to his back as he looked over at the others, now watching intently.

“What can I do for you Shaela? Anything, you name it.” She shook her head.

“Not just yet Talon. How have you been?” He smiled, openly charmed by her.

“Well, thank you. There are many who now whisper your name as a legend in the Underworld.” She made a face and shook her head.

“Me, a legend?” she laughed. “Then you must have come to visit and gain my approval.” She felt highly amused at this exchange of nonsense. Talon shook his head, his darker than black eyes sparkling in amusement.

“I would do anything to gain your approval my lady, you know that well.” She grinned, baring her teeth at him. Stepping so that she was between Talon and the others, she let her hand brush his.

“I've missed you,” she whispered, fresh tears filling her eyes.

“And I, you. I hope things are well for you?” Shaela shrugged.

“Things are, well, complicated. Here, there is turmoil between the Humans and these people, who represent each of their races. It isn't good.” Talon looked over at those watching on and shook his head, a grin spreading across his face as if something amused him.

“Do you always get yourself into trouble?” Tears abruptly crawled down her face as she nodded. She tried to control her emotions, but it was no use.

“When I was young, my mother and father went out. After they left, I snuck into the wine cellar and had my first taste of Elven Spirits. I think that is what started it all. I think, if I had not done that, I would not be here in this mess.” Talon laughed heartily.

“Shaela, I hope you never change. You are the graying of the skies in the morning to me; a light in shining darkness.” She wiped her face, wishing she were

alone with Talon so they could talk for, oh, a year or two, but pressing matters would not allow that for now.

“Thank you Talon. Can I introduce you to the head of each race and faction within my home? Could I also introduce you to my husband?” He grinned and nodded, holding out an arm, which she instantly slipped a hand through. As they began walking over to the others, she squeezed his arm and whispered.

“I miss you so much.” As they approached, she gripped Talon's arm as tight as she could, enjoying his presence.

After introductions were finished, Shaela left Talon to talk with Mother and motioned Hiska to follow her.

She had suspected there would be some tension between her husband and Talon. To her relief, there was nothing but cordial pleasantries. She felt his left arm raise up under her right. She motioned into the jungle.

“Hiska, let's just walk for a while, can we?” He nodded, leading her into the density of the home she loved so very much. When they were a good distance from the others, she took his hand and smiled up at him, her heart warming at his wonderful presence.

“Shall we take our honeymoon to Gaunten?” Hiska nodded, then threw hew an inquisitive look.

“Shaela, how can this Vahkrin help us get there?” She looked back through the thickness of the jungle, as if she could see Talon, a slight smile playing across her lips, then returned her attention to him.

“Talon can shift into dragon form.” Hiska was openly surprised. “These Vahkrin, oh Hiska, if you only knew some of them. They are not the terrible beings most everyone whispers about in hatred. Some of them are ignorant and biased, just as any of the races, only sometimes more acute.” She waited for his response, but he only embraced her, nuzzling her affectionately.

Shaela thought flying had definite advantages. For one, it was faster than walking. Talon soared high into the night sky as they both held on tight to the horn of the dragon saddles furnished by Mother. She looked back at Hiska and laughed.

“I never thought I would see you nervous!” She yelled as Talon shifted his flight around a mass of bats heading to some destination, on an adventure of their own. Hiska only growled at her in response, provoking Talon to laughter.

“Shaela's right, it is a good night to soar!” Talon roared. Shaela bared her teeth at Talon playfully, thoroughly enjoying herself. She remembered her first flight with Talon; it scared her too. She heard Talon's voice upon the wind.

“You are a natural Shaela; have you done this before?” Shaela laughed at the dragon, recalling many times during her training when she went up into the skies with him, soaring over the Vermillion Forest.

The next few days passed too quickly as they sped on over the Navarian Sea toward Gaunten, the capital city of the Zurkel Mainland. Shaela never questioned why they had no encounters on the journey.

“Talon,” she called out, “you are scaring away the prey!”

“How much prey resides in the open air? Would you like me to dive and search beneath the surface of this grand sea?”

“No, no!” Hiska called out, causing Shaela to laugh as her hair whipped across her face. She leaned back and shook her head, relieving her face of her arm-length strands of hair, laughing happily.

“Don't do that! I would hate to remove the bones again from your mouth!” She gave talon a look of disgust as he chuckled in a deeper than baritone voice.

“Shaela, the pleasure would be all mine, I'm sure!” She nodded and looked back to see that Hiska was faring well. A few days of practice had weathered him out of his nervousness. She snapped her teeth at him playfully, but he only ignored her.

One night as they soared like a comet over the shores of the Zurkel

Mainland, Shaela noticed thousands of tiny lights far ahead of them begin to steadily appear on the surface of the ground as they rounded a long chain of mountains. She pointed, looking back at Hiska.

“Is that Gaunten?” Hiska shook his head and yelled out.

“Iron Keep! If Talon is detected, they will come after us! If they do, we are in trouble!” Talon, hearing Hiska's warning and shifted his flight, making a wide detour around the area. Shaela was naturally curious and pressed Hiska for more information.

“Who lives there,” she shouted. Hiska shook his head.

“What?” The wind was impairing his hearing somewhat, so she repeated herself, raising her voice.

“Who lives there!” Hiska looked to the side as they made their way past the citadel at a great distance.

“Sardakk Elf nation!” Shaela nodded, now knowing why Hiska had given a quick warning to Talon. She had read about them. They were very strict and had an honor code which they lived by to their graves. She knew the Sardakk and Vahkrin were mortal enemies, thus the reason Talon had instantly changed his flight path.

From the look of the lights, which dotted the main fortress of Iron Keep, she guessed the main castle was at least half the height of the mountain it set against. By the look of it, it ascended well over a thousand feet, possibly further.

“Their courtyard can hold the city I grew up in ten times over, and with room to spare!” Hiska gripped the back of her dress, up by the neck as she began to lean out.

“Shaela . . .” Shifting back into proper position, she looked back, throwing Hiska a smile.

“Love you,” she mouthed, nearly breaking his concentration. Bearing his teeth at her, Hiska silently threw her a predatorial look, then raked his claws threw her hair. Oh, how she loved this man!

As they sped down over the far side of the mountain, Shaela wondered

about the people within Iron Keep. She wondered - if she ever visited - if they would allow her entrance into their city.

She watched the lights of the castle and grounds fade away as Talon sped them on into the night towards their destination. They had been traveling now for three days and were well over halfway to Gaunten. At this rate, they would be there in a little more than one more day. The journey there and back would be ended in ten days time. Leaning back into him, Shaela grabbed his neck and pulled his ear to her mouth.

“We have not stopped to rest. Are you alright?”

“The training I have gone through allows me to rest little, yet retain my vigor. I am well, thank you.” Pulling him into a loving kiss, Shaela sighed.

“After this is over, I want to rest. Peace, Hiska, peace.” Understanding, he secured her in the shelter of his arms as they soared on.

After she returned, she wanted to see this insane conflict end, then vanish into the jungle with Hiska. She suspected some form of treachery from the future, and so planned on nothing definite.

A day and a half later, Talon began his descent into a wooded area quite a ways outside a city, a citadel that seemed endless. In fact, Shaela noticed Gaunten made Iron Keep look small in comparison. She was taken back by the vast tracks of land within the high walls which spanned about a city so far, it seemed no one could ever explore it on foot in a year's time.

She had not marveled long before the city was lost from site as they landed in a forested area. After dismounting, Talon shifted back to his natural form and turned to them both.

“Here is where I leave you both. When you are finished, if you need me again, come to this spot and call on me.” Talon looked back, at if he had heard something, then looked back at Shaela.

“Farewell Shaela . . . a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Hiska.” He closed his eyes and began chanting. Slowly that same liquid-like light enveloped him in brilliance, engulfing him until only his silhouette could be seen. Slowly the

brilliance of the spell dwindled until only Shaela and Hiska remained.

After finding themselves alone, Hiska turned and stepped to her side, lifting his left arm up under her hand. Soon they began making their way through the forest of what Shaela thought to be the most peculiar looking trees. As she passed by the last one, at the forest's edge, she glided her hand over its surface. Instantly, she felt the exact same energy, the same life, flowing through this tree, as the others in her own woodlands. Hiska watched her in silence as she caught his eye and smiled. Laying his hands upon her shoulders, he gently turned her to face him.

“Shaela, when you go before the High King, you must be fully honest; hold no truth back from him.” She reached up and placed a hand on his arm.

“Shall I inform the King that I love you so much, that at times I am at a loss to express it?” Hiska smiled slightly, his eyes narrowing.

“Only if he specifically asks.” Closing in, she embraced him and sighed, feeling comforted by his presence, as well as haunted. One day he would die, and she would live on, alone. Everyone she loved would vanish from her life. She was suddenly determined to either help Hiska become as she . . . Deathless, or somehow gain back what she once was. She had two extremely valuable possessions on her person she would be willing to trade or barter for favors which might lead to her desire. Hiska tightened his embrace about her and sighed as she and her thoughts melted into his arms.

She knew, in a few moments time, she could devastate his happiness with the information Bane had given her. She had to be careful in future decisions that would begin the task of making them both equal . . . in life, or in death. Confused, she rested her right hand upon Hiska's left arm, throwing him a look that, by the beating of his heart, instantly caused him to worry.

As they emerged from the forest, they stopped, noticing a road teeming with travelers. They crossed a field of green to get to the road, and as they neared, Shaela spotted a wagon driven by a man who she nearly mistook for her father.

She abruptly stopped and stared as it neared, rolling at a steady pace toward

her. She was shocked to notice the woman sitting beside the man resembled her mother. Stricken motionless, as if suddenly petrified, she watched as the wagon approached. What added to her shock was the young woman with dark, back-length hair, who came out from the back of the wagon to sit between them. As the wagon rolled near, her eyes widened in disbelief. It was them; her family! She choked with emotion as the man patted his daughter on the knee and laughed.

“Happy birthday my dear,” he stated in her father's voice. Shaela felt cold inside as the man looked down and repeated the same to her as the wagon rolled by.

“Happy birthday my dear.” Shaela would have fallen to her knees if Hiska had not caught her. She felt strange, detached from herself as her staff fell from her hand to the earth.

A cold wind abruptly blew, caressing her in its icy fingers. Wrapping her arms about herself, she blew out a breath, as if the weather were suddenly chilled. Shivering, as if she were in a sudden downpour of freezing, ice-cold, rain, she choked, trying to breath.

Hiska's voice came to her, as if from a distance, speaking something to her she could not make out. Scenes flashed before her eyes by the dozens; men speaking strangely over her, women smiling down at her, stern faces radiating wrath and power. She saw the ceilings of chambers and the blue of the heavens above. Amidst all of these scenes, there was always a hand holding hers. She could feel it, though she never set her eyes upon it.

Confusion set in, stripping her senses, stealing her ability to understand. Then there was night, pitch dark night. She felt as though she were holding her breath under deep unclear water. Her lungs burned like fire as she tried to take in a breath of precious air. Concentrating all her willpower, she struggled for oxygen, and failed. *I'm dying*, she despaired. *No, I won't end like this!* With all her strength she managed to suck in a breath.

With a gasp, Shaela opened her eyes, sucking in air as she arched her back and struggled. Panting heavily, she caught her breath and relaxed, not

understanding, nor comprehending what anything was. She tried to speak, but could not focus her words.

Panicking, she writhed upon a soft surface . . . and caught hold on what she lay upon; a bed. It was a bed, yes, a bed. Slowly her mind began to clear enough to form words which somehow made sense.

“What am I?” She whispered. She heard herself say something else, but did not understand. She tried again as she saw an unfamiliar face appear above hers.

“What it . . . what are . . .” Shaela swallowed hard and groaned. She felt her head lift and something press against her mouth. She felt something moist upon her lips. Slowly she swallowed the liquid, feeling it slide down her throat, soothing her dry and parched mouth.

“Easy young lady, you've had quite a spell. Rest.” It was a man's voice, though she did not recognize it. Weakly she looked up and strained to focus on him, but all she could make out was his blue eyes and his smile. She did not trust him, nor anyone who smiled at her. They were trying to destroy her . . . something was wrong.

Darkness crept into the area, blotting out the light, until all she could see was a shaded blanket of dark all about her. closing her eyes, she relaxed, forgetting all the strangers who sought her demise.

Shaela opened her eyes to the soft glowing light of a lantern next to her. Concerned, Hiska looked at her as she threw him a weak smile.

“I remember when I first saw you,” she whispered, stirring to position herself to face him as he knelt beside the bed she lay upon. His hand gripped her's as he gently stroked her hair. “I remember those green eyes in the dark as you leapt across the stream. You really frightened me.” Hiska looked up, and then back down at her, a look of worry fading from his face.

“I am sorry Shaela. If it is of any comfort to you now, you are the one who frightens me.” Weakly, she laughed.

“So, we are frightened of each other. What better relationship could anyone

have?" Hiska managed a slight laugh as another snickered from the base of the bed she lay upon. Shaela looked towards her feet, startled.

"Oh, I thought we were alone." A tall blonde man, clad in silver-white plated armor, smiled at her and shook his head.

"I am Orin of the Guild of Vannar. You have been very sick Shaela. In reality, I am surprised you are alive." Shaela shrugged, then looked at Hiska questioningly. Hiska drew in a deep breath and sighed, as if relieved. He looked ragged and exhausted to her, as if he had just returned from a fortnight's journey in which there was no sleep. Orin stepped around to the side of the bed and placed a hand on Hiska's shoulder.

"You should go get some rest. I'll take care of her." He nodded and stood, looking down at Shaela, obviously concerned.

"I will see you soon. Orin can be fully trusted with anything we know." He bent down and kissed her on the forehead and brushed her hair back. He then departed from the room.

Orin watched him go, then turned his attention to Shaela, who suddenly found herself fidgeting in his presence, fully aware that he was indeed a stranger, and that she was only dressed in a simple gown, a blanket concealing her. She checked the blanket to make sure she was covered as best she could, noticing all her personal belongings hanging neatly on pegs on the wall behind the man. It made her more nervous to see the blade she was strictly advised to keep near her next to her belongings as well. Orin smiled down at her.

"Pray, don't make yourself uneasy. He reached over and grabbed a glass of water on a small table near the head of the bed, placed a gentle hand behind her neck and gently lifted her head, helping her to drink.

"Only drink half of it. Shaela, you are within the Guild of Vannar, safe. You were brought here three days ago, unconscious, stricken with a curse, which my master has successfully exorcized from you. As was said, you are lucky to be alive through such an ordeal." Shaela swallowed half the cup of water. As Orin withdrew his hand, she laid her head back and looked at him, feeling weak.

“Sir, that is the second time you have said that.” Orin smiled down at her and placed the glass on the table.

“Said what?” Shaela's countenance darkened as she lowered her eyes. “Alive . . . you keep saying that word.” Orin nodded, understanding what she meant. Shaela noticed a golden lion on his chest plate, recognizing it as the crest of the kingdom he served. She could feel a power radiating from his being, which felt wholesome and pure. Orin was a Holy Warrior.

“What do you want to know, Orin. I won't lie to you. I know what you are . . . I can feel your aura.” Orin reached over and grabbed the chair, adjusting it so he could sit and face her. As soon as he was comfortable, he looked at her sternly for a long while, as if calculating something. She held his eye, unmoving, feeling as though he could see through her like a thin sheet of clear ice.

“Shaela, I see a dark aura about you, yet I detect no evil mischief. I sense a presence about you which my order opposes to the death, and yet your aura is coupled with an innocence which confuses me. You lack the evil that has always, in my experience, accompanied that dark gift, and I find myself full of questions. I have met only one other like you.” Shaela smiled and sat up against the headboard of the bed, pulling the blanket up to her shoulders. She closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths, wondering how she should go about this conversation. Finally, she gave up trying to be the diplomatic type; it wasn't in her to pretend.

“Oh Orin, I feel so lost, like I'm standing upon the end of a log set upright in the dark. I can't see clearly enough to know which way to step for fear of falling. I have a question, if you would permit it.” Orin smiled kindly at her.

“Of course,” he said.

“How did you know what you wanted, and when you finally put that armor on, what aided you to know you chose the correct path? And once you did, how did you cultivate your gift?” The Holy Warrior thought deeply for a minute, then stood.”

“Shaela, can you stand?” She shrugged and set her feet upon the floor. Slowly she stood, then fell off balance. Though difficult, she took a step.

“Yes, I'm weak, but I can stand.” He offered an arm for support, which she accepted.

“Let's take a little walk. There is someone I need to introduced you to. She can answer that question better than I.” She looked at her possessions on the wall and stopped.

“I can't leave my personal items unguarded. I have a few things of great value here.”

“I promise they will not be touched; we have to leave them until they are cleared by my master.” Shaela hesitated, pointing at the sword hanging in its scabbard.

“Please do not reveal the blade. Once revealed it will bond with the one who casts the spell. It was forged during the Age of War. Orin it is highly dangerous in the wrong hands.” Orin nodded.

“I promise you, nothing will be touched.” She looked at him, hesitating, fear beginning to fill her mind.

“Okay, Hiska said you were to be trusted, but if that blade does fall into the wrong hands,” she hesitated for a moment, “there will be trouble.” Orin slowly took his arm from her and retrieved the blade. As he approached, he once again offered his support. She sighed, relieved, and placed her hand on his forearm as they continued out the door of the room.

Exiting the small chamber, Orin guided her into a wide corridor with grand, ornately crafted, pillars spanning both sides down a lengthy hall. She looked around in amazement, noticing the complexity of the structure. Never in all her life had she seen anything so grand.

“Orin, is this a castle?”

“No,” he stated, just as a woman, adorned as Orin, appeared ahead, and began walking toward them. Orin stopped as she neared. As the woman passed, she caught Shaela's eye and threw her a warm smile. Shaela smiled at her, fearing to be rube. Watching her pass, Shaela wondered who she was; what her history was. She also watched Orin's reaction to her.

Orin watched her walk away, obviously taken by her. Shaela smiled and averted her eyes, pretending to admire a large nearby painting until he turned back. Catching his eye, Shaela grinned, shook her head, and glanced back over her shoulder at the woman, who passed out of sight. Once she was gone, she turned her attention back to Orin, who cleared his throat and pointed down the corridor.

“This is the Holy Warriors Guild. When you were discovered, you were brought here and tended.” Shaela became suddenly concerned.

“Orin, am I in trouble? I have never done anything against mankind, but defend myself and others in honor, I swear.” Shaking his head, Orin held the scabbard, which within set her blade.

“No, unless you know something I don't. Shaela, how long have you possessed this blade?” She thought for a moment, recalling the time which had passed since she met Talon.

“About sixteen years, I think, why?” she answered as they both stopped at the first of many steps that led down and out onto a wide street teeming with a throng of people going about the business of their day.

“Have you ever read the runes on this blade?” She shook her head, suddenly enthralled by what she saw. She felt overwhelmed to see a city which seemed to span endlessly before her eyes as they descended the steps. Gripping Orin's arm, she steadied herself.

“Orin, where is my husband? She stated, obviously, suddenly, very nervous. He closed his eyes a moment and patiently smiled, shaking his head.

“I take it, you are not from around her.” Shaela shook her head.

“Shaela, Hiska is resting after three days and nights of watching over you. He will join you in the evening. Right now, you have been placed under my jurisdiction unless I see fit to hand you over to another - which is now my design. I'm taking you to one of the most gifted witches of our time. I sense in you, something only she can understand. Shaela, answer my question, please.” Shaela looked out into the city, as if in a daydream and blinked in amazement, the sun

beginning to annoy her.

“No.” She whispered. “Orin, what is the history behind this magnificent place?” The Holy Warrior looked at her and smiled.

“You really don't care do you?” She glanced down at the blade briefly and then down at some children at the bottom of the steps playing a dice game. Instantly, she felt a yearning in her heart as she watched them laugh and talk excitedly.

“I was saving the sword to trade to the King for a small favor -- a huge favor for me.” Shaela placed a hand to her face and smiled as she saw one of the children distract the other two and quickly turn the dice, probably to his advantage. She pointed at them.

“He just cheated, did you see that?” Orin gave up on the conversation and looked down at them.

“Which one?” She glanced up at him and smiled slyly.

“Why do you want to know?” Shaking his head, Orin pointed to the one wearing a sky-blue tunic.

“Which one was it. The one in blue is my son.” Her smile grew as her eyes sparkled with delight.

“I'll never tell.” He laughed and looked at her, taken back by her simple innocence.

“Loyalty to a stranger?” he inquired. Shaela side-glanced at him, grinning.

“Never burn a potential bridge, she stated diplomatically.” Sighing, he gave up and held a hand out, as if offering her the city.

“Shall we continue, milady?” She nodded enthusiastically, as the sun beat down on her relentlessly. To her disappointment, she was led down the other side of the steps, away from the three children playing their game. She glanced back at them for a bit before they entered the busy street.

“Oh, how I wish I could have -” she stopped before finishing her sentence, and continued on. On the way, she noticed the city was diverse in culture. There were light and dark skinned Elves, Humans and a very large looking Human, which

particularly caught her eye.

“Orin, what race is that man?” Orin waved to someone passing by, then glanced at who she was speaking of.

“Oh, Leviathan.” The large man caught her eye as she watched him and glared. She smiled a little and shyly waved at him, his dark eyes seeming to bore holes into her.

“Careful Shaela, Leviathan are not know for their pleasant manners.” As he whispered, the huge man nodded her way. Quickly she broke away from Orin and headed for him.

“Shaela, you are not dressed for this. Shaela!” He sharply whispered. Sighing heavily, Orin raised his eyes to the blue sky above.

“From what her husband has told me, it's no wonder she gets into so much trouble.” Casually he followed, observing her as she walked up to the Leviathan, seemingly without fear. She stopped before him and tilted her head back, looking at him with a grin.

“Hello, my name is Shaela.” She said politely. The Leviathan was easily twice her height and as broad as two oxen. He bowed slightly.

“Tomakk at your service.” As Orin stepped up beside Shaela, the Leviathan gave him a narrow glare as she casually continued.

“What are you doing?” Tomakk looked at the wagon behind him and shrugged his massive shoulders.

“Selling my craft, which is weapon making. I'm a blacksmith.” Shaela walked over and looked into the wagon to see various weapons all placed neatly, and in perfect order. Her eye caught a katana, fashioned from a grayish steel.

“May I see that one?” Tomakk pointed, and she nodded. “Yes, that one.” Reaching into the wagon, he carefully took the blade, turned it point first to himself and offered her the handle, which she took. As he let go, she knew it was slightly too heavy for her taste, but perfectly balanced. She made a face, signifying her admiration for his work.

“All my weapons are folded steel, not cast in a mold. They are master

crafted to increase their durability and strength.” Shaela looked up at Tomakk and nodded in agreement.

“It is a beautiful blade . . . well made.” Tomakk grinned at her approval and compliment.

“Kind of you to say it.” Handing Tomakk the blade as he had offered it, he took it and watched Shaela look into the wagon as she studied each weapon carefully. “You have a strange accent young lady; where are you from?” She glanced back over her shoulder.

“Tchurdjen Westlands, though I am not from any civilized area . . . I live in the EverShade Jungle.” Tomakk put the sword back into the wagon as Shaela became curious to know more about him and his kind.

“Where are you from?” she asked curiously. After setting the katana perfectly in its place, he turned, pointing south.

“I live in the Outer Wastes of the Volanar Rim, near the Fire Mountains. I come here once every three years to sell the weapons I have crafted.” Shaela smiled, careful not to expose her fangs, feeling very drained and a little sick. She knew it was time to retreat from the direct rays of the sun, which seemed to be attacking her skin now.

“It was my pleasure to meet you sir.” Tomakk smirked, then bowed.

“The pleasure was all mine young lady. Be safe in your travels, Shaela.” They departed as she placed a hand on Orin for support, leaning into him heavily. She was feeling weak now, and her leg muscles were beginning to rebel. As they walked away, she began to openly tremble.

“Do you need to sit down?” Shaela nodded and pointed to a shaded area between two tall structures.

“I think the sun is beginning to weaken me.” Orin did not hesitate to scoop her up as if she were a mere child, making her way quickly into the shaded area. Gently he set her down on a low overhang on the stone's structure and eyed her thoughtfully.

“How is it you can withstand the daylight hours at all?” Resting back

against the cool stone of the wall, she whispered, unable to shake off a growing weakness.

“Maybe it's the curse I had, weakening me more than usual. This has never happened before . . . and to answer your question, I was given the ability to resist the effects of the sun and Bloodlust by my master.” Orin became curious.

“Who is your master, if I may ask?” Shaela looked at him, suddenly wary.

“Who is yours, Orin?” Orin smiled.

“Vannar,” he stated humbly. Shaela smiled and flattened her back against the cool stone.

“Vannar . . . I have read two books about him, though I've never met him in person. Is he as magnificent as the books say?” Orin was openly taken back by her manner of speech. He eyed her with sudden curiosity as Shaela pulled her hair away from her face, trying to cool down. Quickly she continued.

“I'm sorry, you told me who you serve at my asking. I seem to be very rude lately. I serve Bane, Master of the Dead.” Orin's eyes widened.

“Are you come with an errand from him to my King?” Shaela suddenly stood, rising, almost touching him. Orin took a step back to give her some room to stand.

“My errand! Oh no! How long have I been here?”

“Three days. You were told this earlier. What's wrong?” Shaela looked at him in all seriousness.

“I am not sent from Bane. I volunteered to come and beg the King's assistance in a matter of life and death among my people.” She thought for a moment and then earnestly looked at Orin. “I've read that Vannar keeps his Dithinoth at hand, ready to serve him, is this true?” He nodded, talking a little uncomfortable.

“I had been taught this point of fact by my masters, yes, Vannar does.” She looked around, as if she were suddenly suspecting an attack from the shadows. Her head began to reel and spin, causing her to stagger.

“Orin, I need darkness . . . something is wrong here.” Orin instantly picked

her up and ran out into the street as she rested her head against his chest, feeling a wave of pain wash over her.

“Orin,” she weakly said, “Bane is master of the dead and death. Vannar is master of Dithinoth, who do his bidding as heralds of death to gain their final rest in payment of their wrong doings in life. We are allies, you and I, not strangers. Help me Orin, or I will die.” Her vision blurred as she felt a pain, like fire, inside her head as the sound of screaming began to cry out in her mind. It was faint at first, but as he bore her through the city, dodging people, it began to intensify.

By the time she was brought into the shade of another structure, the constant screaming and pain within her skull was intense enough to make her cry out. She felt as though she was on fire. She could hear voices all about her, and thought she was still in the busy streets of the city. The shade of the building soon turned to darkness, as she felt herself being carried with no gentleness. She then heard the sound of metal boots descending stairs.

Soon she felt soothing darkness close about her, comforting her mind and body. The screaming in her head faded slowly, as did the pain within her skull. The fire about her subsided, eventually being replaced by an icy cold feeling, causing her to uncontrollably shiver. She opened her eyes to find herself staring at walls of ice all about her. Her teeth began to chatter violently as she slowly stood and began pacing back and forth between the hanging carcasses of large animals on meat hooks.

“I'm in a cold storage room.” She whispered between the chattering of her teeth. It wasn't long before she spotted a door. She remembered her parents inn, which had a similar cold room. She walked over to the door and pushed the bar, snapping it open. Cautiously, Shaela peeked out to see Orin waiting within a small adjoining room across from her. He raised his eyes to meet hers as she opened the door.

“How are you feeling?” She walked out and shut the door, turning and pushing on it to make sure it was securely sealed. Then she turned to him.

“Thank you, much better. Where are we now?” Orin shook his head and

sighed, obviously relieved.

“Food storage within an inn across the avenue from the Essence Magicians Guild. I booked you a room here. Come, it's night, I need you to prepare yourself to meet someone this evening. She is expecting you.” Shaela grew curious, following him up the stairs. When they reached the top, he opened a wide door leading directly into the back area of a very large and busy kitchen, where many people were preparing and delivering food.

They passed through on the least busy section as the workers stared at them in curiosity. Once out of the kitchen area, Orin led her through a hallway and down some stairs, taking her by the hand. Shaela followed, smelling the aroma of the dishes prepared.

“The food smells so good.” Glancing back, he nodded in agreement, then turned down another hallway, descending even more stairs. As they descended, Orin offered her an arm, which she took.

“I thought you might need a secluded room with little or no light. I'll have a tray brought down to you. What do you like?” Shaela thought for a minute.

“Steamed vegetables, dried fruits and a small portion of well done beef.”

“I'll have it brought up right away. What would you like to drink?”

“Water, please. I'm very thirsty.” Stopping at a door, Orin produced a key. He unlocked the door, pushed it open, then placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, guiding her into the room.

“I hope this is suitable for you.” She entered into a very nicely decorated room and instantly saw the bed.

“Wow, a bed,” she whispered in awe, “and not just a cot - a real bed. When last I slept in one of these, I was fourteen years old.

“How old are you now, if I may ask.”

“Thirty.”

“Well, I hear jungles are soft and cozy,” he jested. Shaela threw him a look and laughed. Walking over to it, Shaela placed a hand down, feeling the softness of the thick quilts. For a full minute, she simply enjoyed the rarity of what she

now explored with her hands.

Orin shut the door, walked over to the far side of the room, and pointed to a ornately crafted basin.

“I’ll have them fill you a nice hot bath . . . oh, your belongings are there in the closet, over there.” He pointed and looked around.

“Ah, there are some towels and some scented soaps as well. I will return in a few hours, unless I get caught up in some unexpected adventure,” Orin gave her a father-like look, “which you seem to naturally throw others into.” Not knowing what to say, Shaela, sighed and lowered her head, both hands still massaging the quilted blankets.

“Thank you sir, I’ll be ready, unless I fall asleep.” He chuckled and returned to the door, opening it.

“I’ll send someone up with the bath water shortly.” With that, Orin exited the room and gently shut the door. When he was gone, Shaela sat on the bed and waited for her bath water to arrive. Within ten minutes, two men were hauling buckets of hot water down to her room, which they dumped into the basin. Soon their task was finished.

Soon after that, Shaela was enjoying the rare luxury of a fragrant bubble bath. It was so relaxing, she did not hear until the third knock upon her door. Jumping out of the water, Shaela grabbed a towel, wrapped it about herself as she ran to the door.

“Who is it?” she called out. A woman’s voice answered her. “Your food is here milady.” Shaela slowly opened the door enough to see who it was. When she saw a tray of freshly prepared food, and the middle-aged woman carrying it, she opened the door. With a curtsy, the large woman smiled, her plump cheeks turning red.

“I’m so sorry to have interrupted your bath miss. Would you have me come back later?” Shaela shook her head.

“You are no inconvenience at all. Thank you.” Smiling brightly, the woman showed her all the delicacies of the most wonderful meal she had seen in quite

some time.

“Water, as you requested, miss. I added some apple juice as well, if it pleases you.” Shaela motioned her to enter.

“Oh, come in. Ummm, put the tray on the table, please. Let me get you something.” She ran over to the closet and opened it, spotting her overcoat, from which she retrieved a few black-gold coins. Turning, back, Shaela walked over to the table, where the woman was meticulously setting the meal out. After she was finished, she turned and smiled.

“If there is anything you need, just pull on that cord by the door, right over there, and someone will come up as soon as they can.” Shaela took the woman's hand and placed the coins in it.

“Thank you.” The woman opened her hand and looked at the money, her eyes widening in shock surprise. Shaela knew full well she had just tipped her.

“Thank you miss,” she stated, trying not to choke. This is most generous of you. Are you sure?”

“Yes. Really, it is not a problem.” Shaela felt the pulsing of blood quicken in the woman's body by her heart that was suddenly beating fast. A wave of hunger flowed through her head, nearly causing her to swoon.

“I must finish my bath, thank you.”

“Oh my, I am so sorry, miss. I'm being very inconsiderate and rude,” she scolded herself as she quickly departed. “Enjoy your evening, miss.” At that, Shaela shut and locked the door. Turning, she rested her back against the door and took three deep breaths, trying to control the insatiable hunger welled up inside her. Closing her eyes, she bared her teeth and snarled, sounding a bit too much like Hiska.

“Never,” she hissed, the smell of real food grasping her attention. “Vahkrin are one thing. My own, never.” Banishing her Vampiric hunger, she turned her thoughts to three choices. There was the bed, the bath and the food.

“Ah, such choices I have before me,” she whispered, as if she were talking to someone. “Which adventure shall I embark upon first?” She thought for only a

moment, before sitting down to eat a delicious hot meal. After finishing her dinner, she happily discarded the towel, stepped back into the bath and slid down the tip of the slanted basin into soothing hot water. Closing her eyes, she sighed, as if she were in a wonderful dream in which the hot water were alive and willing to work the stiffness of her muscles loose. All too soon, she fell into blessed slumber.

A knock at the door brought her instantly out of a pleasurable rest. Aggravated, Shaela got out of the water, which was no longer hot, wrapped the towel around her and headed for the door. The knock sounded again as she bowed and then straitened up quickly, flinging her hair back. This stay was not going to be as pleasant as she thought it would be.

“Just a moment!” She called out, rather perturbed. Quickly, she unlocked the door and pulled it open, glaring at a female Elf standing in the hall outside. Instantly, she recognized her as a Sardakk Elf. Her anger dissipated like fog over a bonfire.

“Oh, hello.” She stated informally, struggling for lack of better words. The woman raised an eyebrow at Shaela as she began to shiver.

“Shaela, my name is Mitcheio. I am the Essence Magician Guild Master here in Gaunten. Orin said you were staying here.” Shaela nodded and stepped back, motioning for her to come in.

“Oh, yes, Orin said he was going to come and escort me to you.” Mitcheio shook her head as she stepped inside the room, taking in its entirety.

“He showed me your blade and told me all he could remember about you . . . what you told him. It was vital I not to wait for you to come to me.” Shaela shut the door, noticing the beautiful braids in her hair. She let out an exclamation of admiration as she followed her to the center of the room.

“Your hair is so elegant.” Mitcheio turned and smiled, seeming flattered.

“Thank you.” Spying out a brush laying on a vanity, she retrieved it.

“Shaela, bring a chair to the center of the room and I'll do your hair while we talk. I'll give you braids like mine.” Shaela quickly stripped the quilt off the bed, wrapped it about her, then retrieved a chair from the table and brought it over. Setting the chair down, she sat down and adjusted her hair for Mitcheio to work with.

“I did not know Vampires could get uncomfortably cold. Interesting.” Ignoring the comment, Shaela forced herself to make casual conversation.

“It's been to many years since my mother last fixed my hair up.” She felt slight tugs as Mitcheio began to brush out the ends, working her way up to her scalp.

“You have wonderful hair young lady. It's nearly as long as mine and the same color. It seems you take good care of it.” Shaela looked up at her visitor and smiled.

“Thank you.” Mitcheio placed both hands to the top side of her head and tilted her head back down into position, handing her the brush. As she began separating a few section of her hair, she continued their casual conversation, giving Shaela a strange, curious look.

“I hear you have come to ask for the King's aid in a matter of some importance.” Shaela nodded slightly, enjoying her grooming session with this stranger, although she was very nervous.

“My people are under threat of attack. I've come to ask King Asmond for help, to see if he can prevent it.” There was a silence for a time as Mitcheio continued working the hair at the side of her head.

“I think that is a wise decision. I have other questions if you would be so kind as to indulge me.” Shaela nodded, but Mitcheio's hand quickly stopped her movement.

“Hold still. Shaela, I looked at your blade as I told you already. Orin informed me you said if revealed, the blade would bond itself to the one who cast the spell . . . is that right?”

“Yes.”

“There, your hair is done. Come, look.” Shaela stood and walked over to the mirror. When she saw herself, she smiled, if only a little.

“You are good at this, and quick.” Mitcheio waved a hand at her.

“Lifetime of practice, that's all.” The elf witch walked gracefully over to the bath and shook her head.

“I apologize to have disturbed your comfort. I would not have come so soon if there were not two reasons which merited my presence.” She turned to

Shaela.

“The first reason is that you have a Soul`Blade. The second reason is that you have the mark of Bane upon you, which means you have been chosen by him. You, Shaela, did not seek him out. There is a grand significance in that fact. Simply put, you need help, but I need to know everything you have been through, starting back into your life as far as you can remember. I don't need to know the personal details of your life; just what you can tell me comfortably.” At this Shaela became curious.

“Before I tell you, may I ask, what is a Soul`Blade?” Mitcheio looked at the bath again and smiled. She reached out a finger and touched the water. At the instant she touched it, steam began to rise from the surface as bubbles formed up to the rim of the large basin.

“Why don't you enjoy what you were doing before I arrived.” Shaela walked over to the bath and ran her hand over the fresh bubbles, then tested the water with her finger.

“How did you do that?” The witch winked at Shaela and gestured her to get in. Shrugging, Shaela removed the quilt and towel and slipped back into the water. She leaned back and began playing with the bubbles as Mitcheio picked up the towel and quilt, returning them to their proper place.

“A Soul`Blade is rare to possess nowadays. They were forged by the most gifted of blacksmith's Utaemia has ever known since before the Age of War. These blades are numbered, and most were lost in the ever rolling wheel of time. When one reveals the Soul`Blade, it bonds with that person. The powers of an unrevealed blade, such as yours, will remain dormant until the moment it is revealed. Shaela, a Soul`Blade is not taken by its wielder, it chooses its host, which is the most extra-ordinary characteristic of such a weapon. You see, Shaela, you did not find it, it found you.” Shaela thought for a moment.

“But Mitcheio, Talon had it; he found it.” The witch retrieved the other chair from the table and brought it over by the bath and sat down.

“Think about it Shaela, why did Talon not reveal the blade?” She shrugged.

“I don't know. He also knew the blade was very valuable, I know, because he informed me of that. He's smart, and has many treasures of his own. And that Vampire,” Shaela shuddered, outwardly shrinking, as if she were feeling his breath upon her skin once more, “he wanted it.” A look of concern crossed Mitcheio's face as she looked down at Shaela, watching her physically recoil at that dreadful memory. Resolutely, the witch placed her hand on Shaela's forearm and leaned forward, lowering her voice, as if she did not want anyone else to hear.

“It is awful, I know. How are you coping with the curse?” Shaela looked into the witch's eyes and froze, a haunted expression filling her eyes.

“It's horrible . . . horrible, but I am doing the best I know how. Bane has made it easier, but it restricts me socially. Mitcheio, I can't even . . .” She stopped, tears beginning to cloud her eyes. Mitcheio, caressed the side of her head with the backside of her fingers and nodded.

“Shaela, nothing can ever change who you are inside. Do you want to know what I see when I look at you?” Shaela sniffed and nodded, wiping her face and getting bubbles on it. She was glad she was in water. She could hide the tears which were beginning to fall.

“A monster?” Mitcheio shook her head and smiled, as a mother attempts to calm a child from the effects of a bad dream.

“No, I see a wonderful future for you. I also see a wonderful young lady, pure and innocent . . . plagued by the cares of the world. Young lady, never let that brightness within you dim.” Her words were comforting. Reaching up a hand, she placed it on Mitcheio's and smiled, feeling very alone and lost.

“Thank you. Mitcheio, how did you know about Talon?” The witch gave her a look and smiled slightly, but did not answer.

“Let's talk about the Soul`Blade a little more. You did end up with it, even though Talon knew it was important.”

“Why did he not reveal it? Why didn't he enhance his power by bonding with the blade. Above all, why did he give it to me?” Mitcheio thought for a moment, then shrugged.

“I don't know. If I should guess, I would say this Soul`Blade has an extraordinary will and power, in itself, to prevent an unwanted bonding.” Shaela was doubtful.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I once found a Soul`Blade, and knew it was not for me. I gave it to another as a gift, and it accepted him.” Shaela was astonished.

“Really?” Mitcheio nodded, seeming to reminisce as she looked at the ceiling.

“Yes. I am glad it worked out the way it did, for now I am married to him, and I now possess him and the blade. You see, things worked out twice as well as I had hoped for.” For the first time in a while, Shaela laughed as Mitcheio gave her a wicked stare.

“Shaela, I want to help you. I fear if I don't, you will end up in some dark labyrinth, hiding from the world and hating all of mankind as you hoard your treasure and murdering all those who would dare trespass.” Shaela didn't much like the sound of that. Mitcheio squeezed her arm playfully, and they both laughed at such an absurd notion. After a moment, Shaela's felt a seriousness creep into her mind.

“Shaela, I have trained and guided another who called herself a monster. Today, she is a monster, but a good one, if you understand my meaning.”

“You mean, by what I know and learn, and the power I am enhanced with, I can hurt others, plague their existence, kill them. But, being a monster, If I choose not to hurt and make others afraid, I can be a good monster?”

“That's exactly what I mean. I will inform you now, in this city alone there are at least, oh, about ten-thousand monsters. Does that scare you?” Letting out a puff of breath, Shaela blew at some bubbles.

“No. Are you one of the most powerful monsters in this city?” Mitcheio's eyes widened slightly, as if surprised by the question.

“Wow, I've never thought about that. Let me think about it -“ ”Are you here to teach me how to not be a bad monster?” Shaela cut Mitcheio off, not wanting to

know such an answer. The witch let go her arm.

“More than just that, Shaela. We all have a beast within us. We just choose whether or not to let it out. I had to come to you, for this is no small matter. Shaela, I do not believe you can do this without full guidance, and if Bane will not guide you in this, then I feel the responsibility to do so. Bane can be, well, difficult at times.” Her words, and the way she said them, intrigued Shaela.

“I’ll make you a deal Mitcheio, I’ll tell you my life’s story, if you will expound on what you just said about Bane . . . and why you said it the way you did.” Mitcheio laughed softly, grabbed the side of the bath and blew as hard as she could, sending bubbles into Shaela’s face.

“You have a deal.” Shaela flicked bubbles back at Mitcheio, sparking a bubble fight with her.

Soon, Shaela was well into her story, feeling comfortable with this witch she had only just met. Her tale took quite some time as she left out no small detail. Morning came and flew by as she shared her experiences as if she were an old and trusted friend who had a lot of catching up to do.

Meals were brought at the appropriate times, and Shaela even slept once while Mitcheio stayed with her. Late the next morning, she concluded the tale of her life.

“ . . . and then you knocked on the door. I’m sure you know the rest of the story.” The beautiful Sardakk Elf witch smiled as they both sat at the table eating a snack of dried fruits.

“Well, that was amazing.” Mitcheio stated, half daydreaming. She then began to ask her a number of questions concerning her feelings of the death of her parents. Shaela tried to be unemotional, but soon broke down and wept like a child, in the which, Mitcheio watched her intently.

“Shaela, if you could say goodbye to your mother and father, would you want to?” Shaela instantly nodded then shrugged, a worried look suddenly crossing her face.

“I miss them.” I wish all this had never happened . . . well, except for

Hiska. He's so wonderful. I don't know, a lot of good things have happened as well." Mitcheio arose from the table and walked to the center of the room in silence, then turned.

"You need closure, and the best way I can think to accomplish such is to take you to them." Shaela paled at her words, then found herself choking on a piece of fruit. When she finally got control of herself, she was nearly speechless. She did manage one word through her coughing.

"What?" Mitcheio repeated herself clearly and waited patiently for her to collect her thoughts. This was impossible; who could break the barrier between life and death? She looked at Mitcheio, who held Shaela with eyes unblinking.

"Shaela, in your story, you said you left your apprenticeship with the Mystic to seek closure. Why did you not hold to that path?" Shaela shrunk from answering her question. Mitcheio walked over to her slowly, placed a gentle hand on her head and knelt down. She looked deeply into her eyes for the longest time, and then smiled sympathetically.

"Shaela, we all have our fears. Some of us face them and are wounded deeply for our bravery. Others keep their fears locked up inside themselves to be endlessly tortured by." Shaela tried to throw Mitcheio a smile but failed. As tears began to roll down her cheeks again, she began to reach up, as if to embrace Mitcheio, but faltered. Resting her hands upon her own lap, she looked at her in silence, not knowing what to do. The witch gave her a loving smile and wiped away her tears.

"Shaela, those who never taste of death, and are tortured by life's open wounds, exist in endless torment." Shaela was instantly confused.

"What, what do you mean?" she asked, dreading the witch's reply.

"Do you not think it would be better to experience the temporary pain of closure, rather than forever ponder, in regret, that which you could have discovered and come to grips with? Shaela, you are a Vampire." Mitcheio's words tore at her insides. She knew she spoke the truth, and wanted to hate her for it. Slowly, Shaela lowered her head and closed her eyes.

“Mitcheio, please, stop,” she pleaded in a haunted whisper. “By Vannar's holy soul, stop. I hate you, I hate you,” she hissed, grinding her teeth. All was silent for a long while. She could feel her watching. Why had she come here? Why? To open fresh the wounds of her past? Then, the witch had made that burning, horrid comment. Shaela felt a sudden guilt well up within her.

“I'm sorry,” I didn't mean that.” Smiling, the witch looked at her good and hard.

“Shaela, have you ever wondered where your newfound path will lead you . . . coupled with all that fear, doubt, anger, insecurity and malice locked up inside you? When I stated the idea of finding yourself in some labyrinth, hating the outside world, I was not joking. One with your abilities and gifts - if they remain unharnessed - coupled with the issues you face, will inevitably throw you into a pain-filled future, from which you will attempt escape, yet hardly avoid. You will cultivate a seething hatred and resentment as you forever ponder the life you once had. In the end, you, the victim of circumstance, will become the hunter, and then, in turn, the hunted. This is the main reason I want to help you. Your tale is that of injustice forced upon you, an innocent, young, loving, carefree, beautiful young girl, forced into an unfamiliar world. Shaela, this path will leave you seething in hate, of which you will assuredly act upon . . . just as Cyphis did.” Shaela shuddered, feeling his fangs penetrate the flesh of her neck. Gritting her teeth, she looked up to see Talon come down upon the both of them . . . saving her.

Mitcheio neared Shaela as she beheld the scene in her mind's eye. Embracing her tenderly, the witch kissed her on the forehead, just as her mother used to do when she was little.

“Shaela, what you must realize is, you are not a perfect judge of your situation. In the future your mistakes could bring dire consequences to the innocent and undeserving of this world, just as was done to you. If you will allow me, I will help you.” Mitcheio stroked the back of her head with a gentle hand. After a while Mitcheio stood and backed away, leaving Shaela in a void of dead silence, and walked to the door. Opening it, she turned back to Shaela, who sat,

head down, trembling.

“If you will allow me to help you, you know where to find me.” Shaela heard the door close. As it shut, she leaned over and let her head fall into her hands, suddenly longing for her husband to hold her in his sheltering arms. After an hour, she slowly arose and walked over to a tall cabinet set beside the rather ornate basin. Opening it, she was surprised to find a variety of clothing stocked within.

Sighing, she looked at her feet, knowing Mitcheio was right. Simply, truthfully, she was terrified. How could she so easily offer such things? It confused Shaela to think that Mitcheio had such power as to offer the unthinkable. Yet, what if she could actually do what she said she could do? What began to gnaw at her even more, was, what if she passed up her offer? She would indeed live forever in bitter regret. If she could not actually do what she offered, she would again be wounded. At least she would know the truth of Mitcheio's words.

After dressing herself, she grabbed her staff. Turning, she headed for the door, then abruptly slowed, feeling the distinct presence of another on the other side. Stopping she listened, feeling the beating of a heart she quickly recognized as her fingers wrapped about the door's handle.

Slowly, she turned the handle, then swung open the door to see Hiska kneeling upon the floor across the wide hallway. When their eyes met, he raised from the ground, approached, and offered his right arm. Without hesitation, she pushed it away and launched into his arms, dropping her staff. Holding him close, she buried herself in the security of his instant embrace.

After a time, she let go, picked up her staff, took his hand as she led him back into the room. Once inside, she shut the door. Hiska remained attentive and silent, simply holding her hand as Mitcheio's words relentlessly pressed in upon her mind and heart.

“Hiska, Mitcheio offered me the chance to see my parents. She said she could make it so I could talk with them, find ultimate closure. What should I do? Is that possible?”

“Would it help you if you did?” She thought on his question in silence, trying to sort out her logical feelings from the emotional.

“Yes, but is it possible?” Hiska mildly reproved her as his attention fixed on the intricate braids in her hair.

“Shaela, it has never been known for a Sardakk Elf to lie.” Astonishing as that seemed, she trusted his word.

“Alright, I'll go to her. What about the King? He is the reason we came here.” Hiska shook his head slightly, gazing into her eyes.

“I spoke with him a few hours after I left you with Orin. We both went and were granted audience with the King, though it was brief. He wants to speak with me again shortly.” Letting go his hand, Shaela rested her arm upon his. Just before leaving, Shaela stopped him.

“Hiska, after this is all over, can we go away for a while, let the cares of the world mind their own business? Her husband bared his teeth; his own way of smiling.

“I have already made every arrangement for that.” As they departed, Shaela noticed they did so from the back of the inn, not the front. Once outside, she looked around, thinking it odd no others were in the street.

“Did we just exit the back of the inn?” Without looking at her, Hiska made a soft hissing sound. Looking up at him, she smirked, then pushed the side of his muzzle away.

“I bet you think you are clever.” Stopping, Hiska narrowed his green, emerald-like eyes down at her. For a moment, Shaela felt something she never before felt, a connection between she and her husband. She could not describe it.

“What is this, Hiska?” she whispered, hearing the drone of the distant everyday-business over the rooftops growing louder. When he did not answer her, her eyes widened as she realized what was happening. Hiska was sharing with her his sense of hearing. Though her range of hearing was excellent, his was gifted.

“Mitcheio's guild is highly concealed for security reasons. We cannot go there, yet we can be invited.”

“When I first met you, I spotted a monster I knew would kill me. Now look at us. Who is the real monster?” Her husband's whiskers flinched at her question.

“Now look at who the monster is,” she repeated. “I'm afraid, Hiska.”

“I fear nothing. Hang onto me and I will do my best to drive us both through all the doors which bar our way. Hang onto me . . . wife.” His words lifted her spirit, making her smile.

“I will. I'll do my very best, I promise.” She thought for only a moment before looking up at him, as if he could right all her mistakes and fix this situation.

“If I go dark -” Hissing dreadfully, Hiska gripped each side of her head in his hands and bore down on her, eyes glaring into hers.

“You will not. You are the master of your own destiny from here on. Never think of failure, and never, Shaela, never let that thought enter into your heart again. I told you I will go wherever you go. My path is yours!” He let her go and offered an arm. Feeling numb, she slowly took it.

“Okay, okay, I am yours, you are mine. It is done.”

“It is,” he forced himself to whisper, struggling with rare emotion. Of course, this made her break down and weep, though she kept it silent, hidden. She suddenly felt so alone, like a child who had lost her way.

Maybe Hiska really was a monster, for monsters made children cry.

Hiska led Shaela down a lengthy alleyway, away from the more busy part of the city. At one point he stopped, turned and faced a simple wooden porch. Wooden beams held up the eave of the building, and the planks of the porch resembled the planks which the side wall of the building was fashioned. It looked simple and thrown together; nothing special. Stepping up to the porch, she heard the distant sounds of many people.

“What is this?”

“Her guild is hidden to all she does not wish to see it.”

“It looks abandoned; just an old shop,” Shaela said, becoming curious. Shaela could hear the distant sounds of the city fill the air in the distance behind her.

“If this is the guild, where are the students, the windows?” Hiska shrugged.

The moment Hiska stepped one foot up onto the porch, the door opened. Two black-skinned Elves in Guardian Robes came out to greet them, each slightly bowing their heads and placing the flat of their right hand over their heart. Shaela noticed symbols, on the borders of both their robes. Of the two one was female, one male. The female spoke.

“Welcome Shaela, Mitcheio is expecting you whenever you are ready.”

Shaela bowed slightly in return.

“Thank you. How did you know who I was?” The Guardian pointed to the border of Hiska's robes without answering, then took Shaela's hand in both of her's and placed the knuckles of her hand to her brow, bowing slightly.

“My name is Djuri, and you are most welcome here.” She turned to Hiska and greeted him in like manner. Hiska bowed to her in silence, waiting for Shaela's lead, signifying to Djuri Shaela would speak for him. Without hesitation, Djuri turned to Shaela.

“Are you both hungry or thirsty?” Shaela nodded, glancing up at Hiska, who then nodded as well.

“My ward is thirsty, thank you.” Shaela noticed how formal Hiska's manner

of speech had become since she had woken up on the Preservation Shrine after. He never said the word I, me, or she before they were separated.

“Amazing.” She whispered, glancing up at Hiska. Djuri nodded at Shaela and smiled almost playfully, throwing her a slight wink, as if she knew exactly what she was talking about.

“Yes, he is.” Shaela looked at Djuri and laughed, realizing she had spoken aloud.

“Shall we go in now, or shall I make the gentleman standing behind you wait?” Shaela glanced back, startled to see a Human boy patiently waiting. He bowed low as she looked down at him. Flustered, she took Hiska's arm.

“My apologies,” she stated to the boy in all sincerity.” The boy waved a hand nonchalantly and smiled up at her, but said nothing.

The hallway entered was very large and spacious, with a lofted ceiling, supported by huge beams of wood spanning the area above. There were a few Sardakk Elves quietly going about their business as she marveled at the intricate complexity of the structure. Glancing up into shadows amidst the large beams far above, she half expected to see some dark shape crouched and hidden, peering down at her.

“Djuri escorted them across the room, she motioned to a young man behind a long counter, who seemed busy with a quill. Immediately, he stepped around the counter and bowed formally.

“Welcome to the Ishanti Guild Hall. My name is Nakuri. I am the Keeper of Records and Guild Host.” He then turned and saluted Djuri, who introduced them, and explained why they were here. After brief introductions, Djuri left them, returning to her post.

“Please, follow me to the common room where food and drink will be served.” Nakuri led them to the far side of the room and down some wide stairs through an alcove, to enter into another large chamber filled with at least five score people who sat eating and drinking and quietly talking among themselves.

He looked about the area and spotted a corner table to the right and headed

for it. As they reached the table, he turned and bowed.

“Will this table suit you?” Shaela nodded and smiled at him.

“Yes, thank you.” Nakuri then left them, vanishing up the stairs. Hiska waited for Shaela to sit down, remaining attentive to his ward as she settled into her seat. As soon as she was situated, she looked up at Hiska.

“Are you going to join me?” He shook his head slightly.

“As soon as you are done, I will find you. I must return to the castle and speak with the King about the conflict . . . he is expecting me shortly.” She cringed and reached out, taking his hand.

“I thought we were both together in this?” Looking down at her, Hiska squeezed her hand and knelt down by her.

“Shaela, you need to see Mitcheio. Please go see her. I cannot be with you when you do.” She gave Hiska a somewhat disturbed look. Hiska raised up and gently pulled his hand free of hers.

“I'm scared Hiska. Our plans are suddenly changing, and I feel lost,” she stated, a tinge of annoyance in her voice.

“You can do anything you put your mind to. Go to Mitcheio, and I will take care of why we came here.” Suddenly, Shaela felt as though she would never see him again, she knew not why.

Without another word, Hiska turned and left the large dining room, leaving her standing alone in the midst of strangers. Shortly, a Human woman approached the table, drawing her attention.

“Would you care for something to eat and drink milady?” Shaela shook her head and sat down.

“No, thank you.”

“Just raise you hand if you want anything.” Shaela smiled, distracted by this turn of events. They had come to request aid from the King, and now she found herself about to seek audience with a witch who said she would let her see her parents? This was overwhelming and strange, especially now that Hiska had left her.

Shaking her head, she rose and walked back up into the main room of the guild hall, making her way to the counter where she spotted Nakuri writing as before. She approached him and stood there in silence, politely waiting to be acknowledged. After he finished a line in the book laid before him, he replaced the quill back into the ink bottle and looked up at her.

“Are you ready to see Mitcheio now?” She nodded, not wanting to. Nakuri silently walked out from behind the counter and beckoned her to follow. She nervously followed. Leading her down a long wide hallway to its end, they stopped before a door of black wood that appeared as if built to withstand the power of a battering ram.

“This is where I leave you Shaela. Good journey to you. May you find and obtain that path which all of us diligently seek.” Before leaving, he waved his hand over the door, turned and pointed at it.

“Do not touch the door. The effects would be terrible. She knows you are here.” He then departed back to his post.

She looked at the door a moment, then back down the lengthy hallway as if unsure. After a minute, Shaela turned her attention back to the door. Biting her lip, she felt the sudden urgency to run, to leave this place. This was frightening her so badly, she was beginning to fail in her resolution to heed Mitcheio's invitation. Quickly, she turned and walked back down the hall toward the main entrance, but before she had taken five steps, she stopped, thinking to herself. *If I leave now . . . oh, what if Mitcheio is right? What will I become?* Sighing heavily, she hesitated, a worried expression giving away the indecision dancing in her head. Slowly, she turned and approached the door again, her hands beginning to visibly shake. She stopped before it again and stared at the dark wood, her mind running in ten directions at once. *What if, what if . . .*

Closing her eyes, she tried to clear her mind and make her final decision, but it was no use. Turning she walked away, again. Maybe it was better just to leave the unknown be. As she took a few steps away, she felt regret strike at her, pricking her conscience. Frustrated, she stopped and turned back to the door,

remembering Hiska's last words. She did not wish to disappoint him as before. Biting her lip, she walked back to the end of the hall and faced the door for the third time. Why was this so difficult? She suddenly felt like a coward, which frustrated her. *Oh, just do it Shaela, just stay!*, she silently scolded herself.

A moment after she decided to stay, the door opened to reveal a broad shouldered Sardakk Elf, who filled the entire doorway, staring at her in silence. She took a step back, feeling a presence flow from him that seemed as threatening as the Shadow Vahkrin she had recently faced. No, this man's presence made that horror seem weak and insignificant. He moved to the side, motioning for her to enter.

As she entered the room, she noticed he wore the robes of the Guardian, for there were strange silver symbols set into its borders. She felt vulnerable as she passed by him, as if he could crush and kill her in an instant. She also felt an energy as she neared him, and then subside as she passed him by, compelling her to nervously look over her shoulder at him.

He was Sardakk Elf, as well as the others, but towered at least a head and shoulder's height above the tallest she had seen in the common room. His presence drew her attention and challenged her heart and mind. His silence added to the feeling of his overwhelming presence.

Pulling her attention away from him, lest she began to lose control of her resolve to be within the same chamber. She turned her eye to the room, which had a very comfortable seating arrangement. All the chairs and couches faced inward, and were set in a large circle about a hearth filled with a pleasant fire. She drew close to the flames, staring curiously at them, noticing they consumed no wood. The male Sardakk Elf broke the silence of the moment, startling her badly.

“Mitcheio will be with you shortly.” She jumped at his baritone voice which shattered the silence in the room, causing her to turn quickly and nod, her eyes widening as he approached and stopped before her. With no expression, he bowed slightly.

“I am Katcha, Mitcheio's husband. Do you need anything before she

arrives?” Shaela shook her head, rather frightened.

“No sir. May I ask, what do those symbols say?” She pointed to the border of his robes in an attempt to draw his eyes off her, which seemed to be stripping away her defenses, leaving her helpless and exposed. Without breaking eye contact, Katcha answered her question in a single word.

“Mitcheio.” Shaela supposed the symbols to be Sardakk Elf. Like Mitcheio's name upon his robes, her's was also upon the border of Hiska's.

“I am informed your husband is a Guardian, am I correct?”

“Yes sir.”

“And he is Harritt Catur?”

“Yes sir.” Katcha looked to the back of the chamber as a door opened. Shaela turned to see Mitcheio, who walked into the room, stopping beside Katcha, placing a hand on his arm.

“I see you have met my husband and Guardian, Katcha.” Mitcheio looked up at Katcha and smiled at him, receiving no response in return.

“Katcha, I will be doing some business with Shaela for the next three days. I will need your personal assistance on the third day.” He nodded once and looked at her in silence.

“Yes, Katcha, what is it?” He glanced sternly at Shaela for a moment, then turned fully upon Mitcheio.

“I would like to bring Hiska here and train him.” Mitcheio nodded, removing her hand from his arm.

“You have two days. I will send for you on the third.” Taking her hand in both of his and placing her knuckles to his forehead, bowing slightly. Turning to Shaela, he bowed and exited the chamber . . . to Shaela's relief. As he closed the door behind him, that staggering presence departed allowing her to relax a little. Mitcheio smiled slightly after Katcha.

“When I first met him, he drove me crazy. I would talk to him as we journeyed, just to hear myself speak. One day he turned to me and bluntly stated, “You talk too much.” Shaela's eyes widened.

“What did you say then?” Mitcheio laughed slyly, narrowing her eyes at Shaela.

“I began throwing pebbles at him.” Shaela suddenly laughed.

“Did you really? He seems the type that could force the subservience of a dragon with but a look.” Mitcheio sighed.

“He is just that.” She put her hands together and brought them up to her lips, studying Shaela.

“Now, down to business. Here let me take your coat and staff.” Shaela surrendered her staff and turned, allowing Mitcheio to help remove her trench coat. As she did, Mitcheio felt its weight and frowned.

“What do you carry in your coat? It's much too heavy for suitable travel.”

“I put a few bottles of liquid in the pockets in hope that someone might tell me what they are. I think there are eight. There are also some coins and a small pouch of pills to eat when I need to understand what someone is saying to me.” Shaela suddenly remembered Mother's warning about the sword Orin had carried for her.

“Mitcheio, Orin has my blade! Maybe I am being rude, and forgive me if I am, but Mother told me never to be without it.” Mitcheio took Shaela by the hand.

“Your blade is here; Orin gave it to me when he left you the inn. Don't worry about that for now. Shaela, are you prepared to speak with your mother and father?” The turn of the conversation quickly changed the mood. She shook her head, suddenly afraid.

“No, but I know you are right. If I don't -” Shaela paused for a moment in thought. “Mitcheio, how is this possible, what you are offering? Ever since you brought up the idea of me speaking with my parents, it's been eating at my mind like a Thought Leech.” The Sardakk Elf witch smiled and motioned for Shaela to sit down. She did so. Joining her, Mitcheio took both Shaela's hands in hers.

“Close your eyes and trust me. I am the high witch of this kingdom. I am not playing games with you Shaela.” Shaela sensed the seriousness of her words, and so decided to fully trust this witch.

“I give you my word that what I will help you to accomplish in the next three days will not be easy, but it will be beneficial . . . even though you may think otherwise. Now, close your eyes and try your best to relax.” Shaela sat erect, closing her eyes as she was asked. She took a few deep breaths, doing her best to calm her mind. As she did so, she felt a wind gently caress her hair, and the scent of flowers fill her senses. She smiled and inhaled deeply, enjoying the experience.

“I can smell the most beautiful flowers Mitcheio. It seems so real.” There was no response from the Sardakk Elf Witch, making her wonder if she was still there.

Slowly she opened her eyes to find herself kneeling at the edge of a vast cliff overlooking an ocean bathed in sunlight, its waters far below a sea of flawless amethysts, bathed in the radiance of the heavens. She looked down to see great whales surfacing to take a breath of air and then dive again.

“This is incredible Mitcheio, how are you doing this?” The singing of a white bird nearby was the only answer. She looked at it and grinned.

“Really . . . well, thank you.” Quickly it hopped over to her and cocked its head sideways, extending its wings and lowered slightly, as if bowing, its long snowy feathers rising on its head to form a beautiful crest. Its long tail feathers fanned out in a modest display as Shaela reached out and gently scratched its chest.

“You are far more beautiful than I, but thank you for the compliment. I've never seen the likes of one such as you before.” The magnificent bird made a clicking sound, leaning into her hand, enjoying the attention as Shaela looked about the area, searching for Mitcheio. She remembered why this was happening and thought it best to find some answers. Her thoughts and attention fell upon the large bird for a moment.

“I don't suppose you could help me find my mother and father, could you?” The bird pecked her arm, biting her sleeve, and pulled. Shaela laughed and stroked it across the neck.

“You are fun, but I do need to find my parents.” she looked about the area. “Wherever they are.” Maybe, since this is only a dream, I can cast myself off this cliff and swim away into eternity.” She winked at the bird. “What do you think, shall I try?” The only answer was a quick peck to the chin, causing her to jerk back as she raised a hand to her face. “Owe, thank you very much.” She abruptly stood and walked away from the cliff, thinking this might not be a dream after all. She had heard that in dreams, no one is supposed to feel pain. Maybe this place was real, and Mitcheio had actually sent her to some other place, like Talon had, but in a different way.

“I don't know what to do Mitcheio.” She whispered quietly. “Where am I supposed to go?” Again, silence was her only answer. Away from the cliff, she saw a single stag suddenly break from a distant line of trees, heading directly her way, leaping in great bounds as it sped up the gentle incline toward the area where she stood. It was quite a distance from her, so at first it did not alarm her, but as it began to close in, Shaela looked around nervously, unsure if it was purposely directing its path her way.

She froze, hoping the huge buck might turn in its course, but it did not. As it neared her, she was amazed at its regal posture, beauty and pure silver coat of glistening fur. The thought crossed her mind to command the roots in the area to halt it, for she feared being trampled.

Just then, from the edge of the woods, something caught her attention. Glancing toward the trees, she saw a group of riders on horseback break from the forest, spurring their mounts after the silver stag. She looked about the area and spotted a small gully to her left which she instantly ran into, hoping the hunters would pass her by. She could see they had bows in hand and it frightened her, even though she knew they were hunting the buck.

Crouching, Shaela waited behind some thick bushes, hearing the approach of the stag as she lowered herself to the ground. Suddenly the stag galloped into the area and skidded to a halt, its ears pricking forwards toward her. It backed a

few steps and looked back, hesitating, unsure what to do. Shaela knew it had spotted her and slowly raised up, gazing in wonder at the magnificent creature.

“I can hide you, if you will trust me.” The stag shook its head and stomped the ground.

“You can talk,” it stated in confused wonder. Shaela's nodded.

“Do you want my help?” It snorted, panting hard.

“Yes.”

“Then don't move, no matter what you see. Don't move at all.” Shaela pointed at the foliage about the area and whispered the words to a spell as she heard the sounds of hooves thundering toward the gully.

“Agrin Mortala.” She whispered. Instantly, every living organic in the immediate area came alive and began to creep and shift as the roots of all the vegetation uprooted themselves and crept over to the area, engulfing the silver stag, which snorted in fear and panic.

“Don't move! You are in no danger of my spell.” The stag froze instantly as all the green of the earth washed up over it, quickly creating a living mound over the animal. Within a few seconds the area was fully blanketed with a healthy overgrowth of living green.

Shaela pointed to other vegetation, waving her hands parallel to the earth. As she did so, all the other organic life about the area crept apart, spreading out evenly, covering the barren area, now void of natural vegetation. In no time at all, the gully looked natural and untouched. Shaela placed a finger to her lips.

“Shhh, be still.” She took a deep breath and exhaled, calming herself from the excitement of the moment and waited for the riders to come. The sound of the pursuit grew, and soon five men on horseback thundered into the area, one rider nearly running her down.

“Woa!” He called, reigning in his steed as she moved away to the side. The riders all reigned in and stopped, turning their horses in circles, looking about the area in search of the stag. Then, when they realized they had lost their quarry, one man spotted Shaela and pointed at her.

“Did you see it?” She shrugged, glancing at each of them rather nervous.

“I am not a hunter sirs.” One man slapped his leg, frustrated.

“Drat, foiled again!” The others looked about the area as their horses pranced in place, snorting defiantly. The light in their eyes dimmed to doubt with the realization of being eluded. One of the riders suddenly dismounted, ripped the helm from his head and ran toward Shaela, pointing at her, a strange look twisted into his face. As he neared her, she backed up, suddenly frightened.

“I, I didn't . . . please sir, I -“ Grabbing her firmly by the shoulders, he gazed in her eyes, catching his breath.

“It's you.” She realized he was trembling as he repeated, “It's you”, over and over again, seemingly unable to say otherwise. She looked at the others, then back at him, eyes wide in fear as he attempted to say something and failed, choking emotionally. His face twisted in deep emotion as his eyes welled up with tears which began to spill freely down his face.

Locking eyes with him, Shaela swallowed hard, catching her balance mentally as he reached a hand up and touched her face. Looking back at his men he choked out a laugh, but was only met with confusion, their eyes riveted upon the scene.

Shaela suddenly froze, her heart burning within her chest as she locked eyes with him. Something was familiar about this man. She stopped attempting to retreat from his grasp and leaned in toward him, peering up at him, suddenly in astonishment and surprise. This man, who was no more than twenty years of age, looked like, like, could this be?

“Father?” she whispered, not disbelieving her own eyes. The man wiped his face with a hand and nodded as his companions watched on in silence. He shook his head, squinting his eyes shut, as if trying to clear his vision.

“This cannot be. Shaela?” She nodded, bursting into tears as she gripped his arms firmly, nearing him even more closely to get a good look into his eyes, a fragile smile beginning to spread across her face. Her father looked up into the blue skies and then back down at her, his voice beyond emotional.

“I don't believe what I'm seeing. Are you real?” She nodded, tears beginning to flood down her face as she slowly lifted a trembling hand to the side of his face.

“It's me father. I came to see you and mother.” A shadow suddenly clouded his face as an obvious expression of worry and fear crept into his eyes.

“You died?” The question took her by surprise, shocking her. She shook her head slowly and embraced him as tight as she could, the thought of him being half correct coming to mind.

“No, no, I came to see if I could find you . . . I came to say goodbye to you and mother,” she sobbed. Feeling her sway heavily, he steadied her and looked back at the other riders. For a moment, they sat there, upon their horses, frozen at the scene before them, until one of them blinked, as if coming suddenly out of a daydream. Clearing his throat loudly, he turned his horse about, making a clicking sound.

“Come on men, let's go! This day is not yet spent!” The others did the same, following after him, leaving Shaela alone with her father, who lowered his hands and pulled away from her, looking her up and down in bewildered astonishment. Feeling as though he might vanish, she embraced him again, squeezing him hard, not daring to let go lest she suddenly find herself alone again.

As she held onto him, she looked at the mound of foliage the silver stag was silently hiding within. After a few moments, she parted reluctantly, looking up at her father.

“Where's mother?” she managed to say.

“She's not here. I don't know where she is Shaela . . . when I came to this place, she did not follow after.” Shaela needed to get out of the area, so the buck could be set free in secret.

“Father, can we talk by the cliff? I need to sit down.” Taking her hand, he led her to his mount, which snorted at their approach. Her father mounted up and leaned down offering her an arm. She took it, and jumped as he pulled her up behind him. Once mounted, she reached her arms about his waist and squeezed,

hoping this horse did not detect her. It seemed unconcerned, which was a great relief. Her father turned the horse about, touching its flanks with the heels of his boots, guiding it up and out of the gully toward the cliff which overlooked the sea.

As they departed, Shaela looked back, willing her spell to fade. Instantly the organic life began to return to its natural place, releasing the silver stag. The beautiful animal turned its attention her way as they crested the side of the gully, locking eyes with Shaela, who smiled at it and rolled her eyes. As they crested the slope, she turned back and rested her head against her father's back, overwhelmed with emotion and excitement.

He led them to the cliffs edge and dismounted. As he landed nimbly, he helped her down. Quickly he set her down and began to remove the saddle, the blanket, and the bridle from the horse. Once finished, he patted its neck and turned to her.

“How did you find me? How did you get here?” he whispered, coursing a hand through her hair. Shaela slipped a hand into his in silence, looking up at him as if he had the power to make everything alright, like he always did.

They walked over to the edge of the cliff and sat down, the tears of unbridled emotion flowing silently between the both of them. It was then that Shaela truly began to grieve for the death of her father as she felt her heart break into a thousand pieces.

For a long while there were no words between them as they silently stared at each other. At some point, Shaela heard herself begin to speak.

“I was sent here by powerful magic. That is all I wish to discuss of that. I miss you.” He took a handful of her hair and let the gentle breeze work each strand loose from his fingers, sighing heavily.

“I miss you so much. I miss your mother, wherever she is.” He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth together loudly. “I told her to run . . . she ran. Maybe she made it out of the jungle.” He reached over, opened one of the saddlebags and retrieved a flask of water. Unstopping it, he handed it to Shaela, offering her a drink. She took it and drank a few mouthfuls, then handed it back. Recapping the

flask, he set it on the ground beside them as Shaela wondered if her mother was yet living.

“Tell me, what happened to you after you escaped. You look well.” She sighed, closing her eyes for a moment.

“That's not fair; I was going to ask you the same.” He chuckled and wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve, leaning back against a rock. Shaela crawled over to him and cuddled up against him, feeling his arms wrap her. She had an idea that would satisfy both of them.

“Father, I'll tell you if you tell me your tale. I'll go first?” She rested her head against him and closed her eyes. She then proceeded to give an account of her life after being separated from them, leaving out the darker details of her Vampiric curse and such things. If he had questions, he kept them to himself until she was finished. After she was done, he told her everything he could remember about his life here in this place, which he called the Seven Havens. After they were both finished telling their stories, Shaela looked up at her father in admiration.

“I can't believe I'm with you.” She repeated it again as he tightened his hold about her, keeping her close enough to feel his life's blood flowing through his body as his heart beat in a steady rhythm. She had supposed that when a person died, they would not be the same . . . she was wrong. One thing she did know; he was alright. She was the one who had not been alright. She smiled, and then frowned.

“Father, if mother is not with you . . . where is she?” He sighed, his heart changing in its rhythm.

“I don't know Shaela, I don't know. I thought we could be together here. After what I've learned of this place, we should be. Shaela, she made it out. I only know this because she is not here with me.” Shaela sat up and turned to her father.

“I'll find her father, I promise. I'll tell her you are doing well, and that you wait for her to join you one day . . . if that is what you need to let her know.” He touched her face, a happiness coming to light within his eyes.

“I would like that very much. Also, if you ever see her again, tell her I love her . . . just tell her I love her.” Shaela reached up and held onto his arm and smiled slightly, not daring to give him the worry of knowing she was cursed. Shaela also felt her heart tear within her as she knew she would never see him again, unless she was killed . . . for she was Deathless.

They spent the rest of the time she had with her father, talking and reminiscing about the life they once shared, the dread of having to leave growing within her mind as the hours sped on much too fast.

Shaela finally forced herself to explain that she had to leave at some point. To her surprise he nodded, as if he already knew it, and kissed her gently on the forehead, just as he did when he used to tuck her into bed at night.

“Of course. I can't deny destiny, but I can ask you to thank this Mitcheio for giving me the gift of being with you, even if for one last time. Tell her I am forever in her debt.” Shaela wept and nodded, embracing him as a feeling of remorse and helplessness began to fill her.

“I will, of course. I will find every opportunity to visit, though I don't know how.” They both stood and embraced each other tenderly, as if they might be unexpectedly parted. Looking about the area, her father shrugged.

“How will you get back?”

“I don't know, but I'm sure Mitcheio knows what to do.” He turned and faced her, a smile spreading across a much younger face than she remembered.

“I am so very proud of my little girl. Go, live your life happily, knowing that I will always have you in my mind and heart.” She looked out upon the sea in an attempt to escape him seeing her face darken.

“This is a strange parting. I don't even have an escort . . . very strange indeed.” Her father placed a hand on the nose of his horse as it approached, nuzzling him. His eyes widened to see it fully saddled up and ready to ride. Looking at Shaela, he nudged her with a hand and pointed to the horse, shaking his head.

“Is that my cue to ride away and not look back?” Shaela rolled her eyes and

shrugged.

“She's amazing, simply amazing. I think it is time for me to leave.” She hugged her father tight, not wanting to let go. In return, he gripped her in the strongest embrace he ever had, weeping openly.

“Thank you for coming. Maybe we will see each other again?” He kissed her head, parted from her and quickly mounted. With one more look at her, he waved and smiled, tears heavily streaming his face. She waved back and sniffed as he turned and spurred his horse down the slope, breaking into a gallop.

She watched him ride away, though the tears in her eyes blurred her vision badly. Soon he was gone. She looked around the area and noticed the flask lying on the grass. She picked it up and uncapped it, taking a drink as she felt a heavy weariness creeping over her, brought on by strong, prolonged, emotion. She slowly capped the flask, her thoughts turning to her mother.

“I'm ready Mitcheio.” She whispered softly, choking on her own words.

In an instant, as she blinked, she found herself back in the chamber, sitting by Mitcheio who was holding her hand, earnestly watching her.

“Are you alright?” she whispered, deep concern in her voice. Shaela looked at her and suddenly broke down. Mitcheio embraced her and rocked her gently back and forth for quite some time before Shaela gained control of emotions.

“It can work out Shaela, but only because of your future choices. Remember this one thing, even should you forget all else you ever learn; be good in your heart. If you do this one single thing, deep down you will always be happy.” Shaela lifted her head, noticing her father’s flask was still in hand. She looked at it for a moment, lost in thought.

“I will.” Mitcheio smiled kindly at her, approving. She continued to hold and rock Shaela for some time, until she finally faded into asleep.

She awoke to find herself laying down on a small comfortable bed in the dark. It was unnerving her to find herself in a strange place, like when she was very young and didn't know where she was upon opening her eyes.

Sitting up, she turned, placed her feet on the floor, noticing a tray of dried fruits and fresh vegetables on a night stand at the head of the bed by the wall. She also noticed the sword was fastened about her waist, restricting her movement as it caught on the blankets. She wondered how she got here with a sword strapped to her waist without being awakened.

Standing, she adjusted the belt to the scabbard and looked at the dried fruit, especially the lengths of banana. She ate most of it and half the vegetables as she thought about her journey to the Seven Havens. It seemed like a dream, and yet she knew it had been very real. She had to admit, Mitcheio was a far better plane traveler than Talon. As she exited the room, she desired to know the spell for such travel. If she could learn that, she could visit her father often.

As she stepped through the door, she found herself standing in the same

room that she had first stepped into upon arriving. Looking at the front door, she noticed Katcha standing there, still as stone, watching her. She timidly waved at him, only provoked a raised eyebrow in return.

“Mitcheio will be with you shortly. She had an urgent errand to attend to which called for her direct response. Are you thirsty?” She nodded and looked at the flame within the circular fire place at the center of the large, well furnished chamber.

“Yes, please.” He walked over to a table at the far end of the room, where a pitcher of water stood amidst a few upside down cups. Grabbing the pitcher, Katcha filled one and brought it to her.

“Thank you sir.” He sternly watched her drink it all. When she was finished, she handed him the cup, grateful she did not choke on the liquid.

“More?” She shook her head.

“No thank you, sir.” He walked over and placed the cup on a tray beside the table and returned to the door. She sat down on the sofa just as Mitcheio walked in through the door at the rear of the chamber, causing Shaela to abruptly stand again and turn. Mitcheio threw Shaela a smile.

“You are supposed to be resting young lady.” Shaela smiled back at the witch, actually excited to see her.

“So you can remain informed at your Guardian's doings, he has gained audience with the King. In fact, even now, he speaks with him. I'm sure things will work out for the best as we continue here. Do not worry about the time it will take to get back to the Ever`Shade Forest. I have my ways,” she stated dramatically, mysteriously. Shaela could not help but smile at the witch’s unique personality.

“I trust you, milady.” Shaela became uncomfortable as Mitcheio pointed at the blade, continuing.

“I need to teach you the spell to reveal the enchantments and magical nature of an item.” Shaela shook her head, slightly panicking.

“I was supposed to do this Mitcheio . . . I'm supposed to be with Hiska

before the King.” Mitcheio's Guardian stirred a bit, looking at his Ward. Holding up a hand, Mitcheio looked down at Shaela's waist and tapped the scabbard with the back of her hand.

“Shaela, Hiska is speaking with the high King at this very moment. I came from the meeting, which is not being held in the throne room amidst the common petitions of the day. This is not a light matter. The King is going to arrange a full garrison to be sent to the EverShade Jungle, and quickly. This is not the first time this has occurred, and probably will not be the last. It is serious, and is being taken seriously.” Mitcheio's words were quick and somewhat sharp, seeming to border on annoyance. Shaela noticed Katcha's movement and looked over at him, suddenly afraid. She looked back at Mitcheio, her fear brought to life by a sudden suspicion.

“What's going on Mitcheio; I feel something else is in the works and it's scaring me.” Shaela's eyes shaded to darkness as she took a step back, causing Mitcheio's eyebrows to rise in surprise. A troubled and concerned look crossed Mitcheio's face as she also stepped back, matching Shaela's movement with exactness.

“Oh, Shaela, you have no idea, do you? You are as innocent as a child among a band of thieves. I wish I had taken you in first.” Shaela felt suddenly cold inside. Instantly Mitcheio turned her back on Shaela, which confused her.

“Katcha, leave us, now.” Instantly Mitcheio's Guardian turned and left the room in silence. When he had departed, Mitcheio turned on Shaela.

“Shaela, I am not your enemy. Trust me one last time, as you did yesterday, and I will show you something you must know. Somehow, you have been caught up in . . . a destiny which you are ignorant of. Will you give me the chance to show you what is evolving in the path you are on . . . within your life? Please, Shaela, this is so very important to you specifically.” Shaela listened to her as she felt an energy began to grow within her, like when she killed the Prima Catur in the jungle just after leaving Mother.

She closed her eyes and shook her head, trying to control herself. If these

people were traitorous, their job would have already been done when they brought her into the city. They had healed her of a terrible curse, not harmed her. Swallowing hard, she breathed in deeply, trembling, while Mitcheio's voice came to her softly, as if at a great distance.

“No tricks, no secrets here. I would like to help you. If you do not like what I have to tell you, you may leave wherever you wish to go. I will not hinder you. You have been free to go at any time.” Shaela's hands trembled as she opened her eyes and sobbed like a lost child.

“I'm scared Mitcheio. There has been a lot of attacks and lies. I don't know what to put faith in anymore . . . only Hiska.” Mitcheio nodded and bit her lip, tears coming to her eyes.

“I know exactly what you mean. Shaela, whether you believe me or not, I am beginning to love you dearly.” For a moment the witch paused, as if suddenly thrown into a trance, then came to her senses, grinning.

“I foresee you will seek me out as a mentor, of your own free will. Until then, let us continue with what little time we have together. This is of vital importance to you, your wonderful husband and your people.”

Shaela's fear subsided at the sympathy of Mitcheio's words. Slowly, she nodded and looked at the sofa, feeling drained. Her eyes clouded over, and then flickered, slowly returning to normal. She stepped to the sofa and sat down, Mitcheio joining her. The witch slowly took her hand. A moment later she sighed and bit her lip.

“Shaela, what did Bane tell you?” Shaela thought for a bit, knowing she had already told her everything. It didn't matter; she recited all his words to her, feeling that energy slip from her, leaving her tired.

“He said I am Deathless and that he would take me to him if I held to my destiny and continued on until . . . why Mitcheio?” She looked at the witch, yearning for an answer. Mitcheio nodded.

“I know you told me everything a few days ago. I need to tell you something now, and I want you to keep an open mind about it. Make no

preconceived notions, okay? Shaela, you are at a crossroad in your life. Which ever way you choose to turn will lead you into destiny.” She drew in a deep breath, letting it out slowly, closing her eyes. Shaela watched her, frozen still by the anticipation and dread she felt for the future.

“Shaela, that blade only comes to those who have the disposition for deep and dark powers. Have you ever done something which would usually require years of study and training?” Shaela nodded, thinking of the Gargantuan spell, of her ability to wield the staff and sword, well skilled in their use beyond her years, and how, shortly after her apprenticeship ended with Mother, she killed an entire band of Prima Catur.

“Yes,” she stated in a whisper, “yes, I have, and more than what I care to remember.” The witch squeezed her hand tightly.

“I am an Essence Magician. I too have the same gift. I need to show you what I'm getting at, for telling you would only confuse and frustrate you. Would you be willing to let me take you to a place where I can help you to make things more clear?” Shaela nodded, feeling suddenly connected with Mitcheio, though she could not explain how and in what way. The only way to describe the feeling, was that she was the witch, and Mitcheio was her, odd as that sounded.

“Are you ready to experience some things which you, Shaela, will never forget, even though if you may live a thousand ages and beyond?” Shaela trembled, fearful of what was about to happen. She closed her eyes, waiting, only to feel a finger poke her in the ribs.

“Don't hold your breath,” Mitcheio teased, then poked her again and raising one eyebrow. Shaela laughed, amused by this witch. Even though she was Vampire, she was still ticklish. This Elf had the innate gift of setting her at ease, and it felt genuine. She had been told the Sardakk do not lie, and she now believed it.

“Ready?” Shaela blew a few strands of loose hair out of her face and relaxed as best she could.

“Yes, I'm ready,” she said, not sounding too sure. Mitcheio leaned forward

and puffed a breath of air in her face, making her blink.

In the instant she blinked, she found herself on a wide golden path, apparently crafted of solid gold. To either side was the darkness of a starless space, causing her to grip Mitcheio's arm. Looking all about her, Shaela noticed the path extended both ways until it vanished out of sight. Closing her eyes, she forced herself to breath slowly, evenly, in the attempt to keep from panicking.

“What is this place Mitcheio?” The beautiful Sardakk Elf woman looked both ways along the golden road.

“You cannot be here, unless you possess the gift.”

“What gift?”

“Essence of Eternity,” Mitcheio stated reverently. “You also are kin to this power. Beneath us is a pathway, which stops us from falling forever into eternal space. Now, I need to tell you something. Shaela, I must leave you now. Here, you must find your own way . . . good luck.” Shaela panicked and held tightly to Mitcheio, shaking her head, her eyes shooting open wide as she felt Mitcheio lose the physical structure of her body. Her grip soon passed through the witch as she slowly vanished, fading away until Shaela was alone.

“Mitcheio? Mitcheio! Don't do this to me! Mitcheio!” She screamed her name again and again, her heart beating like thunder.

She eventually gave up calling for her and looked ahead, then behind her, not knowing which way she should go. She felt suddenly helpless and very alone . . . she was alone.

She stayed well into the middle of the path and wrapped her arms about herself, looking one way, then the other, again and again, not knowing what to do.

“How long have I walked for?” Shaela whispered, feeling hopeless as she stopped and turned the other way. She had switched directions so many times, she did not know the way she had originally faced when Mitcheio had vanished. Mitcheio . . . she was angry with the witch for leaving her like she did. She said to trust her. Shaela laughed bitterly, thinking the worst, again continuing a very one sided conversation.

“Oh, I trust you, sure.” She raised a fist to the blackness above and screamed, hearing no echo. “Mitcheio, I want out of here!” She staggered, suddenly finding herself teetering on the edge of the golden path. A cold shock gripped her as she steadied herself. Moving quickly to the middle, she crouched and hissed, glaring at the path before her, a thought crossing her mind as she breathed deeply to calm herself.

“Maybe it does lead somewhere. Maybe I just need to run.” With that thought, she took a deep breath and bolted down the golden road as fast as she could, eventually losing herself in the vision of the path passing steadily below. She ran for what seemed hours, not seeming to get anywhere.

Eventually she stopped. Her feet ached as she panted and leaned over, resting her hands upon her knees, her hair hanging down to the golden surface. After a few minutes, she knelt down and sat upright, her back straight. She took a few deep breaths, thinking. She wondered at something, which she hoped was not the truth and reached into a pocket of her robes, wherein she retrieved a single black-gold piece. Laying it on the path before her, she stood and began running, leaving the coin to fade away behind her.

After quite some time, to her dismay, she came upon the gold piece and stopped, looking down at it. As she picked it back up and put it away, she began to wonder if it was her own self causing this, like occurrences that manifest themselves in reality to those who fear them.

She was angry and bitter at Mitcheio. In fact, she was bitter at the world as she hid herself within the density of a jungle. She recalled the trials she had faced

and overcome, suddenly coming to the realization that she had rarely felt gratitude for her successes . . . only selfish pride.

She began to wonder if this was a punishment for all the good she could have done. A thought crossed her mind then; was Mitcheio hired as a specialized assassin to get rid of her forever? She realized she could now make enemies; enemies which had connections . . . strong connections.

She stood there and stared ahead at the path before her, suspecting this road led to nowhere, no doubt just as the blackness about her. Shaking her head, Shaela rejected her suspicions.

“No, no, she could have killed me in my sleep. She is Sardakk Elf . . . a truth sayer. No, this is a test, not a final defeat. What am I thinking? What am I doing?” She began to recall everything she had experienced, both great and small, significant and insignificant. In her mind she meditated, thinking of the first experience she could recall and related it into the scheme of things. As she did this, Shaela mentally began a journey which lost her within her own mind for a long while.

At length, Shaela opened her eyes, realizing she was laying down. Slowly she lifted herself up on an elbow and looked down at the golden surface. She ran a hand over it, astonished at what she suddenly knew to be true.

“This is my path -- my life . . . it leads to no where.” She slowly stood, recalling how she had run along the path, hoping to find some destination. There was no destination . . . it was her.

“I see, I see,” she whispered. “I understand now.” Closing her eyes, she shook her head, remembering all the warnings she had been given.

“This is not what I want. I reject my current path. There is a better way,” she whispered in total resolution. A feeling of peace burned within her heart and mind then, making her smile. Lowering her head, she closed her eyes, recalling the thoughts she had for Mitcheio.

“Mitcheio, I'm sorry. It is not you, but me who holds the key to the prison door of my life. I understand now. I understand.” As she spoke, a luminescence

gradually emanated before her until she could see the glow through her closed eyelids. Opening her eyes, she blinked in awe at the sight before her.

To her astonishment, she beheld the radiance of a city of gold unfolding before her eyes.

“I wonder if I can make a friend here,” she whispered.

Hiska sat in council with Nishane Asmond and two of his generals. They had been talking for about an hour after Mitcheio had left them. The King seemed to be a mere Human, and Hiska would have supposed him to be such, had he not heard the words of his mother when she had informed the council otherwise.

King Asmond was calm and keen of eye, his presence radiated a natural authority and majesty, even with soft spoken words and the thoughtfulness by which he regarded Hiska.

His presence demanded respect, and not due to his rather large and lean stature. It was not his manner which compelled Hiska to respect the King either. There was a presence which touched him deep inside, a presence which seemed to discern the intentions of his heart as the King respectfully listened to him explain his situation.

When Hiska finished, the King sat back in his chair in silence, looking at him. After a long moment, King Asmond spoke plainly.

“Hiska, I will send out a full garrison of my Griffon riders and help settle this situation. I will not take sides easily in such a civil conflict, for you all are within the boundaries of a land not mine. Even so, I am an ally to that land.”

“Thank you sire. I hope this dispute can be settled with no further conflict.” The King pointed at Hiska's robes.

“When Shaela is finished, I would very much like to visit with her before my troops set out.” The King stood as their business concluded. Hiska was impressed by this King. He was humble and respectful to everyone he talked with, wether of high or low standing.

“I will bring her, your majesty.” The King rounded the table and placed a hand on Hiska's shoulder.

“Hiska, I know the territory and the city you speak of. We will do our best to help. Until then, please accept my personal invitation to stay here in one of the castle garden suites for as long as you need. Mitcheio has given me a brief, yet detailed, report of you and your new bride. It would be good to have you and

Shaela stay here while she trains under Mitcheio.”

“Training sire?” King Asmond nodded, snapping his fingers loudly. Instantly a man in blue robes entered through one of five doors in the chamber. The King turned and smiled at him as he entered.

“Ah, Daedris, could you see to it that this gentleman and his Ward are housed in one of the inner garden suites until they decide to depart? I would be most obliged.”

“Yes sire.” The man beckoned Hiska to follow. Hiska was suddenly curious how Shaela was doing. As he followed, the blue robed man waved a hand in front of him.

“Shaela is currently within a trial set for her by Mitcheio. She is in good health.” Hiska didn't answer, but began to study the ornate complexity of the structure of the castle about him, realizing Daedris had perceived his thoughts, which made him naturally wary not to set his mind upon things he ought to keep to himself.

They both made their way through the sturdy and well manned fortress. The inner halls and corridors were like none he had ever seen before. The entirety of the physical structure was constructed of light colored marble, finely crafted, yet practical in design.

As they passed through an inner courtyard, open to the warmth of the sun, Hiska saw many people going about their business. The smell of green permeated the air, mixed with the fragrance of flowers and honey. They walked through an orchard of fruit trees of many varieties and came at last to a structure no larger than a small home.

Daedris stopped at the front door of the beautiful dwelling and turned to Hiska.

“This will be your place of residence until you decide to leave. Make yourself at home. You are free to come and go as you please.” He bowed to Hiska and walked away. Before he was out of sight, Daedris turned back.

“Oh, and do walk the flower gardens with Shaela. I'm sure she would enjoy

them very much. There is something about the flower gardens here which tends to drive away even the deepest cares of the world.” With that said, the man vanished into the orchard, leaving Hiska standing at the door of one of the suites in the midst of the King's beautiful gardens.

She approached the golden city and stopped, nearly overcome by the splendor of this unearthly civilization, burning with a light of its own. Its radiance penetrated the dark, like a brightly burning lamp in the night, drawing her toward it like a moth to a flame.

After a time, she began to slowly approach a massive archway suspended by the great walls of the structure. As she passed under the great arch, which looked as if it could span across the entire borders of the city she grew up in, the golden path branched out into a hundred paths before her eyes.

As she wandered within the magnificent and breathtaking city, Shaela noticed an elf walking her way, as if he were leaving. He stopped in front of her and bowed, a luminescence glowing within his eyes, as if two burning candles had been lit and placed within him, his eyes being the only outlet for that light.

“Welcome to El’Anara. My name is Javahn.” Shaela bowed slightly, taken back by his striking appearance. She felt as if she were in a dream.

“Shaela, my name is Shaela.” Was all she could say as she stepped closer to him. He smiled brightly at her.

“You have a beautiful name. We don't often receive visitors from the Outplanes, especially from the golden road from whence you have come.” Shaela looked at him, completely at a loss for words as he motioned her to follow.

Turning he began walking through the main street, which at first was scattered with a few other elves here and there. Mostly, the area seemed vacant. As they walked in silence, she marveled at everything; how perfectly clean and lighted the streets were. She was especially drawn to the large expanse of gardens they passed.

Each garden had a trail winding up into it which was wide enough for a few people to casually traverse. She stopped and peered up into one such garden, wondering where it led to and looked at Javahn, who looked up the path as well, almost as if he'd never seen it before.

“These areas are for those who wish to be alone. Never enter into one of

these gardens if you don't have the time to enjoy the experience. Come, I will introduce you to someone who is looking forward to meeting you.” Shaela glanced at the thick, well kept vegetation, admiring it for a moment longer before turning away to follow. This garden seemed quite similar to the Sacred Grove within the EverShade Jungle, where she and Hiska had been married.

“How many gardens are there Javahn?” The Elf shrugged as they turned down another golden avenue.

“Hmmm, to tell you the truth, I don't know if there is an end to them, for I've never been able to count them all. As a child I tried, but got tired of it after I had reached the grand total of twelve.” Shaela looked at him, unable to resist snickering at his naturally cheerful demeanor.

“Twelve?” He nodded enthusiastically.

“Yes, after the twelfth one, I got tired and went home to get a drink of water. Funny thing, water, it makes me forget to count gardens. I will tell you one thing, but you must make a sacred oath to me that you will keep this an unbreakable secret.” He stopped and looked at her, a very serious look crossing his face, mingled with a twinkle in his eyes. She laughed and nodded.

“I promise.” Satisfied, he continued.

“Each garden is uniquely different. If you enter once, it will take you away into high adventure. If you enter the same garden again, something else will happen. See, watch this.” Javahn pointed to a beautiful young Elf woman, who turned up and onto a nearby garden path, shouldering a small backpack. Shaela was captured by the flowing robes of green she wore, and her knee-length hair of blue, gently trailing like fine stands of silk. She entered into the tree-line and vanished. Javahn's mouth opened slightly as he stared at her in silence, the light in his eyes changing from his normal demeanor, to that of infatuation and admiration.

“Wow,” he whispered, biting his lip, “Seren looks so lovely today.” Shaela grinned at Javahn, a twinkle coming to her eyes. Javahn noticed her watching him and pointed.

“There, did you see that?” Javahn looked at Shaela. “Did you see that

slight movement in the grove? When that happens, it is then permitted for the next to enter the garden. If you had followed Seren into the garden without waiting, you would have been caught up in the same adventure as she.” Javahn stopped and thought for a moment as Shaela's smile grew. She looked at the garden and bit her lip, her eyes lighting up. She sighed and turned to the Javahn, pointing to the trees wherein Seren had gone.

“Javahn, you missed your chance.” He nodded and looked at the garden, then blinked, shook his head and glared at Shaela playfully, his face turning crimson red. Shaela laughed, feeling a sudden joy fill her.

“I don't think I should ever want to leave now . . . and I don't even know this wonderful place.” Javahn nodded.

“Yes, I know how you feel.” Shaela looked back to the garden curiously.

“So, Seren is where? Is she in the garden still?” Javahn shook his head.

“No. Seren is on an adventure. When you enter, you decide the type of adventure you want. The garden does the rest. Some leave . . . and are never seen again.” Shaela cringed.

“That's rather scary, don't you think? What happened to them?” The Elf shrugged.

“I don't know; no one knows. But I'm sure they are happy . . . wherever they are. One day, I want to go on a long journey; a daring and bold adventure, filled with dangers and wonders.”

“Why don't you then?” Javahn looked down at the ground, a sudden reluctance to answer coming over him.

“It's alright, I don't need to know.” He shrugged, looked up Shaela and winked.

“Keep another secret?” Without waiting for a reply, he continued.

“I'm a little scared of my fantasy. I have it completely written in a series of three full tomes, but I'm rather afraid to meet some of the villains within the story.” She shook her head and cringed a bit, thinking it rather odd he should have written it all down.

“Well, take out the villains. Then you wouldn't have to worry about the dangers so much.” A troubled look crossed Javahn's face.

“What is it?” She inquired.

“Well, if I did that, the story would change, and I would have to rewrite the entirety of it again. Besides, what's the point of an adventure where I win too easily?”

“You mean to say, the garden grants the desires of the one that enters into it?” Javahn perked up, excited, snapping his fingers loudly.

“Exactly!” Now she was very interested. The sudden desire to run and enter one of the gardens nearly compelled her to escape. She looked at the path that led up and into the nearest garden and wondered if the adventures were real, or only fabrications, illusions.

“What happens within, Javahn, is it real?” He nodded in earnest, then quickly beckoned her to follow him.

“Come, come, there be time enough later for such luxuries. Let me give you a walk-about . . . a tour.” Resisting the urge to flee back into her old life, she began to walk with Javahn, stepping in beside him as he continued.

As they made their way deeper into the city, Shaela noticed more people about her. The beauty of Al'Enara captivated her. After a good long walk, and many turns and detours, she became curious about Javahn's race. She noticed each elf was distinctly unique from another, with the exception that each had that same glow in their eyes.

“What type of Elf are you Javahn?” He smiled.

“Long lived, that's for sure.” He snickered to himself, seeming the only one to catch the humor. When he noticed she waited for a reply, he cleared his throat unnecessarily.

“Kithillian.” In all her studies, she had never heard of the race of Kithillian Elf. Just his presence alone seemed wholesome; full of life. She watched him continue on, happily giving her information about the city, even though she had not asked for it.

“I think I know half of everyone here in this city.” She looked at him, narrowing her eyes, doubtful.

“Javahn, I've noticed there aren't too many people here, well compared to the size of this place.” Holding up a finger, Javahn was about to say something and then looked at her as if she had made a good point.

“Well, maybe you are right.” She followed him down a few more avenues, suddenly finding herself in the midst of a throng of people. Shaela stopped and looked around, her eyes taking in a part of the city unlike any other she and her guide had been through. All about her, towers scaled far into the blackness above, connected by a sea of endless bridges which arched far above them, some connecting to other buildings and others meeting other bridges of the same in mid air. Many connected to huge round platforms which floated independently far above the surface. Each bridge was suspended without supporting pillars above hundreds and hundreds of people below. She gave Javahn a look of wonder.

“You know about half of them?” He nodded, then shook his head, thinking to himself.

“Well, maybe a little more than half . . . I don't remember.” Shaking her head, she followed him down a golden stairway, not believing him, the magnitude of which she had never dreamt of playing out before her eyes in a nearly overwhelming panorama. After they reached the bottom, they began to mingle with the masses of people which teemed in the thousands within a great plaza. Javahn greeted many of them by name, and after a long while, Shaela began to believe he knew as many as he claimed to know.

She did not recall how far into the city she and Javahn had traveled, for there was no sun to gauge time of day by. Just as her feet began to complain, he turned down one last smaller avenue and entered one of the buildings. As she followed, she ran her hand across the inside wall of the structure, noticing it was stone, yet smooth and cool to the touch. She also felt something else besides its normal texture and temperature. When she made physical contact with its surface, she froze instantly, taking in an astonished breath. It was as if she had felt a

heartbeat within the stone, yet there was no pulse as in living beings . . . it was alive!

Slowly she reached out her other hand, laying it to the stone's surface, bending her attention to it. Yes, it was alive; she felt its awareness of her. Slowly she set the side of her head to the wall, feeling the coolness wall's surface.

Javahn stopped and turned, watching her curiously. Shaela felt it again. It was not like the beating of another's heart at all, yet it had a steady rhythm to it, and seemed far more complicated than the normal life she could feel emanating within a person, or an animal.

As she felt its life force, the sudden vision of two great dragons flashed in her mind. One was golden, one black as night. Both dragons looked down upon her from a mountain of riches, their attention riveted upon her. The right eye of the gold dragon blazed to life, and as it did, Shaela beheld a sea of terrible, ghastly, knights, riding upon twin-tailed wolves. It was fleeting, this vision, but was enough to move away from the wall. Startled, her eyes widening in wonder and fear. She turned to Javahn, placing both hands to each side of her head.

“Javahn, I saw two -” Javahn quickly turned away, waving her to follow him, interrupting her quickly.

“Come, come, I want you to meet my grandmother. She is expecting you.” Shaela let her hands drop and looked at her guide for a moment, not knowing what to think, then followed in silence. As she ascended the stairs after him, she glanced back at the wall, once, feeling highly unnerved. Her hands began to tremble visibly as they entered into the building.

Once within, they ascended a grand spiral staircase that led them up for a long, long time. As she followed Javahn, she thought about what she saw, not knowing what to make of it. The ascension took quite a while, in which time she composed herself, gaining control of her hands.

At length, she followed him into a circular chamber lavishly furnished with soft seating arrangements, complimenting the golden hue of the room. As they entered, she thought she had walked into a dream. The room was adorned with

paintings and flowers and carpets which richly enhanced the feel and look of the chamber. Shaela stopped and looked about her, marveling at its beauty and elegance.

Javahn glanced at her and smiled brightly, nodding as if in approval. Without a word, he offered her an arm, which she took, and led her through what seemed a forest of living plants and flowers as they headed to the center where sat a beautiful young woman with silver hair and golden eyes. She instantly greeted Javahn with a warm sentimental smile, beckoning them to come.

“Javahn, you have returned. Ahh, good, I see you have brought our guest.” As Shaela neared, the Elf woman turned to her, taking her hands in her own delicate hands, smiling.

“My dear, welcome to Al`Enara. I have awaited your arrival for quite some time. Please sit and make yourself comfortable. We must talk.” Shaela smiled and sat down, confused. Once seated, the beautiful Elf sat down beside Shaela and looked up at Javahn.

“Go child, I will speak with Shaela alone.” Javahn bent down, kissing her on the cheek, bowed to Shaela, then quietly departed. After they were alone, the woman turned her attention back to her and smiled.

“I am Ellesa, Matriarch of the Household of Myst. You need not tell me your name, or anything about you. I know it all . . . from the time of your forming before your birth. Ahh, I have confused you. Forgive me, this is rather a delicate subject . . . one which will enlighten you beyond the wisdom of your years. Shaela, you have come here arriving at this time to Al`Enara, due to the choices you made since you were a baby.” Shaela was suddenly aware of the power of this woman, who seemed to be in her prime. Looking into her golden eyes, Shaela guessed her to be much older than she looked, and desired to ask her the personal question of how old she was. Without hesitation, Ellesa smiled and then chuckled.

“I know you have a lot of questions, and the answers will be revealed to you in time. Of course, I will answer a few of them now. I was before the first Human was formed of mortal stature.” Shaela was taken back by the answer to the

question she had only thought to ask, and suddenly felt exposed and vulnerable before this Elf, as if she were a simple book to be read at her will and pleasure. Shaela sighed and bit her bottom lip.

“What do I do now?” Ellesa smiled like a loving mother and touched the side of her face.

“Shaela, when you touched this structure, what did you perceive?” Shaela thought about it. By what she had just told her, Ellesa knew what she had experienced.

“Shaela, my knowing will not help you learn and grow. Child, you must study things out in your own mind grow yourself. It matters not that I know your thought, for this is about you, not me.” Shaela considered the significance of the two questions she had in conjunction with each other and became confused.

“Ellesa, I saw two dragons; one gold, one black, amidst vast treasures which seemed to me uncountable. They looked at me . . .” She told Ellesa everything she had experienced. Confused, Shaela stopped, placing a hand to her head, as if not feeling well. Ellesa handed her a crystal goblet filled with a clear cool liquid.

“Drink this; you have neither eaten nor drank anything for days. Do not become so enthralled with the moment, that you neglect your health child. You have a very bad habit of forgetting to eat . . . among other things. If you are not careful, you may wither and become a wraith, then drift away in the wind.” Shaela took the goblet and tasted the liquid, which was cool and very refreshing. As she emptied the contents of the goblet, she felt strength return to her body and clarity to her mind. In a moment she felt much better. Ellesa held out a hand for the goblet, which Shaela placed back in her possession. She set it aside and gave Shaela a very curious look.

“It is interesting you should behold the dragons, for they are manifest to very few who find this path. Even among those, like you, who successfully traverse the golden road to Al`Enara, few envision the dragons. Is even more of a rarity to be given a vision by them.” The golden eyed Elf held up a delicate hand.

“That will be answered when it is answered, and is not for me to divulge my

dear. Needless to say, they have manifest themselves to you for a purpose. Shaela, I will council you strongly to let things happen . . . don't yearn for results predetermined by your own desires and wants.” Shaela shrugged and sighed.

“Who are you? Why am I here? What is the purpose of all this? What is expected of me now? Will I have a normal life?” Ellesa grinned at Shaela, her demeanor changing from a deep and poignant state, to carefree.

“Shaela, even though I see much, and discern more than I see, it is merely my gift which I use to help others, like yourself, discover their true path. Nothing is predestined unless forced so by a greater power, and that happens rarely. Your path is different than mine, as is every single soul crafted and formed by the Essence of Eternity. To answer all your questions would be to sway you from the natural course of your life; it would change things . . . and that is not my right. I will tell you one more thing as an anchor for you in all this confusing talk.” Ellesa stood and turned to Shaela, thinking for a moment. “I just mentioned the Essence of Eternity, which is something you must know, at least, before you return to your home world. The Essence of Eternity is the very fiber and substance of all things, physical, spiritual and mental. When you discovered this city was alive, you were not dreaming, nor delusional . . . it is. This essence resides within all creatures, though nearly all never discover and tap into its source. You, Shaela, have. With this great gift, you have, by your choices, discovered the Essence of Eternity in ignorance. Now, with what I have told you, you are less ignorant, but still quite naive in this matter. What you do with the powers and gifts you will cultivate in the future will be strictly up to you. Listen to your inner feelings and you will grow. Ignore your instincts, and run with your selfish desires, and you, indeed, will become the monster you have currently suspected you are.”

Shaela felt overwhelmed. She was more confused now than ever before.

“I don't understand.” Ellesa smiled at her, like her mother used to.

“You will, or you will be devoured in and of your own thoughts and actions.” Shaela listened carefully to the words of Ellesa, suddenly afraid that if she explained all the questions she had in her spinning head, she would lose focus

on this woman's instructions. Once thing she did come to realize, was she had been given a great gift that she knew was unique amidst all others . . . as each of those who gained such Divine Favors were unique from her's and all others as well. She felt the spark of understanding mingled within this sea of the unknown. Truly, Shaela felt quite overwhelmed and small - lost.

“Shaela, do you know what the two dragons represent?” Shaela thought for a time, coming to no certain conclusion. The strain of all this was giving her a headache.

“Mother, I . . . did I just call you mother?” Ellesa smiled brightly and nodded.

“Yes.” Shaela shook her head.

“I'm sorry.” Ellesa shook her head in return.

“Don't be. That is a high compliment to me. I love family in all its diverse nature. That is all we are, you know, family . . . all of us. Most just don't know it . . . yet. Please continue my child.” Shaela smiled, feeling a warmth enter her heart, which brought tears to her eyes as she looked at Ellesa for a moment.

“I believe the two dragons represent light and darkness . . . the gold being order and the black being chaos . . . neither can exist without the other in the great balance. Well, that is my assumption.” Ellesa suddenly looked disturbed.

“What's wrong Elessa?” The beautiful Kithillian Elf shook her head and smiled slightly.

“I did not foresee your answer. It is my divine favor to discern the thoughts and intentions of another to a point. When I can no longer enlighten them, I lose that ability. To lose such a link is always disturbing to me, like seeing something I do not wish to. Losing this link with you indicates that you are ready to leave. Your time with me, I must say, has been of short duration, which is rare. It means you understand enough. Shaela, cultivate your power . . . keep an open mind, and you will do well.

Shaela felt a deep and sudden need to sleep overwhelm her. The feeling was so intense, it caused her to lay down and shut her eyes. The moment she shut

her eyes, she was taken into slumber.

The last thought that came to her was one of the gardens, which she longed to enter.

Take on the power of the other, your companion, your loyal ally. When all has passed in this age, what will you do then? When all whom you know have turned to dust, to become but fragments of memory, leaving you irrevocably alone, who will you turn to then? Will your mind burn and suffer as the searing magma within the depths of the earth?

Shaela . . .

She sat upright as if she had been bitten in the back by something in the bed she lay in. Her hand shot out, even before she opened her eyes, gripping the scabbard which housed the Noth`Kur Aegis, the blade she had been carrying for years. Slowly her eyes opened as she bared her teeth like an animal. She looked at Mitcheio as the Sardakk witch let go the blade, stepped back and whispered three words.

“Mystrin enigma talis.” Shaela carefully pronounced the words of the spell back to Mitcheio ten times, feeling a spark of understanding fan to life within her mind, connecting her to the light, truth and understanding of what she held in her hand. Instantly she was filled with an energy, causing her hair to fly as if suddenly caught in an unseen wind.

Katcha stepped forwards and drew his blade, placing the flat of its ornately runed surface against Noth`Kur Aegis as Shaela slowly drew it from its scabbard, feeling as if she had suddenly awakened it. An energy instantly pulsed between the blades as Mitcheio began to softly chant, focusing her will on the two weapons.

Shaela watched in eager wonder as both Soul`Blades touched. At first, it crossed her mind that Katcha was going to kill her, and that startled her badly, but the energy and living presence she touched enthralled and captivated her attention, holding her will to the blade far more than the fear of being struck down.

A voice sighed within her mind, causing her eyes to widen, as if she had suddenly

remembered something forgotten; something lost.

“I am here Dark Child.” Shaela did not see Katcha sheath his blade, nor hear Mitcheio cease her chant. The memory of the Werewolf in the ogres cave flashed in her mind briefly, causing her to gasp.

Quickly she arose, smiling at the blade she held, as if greeting an old friend. She had so many questions, but kept them to herself. Slowly, she sheathed it and fastened the scabbard and belt to her hip. Once she was finished, she turned to Mitcheio.

“What now?” Mitcheio smiled as a bead of sweat slowly cascaded down her right temple. Shaela reached out a hand, steadying her.

“Mitcheio, are you alright?” The witch nodded.

“Yes, thank you. Now you must go to the King. He wishes to speak with you before you depart for the EverShade Jungle.” Shaela grew instantly anxious.

“I have a lot of questions Mitcheio, but I'm not sure they would be answered. Mitcheio took Shaela's hands in hers and squeezed.

“You, Shaela, will always have questions, as is your nature. Now, prepare yourself and I will escort you personally to the castle. One more thing, you must reveal your blade one more time in order to get the full effects. As of now, it should only be . . . familiar.” Motioning to Katcha, she left the room. As Katcha passed by her, he looked down at her.

“Well done Shaela,” he praised her, then pointed to a basin of water and towels over in the corner of the room. He then departed without another word. As before, when Katcha departed, she breathed a sigh of relief.

As she exited the guild with Mitcheio and Katcha, Shaela spotted Hiska, instantly, relieved to see him. As the three approached, he turned and bowed, then offered her his arm as ever he did. Accepting it, she smiled at him as they all entered the street and began a pleasant walk to the castle.

Just that simple, quiet, walk together soothed her anxiety and relaxed her enough to ponder on how she would go about looking for her mother, who was not

dead after all. It had been so many years since the incident with the Ogres, that she came to the conclusion that she must have escaped, and also must have rebuilt her life to some degree. No one could have survived in captivity with monsters like that for this many years . . . she had to have escaped. Once she saw the King, she would go back and look for her. She had to council with Mother on this matter.

There was also the Ancient Willow . . . she had the desire to speak with it again. Maybe the willow could help. She wanted to be in its presence again; she craved the thought. If it were not for the King's wish to see her, she and Hiska would be returning home with all haste. Hiska must have sensed her mood, for he pulled her closer to him and became more attentive than usual toward her.

When they reached the front gate of the castle, the guardsman bowed to them. Katcha returned with a silent salute. They were instantly let into the castle without formalities, and soon they found themselves in the presence of the High King, who dismissed all his guards.

Before departing, Mitcheio took Shaela's hands in hers and smiled at her fondly.

“You are welcome in my home any time, Shaela. I hope your journey will be a success, and that you and your Guardian remain safe. Here is where we part for a time . . . but not forever.” Shaela pulled her hand free and embraced Mitcheio.

“Thank you for all you have done for me. Be safe.” Katcha stirred uncomfortably at Shaela's actions, but remained silent, his eyes drawn to the Noth`Kur Aegis katana. They all said their goodbys’ and parted as the King welcomed Hiska and Shaela.

Once they were alone, the King beckoned them to walk the gardens with him. As he escorted them, he made casual conversation.

“How did your training go?” Hiska waited for Shaela to give her account before he gave his. She did so, then listened to Hiska's report. Katcha had taken him aside and had given him personal lessons for the entire time she had been

gone. What was shocking, was another part of Hiska's report, which informed her of news she was ignorant of.

“Milord, it has been over three weeks since Silvara's words during the council, warning that he would gather all who would fight and attack the Human city. We have discussed this, but what news is there? Has Silvara kept his oath?” The King placed a hand on Hiska's shoulder, giving an inquisitive glance Shaela's way, who blanched in shock at what she heard. He began to speak to Hiska, and then stopped and looked at her, concern in his countenance.

“Shaela, what is wrong, you seem confused.” Hiska turned to her and waited, still as stone.

“Milord, I beg your pardon for interrupting, but what is this Hiska speaks of? Our peoples are at differences, even to fighting here and there, but they are not at war.” The King looked at Hiska, then back at Shaela, thinking for a moment. Hiska placed a hand on her shoulder, his talons extending as he gently gripped her in silence and concern. The King shook his head.

“Shaela, do you not remember why you sought me out?” Shaela grew afraid, suddenly realizing she knew very little beyond when they were attacked by the Shadow Vahkrin after she and Hiska were married in the Sacred Grove.

“I, I don't know . . . I don't recall much after the attack.” Hiska slipped his hand down into hers.

“Shaela, you were exorcized of a Plague Fiend, which the Vahkrin attacked you with. After a short time, you seemed to recover, and so we made for the Resting Grounds. After a council, in which the Prima Catur were summoned by Mother, you called on Talon. He bore us to the woods just outside Gaunten. I brought you to the Holy Warriors Guild after you collapsed by the road. Once you awoke, I left and Orin brought you to Mitcheio, who had aided the Guild Master in removing the Plague Fiend from you. Do you not remember any of those events?” She shook her head, a desperate look on her face.

“The only thing I remember is waking up in the guild with you by my side. Tell me about the Prima . . . no, tell me everything, please.” Hiska looked at the

King, who nodded. Hiska continued to tell Shaela everything which occurred after the attack, up until the time in which she awoke. After Hiska related their experiences, she paled and found a place to sit. This was highly disturbing. Three weeks had passed since they had arrive in Gaunten.

All she could recall was Bane speaking with her just prior to waking up on the bed, though she never said a word about that. The Prima had been in the council at the Resting Grounds? The situation must have been dire indeed if the Prima were invited into Harritt Catur territory. She suddenly feared the bloodshed had already commenced . . . and her mother was alive, possibly living in the city.

She stood and began pacing back and forth nervously until the King stepped in front of her, taking her by the shoulders in strong, yet gentle, hands.

“Shaela, my Griffon Riders are among the Humans and the inhabitants of the EverShade Jungle. The reports I am receiving is that all sides are currently discussing the issues in council, though the reports which have come back to me are disconcerting, to say the least. Both sides have been guilty of attack. From what I know, you, Shaela, were responsible for two of those offenses. Is this true?” She nodded, not wanting to deny it.

“Yes, I was responsible for both.” She did not care to defend her position; it would be a waste of energy. “Yes, I attacked and caused the damage they accused me of.” The King glanced at Hiska, who remained silent, watching Shaela as she looked at the King resolutely, mingled with fear. She nodded again to the King in silence, then sat down. Nishane Asmond sat beside her and leaned his chin into one hand in silence for a time, deep in thought as Shaela turned and looked at him, waiting. In a few minutes, he straightened and turned to her.

“Were your attacks provoked?” She nodded, but said nothing. “Will you tell me what happened?” Shaela closed her eyes, picturing the slaughter which she had been a part of. She could smell the blood on the wind as she recalled escaping with Hiska out of the city.

“Yes. Hiska was captured by the Humans, beaten daily until his life was beginning to fade. I discovered that he was in the jail house and tried to negotiate

his release with payment. The Governor of the city, who is also the militia leader, demanded I surrender my blade and staff to him in exchange for Hiska's release. I desperately tried to convince him to let Hiska leave with me, but I would not give up what he demanded. Milord, the situation suddenly turned to what felt like a hostage negotiation. When I refused, he simply drew his blade and entered into the cell, clearly with the open intention to kill Hiska as he lay unconscious. I did what I had to do, though I did not attack anyone at that time. I compelled him to bring a Healer to the jail, sending him out quickly to fetch help, but the charm I wove about his heart faded before I could get the relief Hiska so desperately needed. Hiska was dying . . . I simply was left no other option than to attack. Milord forgive me, but if I had to do it all over again, I would not change my actions. After I got him out of harms grasp, I was commanded by Shae`Hur, the sovereign of EverShade, to go back into the city and obtain Hiska's Guardian Blade. I did so, attempting to go secretly, but not without a confrontation. That is all.” The King stood and turned to her, shaking his head sadly.

“I believe you speak the truth.” He then turned to Hiska. “Tell me first why you entered a city you knew to be steadily growing hostile to your kind, and then what happened after you did.” Hiska knelt before the King and removed both scabbard and blade, tossing it away from him, as is the custom of the Guardian while being questioned on such matters.

“Proceed Hiska.”

“After the disappearance of Shaela, I searched far and wide for her with no success. The last place I would possibly gain news of her whereabouts would be from her own kind. The hope was small, but I had to know if she had returned to her people. I was allowed entrance to the city, and even allowed to rent a room at an inn. On the first night they broke down the door with no warning. I did not resist, thinking it would only complicate matters in my search. I was escorted in chains to the jail house where I stayed in the cell in which Shaela found me.” The King's brows came together as he listened.

“As far as I can see, you committed no crime Hiska.” The King walked

over to Hiska's blade and picked it up. As he walked back before Hiska, he drew the blade and looked down at Hiska, who bowed his head in submission. The King then took the blade in both his hands, raised it parallel to his own chest, yet not quite touching himself with it, hilt held low so that the tip of the blade was before his eyes.

“Hiska, I give you the rank of Free Knight within the my realm, arise.” Hiska stood and bowed formally. The King bowed formally in return and handed him both scabbard and blade in a ceremonial fashion and then drew his own blade, which was fashioned to appear as a radiant star. Turning the flat of the blade to her Guardian, Shaela watched in wonder as the King touched Hiska on the sleeve of his Guardian Robes. As the silver luminescent blade made contact with the fine woven fabric, a second border appeared. The second, inner, border was finger-thick and faded to silver, matching the rune color in which her name was written.

Hiska looked over at Shaela, his emerald eyes burning with a fierce pride. He then stepped back and bowed as the King sheathed his blade.

“Thank you sire.”

“I am sure you deserve more than what I have bestowed upon you. Therefore, you will always have a place in my castle, should you ever find yourself here. Keep your honor, and this privilege shall never be taken from you. You will also, both of you, have access to the castles treasury, to bring the unknown to be revealed, and to buy and trade therein.” He then beckoned Shaela to come to him. As she stopped beside her husband, he placed gentle hands on both their shoulders and looked at each of them.

“You both have received much needed training, and your peoples are not currently at war. You are free to spend as much time as you like here. Before I leave you both to your future, you must know I am grateful for the steps you have taken to help solve this dispute. It could not have been handled better.” The King lowered his hands and beckoned them to sit. As they did, he joined them, suddenly in quiet thought. In all seriousness, the King looked at Shaela.

“You have a gift I have never known to be manifest within a Human. This

gift you have must be well cultivated, well nurtured. Shaela, if you do well to safeguard your gift, one day I foresee you directly becoming an apprentice to one of the great ones.” Shaela blinked in surprise, not knowing what to say.

“Hiska, take good care of her, for she will need your support and guidance before long, or I am no King.” Hiska looked at his wife.

“I will keep a close watch on her.” The King stood.

“Please, come and feel at home here as often as you will. I forbid you both to feel as strangers in my house.” Shaela smiled and stood with Hiska, bowing in respect for the high King of the Zurkel Mainland, who seemed more to Shaela a mentor than a ruler to be served.

“Milord?” The King focused his attention on her and smiled.

“Yes?”

“I would not lessen your station in the least by foolish words, but you seem to serve your people, more than you rule.” He smiled and winked.

“The true power of my rule comes from service, not ruling by decrees and commands. My people follow me because I love and fight for them. Can there be anything stronger than what loyalty is forged by this?” Shaela shook her head and smiled.

“No.”

“Then do likewise. You would be amazed at what transpires through sincerity.” Gripping Hiska firmly by the arm, the King smiled soberly at him, then winked at Shaela.

As they watched him depart, Shaela slipped her hand into Hiska's and squeezed, throwing us a sly look at him.

“So, how loyal are you to me Hiska?” He looked down at her and chuckled softly.

“That depends on how much you love me.” She laughed and leaned into him heavily, feeling very happy.

“I guess your devotion is then unbreakable.” He nodded, wrapping an arm about her.

“Shaela, I want to show you where the King is letting us stay.” He took her hand and guided her through two more gardens before entering into the beautiful flower gardens of the inner grounds. Stopping at the front door of the suite, he retrieved a key and handed it to her, watching her eyes brighten in delight.

Three days passed too quickly. They explored the gardens of the King and did nearly a hundred other things. Shaela never wanted to leave, but knew their time here was coming to an end.

During their walk through one particularly unique garden of roses, she told Hiska of her visit to the Seven Havens, and the discovery that her mother was yet alive. They discussed the issue together and decided to depart the next morning for home. There was work to be done.

As they departed the beautiful and grand city of Gaunten, Shaela's excitement began to rise at the possibility of being reunited with her mother again.

They traveled the open road among the passing guards and common folk of the country, making their way towards the distant forest in which they had landed. As they walked, Shaela watched the people traveling the road.

“Hiska, look!” Shaela said with sudden enthusiasm. He looked to where she was pointing, but saw nothing but travelers.

“There, that big man. Don’t you see him?”

“Shaela beware. Do not provoke him.” Rolling her eyes at the man of her dreams, she watched the Leviathan, noticing him clad in a full set of plated armor. To her delight, she noticed he was traveling in the same direction, striding casually along side a team of four horses pulling his wagon. Grinning, Shaela broke into a run to catch up, suddenly in the mood to play a little trick on Hiska.

“Hiska, come on. Let's go say hello to him . . . the big one.” She looked back and grinned at her husband, who did not look happy in the least. Shaking his head, he beckoned her back to him.

“Shaela, come back, this is not a good idea.” She broke into a sprint, ignoring his warning. In a short time she caught up with the Leviathan, falling into a quick walk beside him as he looked down, catching her eye. Instantly, the Leviathan's countenance brightened.

“Hello Shaela,” he stated in a deep voice. Shaela looked back, noticing Hiska's approach and looked back up at Tomakk, grinning.

“My husband, Hiska, thinks I am out of line talking to a stranger. Don't tell him, but I find it amusing to torture him.” She gave the Leviathan a look that made him chuckle and stop. Raising his large hands, he unfastened his helmet. Pulling it from his head, Tomakk bowed politely, eyeing Hiska as he stopped by Shaela, placing a hand on her arm and gently attempting to guide her away from the huge man.

“My apologies sir, she is just being friendly. We will not bother you further.” Shaela gave Tomakk a pout and resisted, pulling her arm out of his grip.

“Hiska, I just want to meet him. It's not every day you get to meet a giant.”

Hiska froze, not knowing what to do at this point. He looked up at the Leviathan, then back at Shaela, slightly shaking his head.

“Shaela, we must be on our way. We were just leaving sir.” Hiska reached for Shaela again, but she stepped back and turned on Tomakk, laughing quietly.

“How have you been Tomakk?” The Leviathan shrugged and looked at Hiska, who gave Shaela a sudden, curious look.

“Very well, thank you milady. I've finished the business I came here for. Shaela, how are you? You looked rather sick last time we met. You look better, though you are still very pale.”

“Very well, thank you. Tomakk, this is Hiska, my Guardian and husband. Hiska, this is Tomakk, a master weapon smith. We met the day I was taken to the inn by Orin.” Hiska bowed, looking rather relieved.

“Ah, my pleasure Tomakk.” The Leviathan bowed formally.

“And mine. Where are you headed off to, Shaela?” She pointed north.

“Back home. Our business is finished here. Did you sell all your weapons?” Tomakk shook his head.

“No, but I only have a few remaining. I will hopefully sell them in the next few civilized areas before heading back to my lands. I'll have to sell the wagon and horses also before setting back home, unless I want to eat them. They would never survive the journey.” Shaela grinned up at Tomakk, who caught sight of her fangs, and then smiled.

“Ah, I wondered why you looked so pale the day we met . . . you are Ardenoth.” She shook her head, aware that she had blown her cover.

“No, I was attacked. I retain the attributes of my attacker, though it is controllable now.” She noticed Tomakk's attitude did not change in the least toward her.

“Like most, you don't seem too worried about it.” Tomakk shook his head and smiled slightly.

“Me, no. I've seen enough to sway my judgement toward you. You must have some very powerful connections to be cursed with such a plague, and yet

retain control over its grip.” She nodded, glancing at Hiska as she took his hand.

“I am lucky.” The Leviathan nodded, throwing a hard look at Hiska.

“I believe you are,” he agreed. Shaela began to like Tomakk more than ever and became curious.

“Tomakk, I wish I could visit your lands one day.” The huge man smiled and steadied one of the horses, which looked like a small pony in comparison to his large stature.

“If you like, I can draw you a map. Truthfully, it would be quite the feat to get there. If you did make it to my city, you would gain much respect from my people.” Shaela nodded and looked at Hiska, who said nothing.

“Yes, I would like a map. From what you said before, I am intrigued by the description you gave me.” Tomakk topped his team of horses, reached into the back of the wagon and opened a large chest. Retrieving a bottle of ink, a quill and a bound tome of paper, he began drawing a full-scale map, with landmarks and a few areas with a large X.

“Do not go into these areas.” She nodded enthusiastically.

“Warning taken.” Soon Tomakk was finished sketching the rather detailed map, which, if followed, would guide her to his home city. Carefully, Tomakk scribed the name of the city on the map.

“Caldera . . . that is your city?” He nodded.

“Shaela, if you venture to this land, be prepared to fight like you never have before. The sounds of battle instinctively drew the attention of other predators looking for an easy feast. I will warn you one last time, prepare with knowledge and gear, light to bear. Think of the worst, and you will have a chance.” He frowned down at her as she enthusiastically nodded, looking at the map.

“Are there mysteries within this land of yours?” Tomakk stood, towering over the both of them and carefully tore the page from the book. As soon as the page came free, he handed the map to her. He then took the tome, the ink and the quill and put them away. After securing the chest, he turned, nodding.

“Yes, most all the land is uninhabited since it was shattered by conflict -

when the land was ravished by the corrupted hearts of mankind.” A pain seemed to fill his face as he spoke of the land being ravished.

“Tomakk, what's the matter?” Shaking his head, he sighed.

“Just prior to the Age of War, one thousand of my own race gave up the freedom of their lives to beings of the Underworld in exchange for power. To seal the pacts and covenants they made with the horrors within that plane, they sacrificed their own families upon alters of pure ruby . . . becoming the dreaded Darkstrome. They aided in the chaos and destruction of that thousand year war, wielding terrible powers given them by their new masters. In the end, many of them were slain . . . but not all.” Shaela was mortified at his words.

“Why, why would someone do such a thing? For power?” Shaela felt as though someone had struck her in the face. Slowly she lifted her eyes from the map to his. He looked at her in silence for just a moment, and then smiled, worry plainly filling his eyes.

“I see something about you Shaela. It is like boiling-hot water being mixed together with freezing water. . . but it is not water . . . it is decision. I see it plainly in your demeanor, in your eyes and in your every action.” Hiska stirred uncomfortably at Tomakk's words, but remained silent, while Shaela gazed into the Leviathan's eyes, not knowing what to say. After a moment, she shook her head.

“How do you know this?” Tomakk took a deep breath and sighed, putting the ink and quill away.

“I follow the path of the Recorder. I not only draw, paint, write and record all I see and hear in my books, but I perceive things; it is my gift.” Shaela was suddenly filled with many questions, but refrained from asking. If she did, it would only hatch more questions in her mind and torture her.

“Tomakk, I don't know what to do from this point. I feel as though I am lost in a sea of Mer, I being the only one with no fins to manage the currents.” Kneeling before her, Tomakk looked hard into her eyes.

“Follow the path of wisdom, Shaela, not merely intellectual knowledge.

Feel with your heart and study things out with your mind. If you do this, things will work out much better in the end. You not only have a Guardian, but a husband that loves you with his heart; I can see that as plain as the map in your hand.” Tomakk tapped the map and stood up. “It is not the power we gain in this life that elevates us to a respectful status, but what we do and how we effect others around us.” He turned and readied his horses for travel as Shaela folded the map carefully, then placed it in her pocket.

“Thank you Tomakk. Maybe, someday we will meet again. We should be going.” Tomakk bowed to her and then to Hiska.

“Good journey to you both.” Both returned his cordial gesture. With that, Tomakk fastened his helmet upon his head, turned and walked away, leading his horses down the road. Looking at Hiska, Shaela’s eyes sparkled.

“What,” asked, not looking at her.

“I got you on that one.”

“Yes, you did. And, it was less desirable than being webbed.”

After traveling for nearly one full day, they turned off the road into a field, bordering the forest which she could not recall being in being in. In fact, she never remembered flying here on Talon in his dragon form. She could not remember anything after the attack outside the Sacred Grove, and this disturbed her immensely.

They made their way into the trees for a time, silently enjoying the company of one another. After a while, Hiska stopped and turned, walking around the area nonchalantly, then laughed and looked behind her, scanning the undergrowth.

“This is where we landed. Do you have any recollection of coming here?” She tried to remember, but could not. A bit nervous, she began to think of Talon, yearning for his presence.

Before she could call for him, she heard her name whispered from behind, stopping her. Like a warm breeze, a feeling of longing washed over her and she turned to see Bane standing not far off, leaning against a palm tree, eating some form of fruit she had never seen before. She glanced at Hiska, startled that her master would appear before him as well, but found that he stood where he was, looking around as if nothing was happening out of the ordinary. With a sigh, she turned back to Bane and closed the distance between them. Stopping before him, Shaela sighed.

“It’s good to see you. How have you been?” He bowed formally, with a dark glint flashing in his eyes.

“I’ve been dead for so long, I don’t recall how I’m actually doing.” Shaela laughed and stepped closer to Bane, fighting an almost unbearable urge to fall in love with him.

“How is Ellestra doing?” He chuckled and casually waved a hand. Instantly, that feeling of longing for him subsided, relieving her of the effort to resist it.

“She is doing well, though she never tried to resist my inevitable charm,” he jested. “My concern is, how are you faring?” Shaela was taken back by his

question.

“You don't know?” He laughed again and reached into his pocket, pulling out another fruit. He looked at it, and then tossed it to her. She caught it and raised it to her nose, smelling it. It smelled very sweet and made her mouth water.

“What is it?” He shrugged.

“I don't know, but it's delicious.” Again, Shaela was confused by his words. Was he toying with her, or did he really not know? Narrowing her eyes at the fruit, she blew a strand of hair from her face and nibbled at it. The juice was good, really good. In silence, they both ate. Once finished, they each threw their core into the trees.

“So, what have you learned while in Gaunten?” She looked at Hiska, who peered about into the trees, his eyes sharp as ever. She noticed the end of his tail twitching, and it made her smile. Bane chuckled and looked at Hiska also, grinning.

“You love him.” She nodded and blushed.

“He is all the world to me. Bane, it pains my heart to know I will go on, watching him get old,” she stated sadly. “Yes, I do love him.” Bane acknowledged her. Shaela saw what she suspected to be pain in his expression.

“Who was she milord?” Startled, he looked at her, rather surprised. For a few moments he just looked at Shaela without answering. After a bit, he shrugged.

“Now it's you who reads the mind?” Shaela looked at him in earnest, ignoring the comment. Finally, Bane gave in.

“Oh, just a princess, but that was so long ago, it rarely disturbs me . . . only when someone asks such a question. You are the first one in a long while to inquire.” Shaela felt suddenly ashamed for asking.

“Forgive me for intruding; I did not mean to bring up such sorrow. Perhaps if I told you a joke, you would forget I asked?” He shook his head and smiled.

“Do you know, Shaela, you are the only female to ever make such conversation with me, the Jahtha of the Realm of Death.” She shook her head in

all seriousness.

“No, but I do now. To answer your first question, I am faring well. I've learned a few things since coming to Gaunten, and I dare say I am filled with questions and desires, but . . . oh, I don't know. It seems like the more I learn, the more I realize I don't know anything at all.” Bane breathed out his nose shortly.

“I agree with that. Sometimes, it gets that way. Then, just when you think you have reached the top of the mountain you are climbing, and just when you think you are mastering its slopes, you crest its precipice only to gaze up into the continuation of the same mountain. That is when you realize you have only mastered the foothills of a range which seems to ascend above the clouds of the heavens. It keeps on like that, you know.” Shaela understood his metaphor and rolled her eyes.

“Are you saying you experience the same?” Nodding, Bane pointed a finger at himself.

“Me, the mighty Bane?” He paused a moment, as if waiting for an answer, and then nodded. “Yes. The cycle of all things is endless . . . or it would get very boring. Take, for instance, you; do you think because you were born into this world, you had, at that point, a beginning? Did your life begin then?” Shaela was at a loss for a logical answer. She never thought about it.

“I suppose not, or would I not remember?” Bane smiled.

“I could show you things that would melt away half your assumptions and eat at the rest. No, Shaela, you existed before being delivered from your mother, I promise you that, and you will continue to exist after you part this life.” Shaela was suddenly cursed even more than before Bane had spoken. Now she was hatching new questions, adding to the others currently plaguing her.

“You know, if all these curiosities keep floating about my head, I will not have room for another spell, and they will eventually form into one huge cloud and obscure my vision. People would will say, ‘Hey, look, there goes the blind witch. Let's follow her and count how many times she stumbles this time before reaching her destination'. They will, no doubt, take bets on me for sport.” Bane bust out

laughing and clapped once, keeping his hands together. Shaela grunted and held out her hands. “Well, it's true.” She suddenly pointed at Bane accusingly, narrowing her eyes at him. “And part of my dilemma will have been your doing from the beginning.” Thoroughly amused, Bane shook his head, holding up his hands as if he were surrendering.

“The best part about the unknown is the journey finding the answer.” He stared into her eyes, waiting for a moment, as if expecting something from her. She was beginning to understand that Bane had a gift for expression. He seemed to have the knack for easing her fears as well. She smirked playfully and looked at him for a while, as if this conversation was not so unfamiliar . . . like it had been rehearsed. A thought crossed her mind.

“Milord, what is the Essence of Eternity?” Shaking his head, Bane waved a hand before him in a sweeping motion, as if quickly removing everything off the top of a small table.

“Everything,” he simply replied.

“Well, I thought I might ask; it does no harm.” He smiled fondly at Shaela.

“True. What are you up to now?” Shaela looked over at her husband again and sighed.

“We are going to find my birth mother. I've learned she is yet living. I figured it would be more safe to search the city I grew up in while King Asmond's guards are present.” Bane shifted to sit by Shaela. As he moved close, once again, it crossed her mind that she had done this before. Again, she caught herself trying desperately not to fall in love with him as he settled in next to her.

“I am going to save you some time, Shaela. Do not look to the city . . . look to the Prima Catur; they have the most knowledge on where she was taken.” Her eyes widened in surprise at his words. She wanted to know more, seeming he obviously did, but she kept silent as she reached out a hand and smoothed out the ornately embroidered lapel of his black trench coat. As she did so, she felt the overwhelming temptation to embrace him, which she did not.

“Thank you,” he whispered. Slowly, she looked up at him, her countenance

filled with regret, though she knew not why.

“A pleasure milord.” Shaela looked away from Bane. As she did, a happy expression filled his eyes as they shaded to solid black.

“Shaela, why do things happen? More specifically, why do things happen to you, and why are you here, now, separated from the ones you love, and from your own kind?” Shaela's eyes darkened to pitch black night as she slowly turned her attention back Bane. She opened her mouth to speak, as a feeling she could not describe overwhelmed her. She hesitated, struggling to find an answer to his question, but could not. Frustrated, she surrendered to her feelings.

“Show me, please.” Bane smiled, his eyes darkening to such a deepness, that what darkness she at first saw in them was as light in comparison. A terrible desire began to form within her mind, to leave everything behind and go with him . . . even if it meant she should kill Hiska. A single tear slipped from each eye as she looked into his eyes, waiting. *What am I thinking? No!* Standing, she staggered, pushed away from him, shaking her head, disbelieving her own sudden desires.

“What are you doing to me?” She whispered, shocked at her own thoughts. Bane shook his head.

“Nothing.” Shaela pointed at him, suddenly ashamed.

“No, you are putting things, thoughts, into my mind. Stop it!” Bane stood and held his hand out to the side, stepping back, shaking his head.

“No, you are wrong. Shaela, you spoke of the Essence of Eternity. Did you find the golden path?” At his words, she froze, glaring at him, then slowly nodded. Raising a hand to her mouth, she bit it hard, desperately trying to feel something. The staff in her hand began to warm, and then flashed hot in her grip.

Bane looked to Hiska, his eyes narrowing menacingly as Shaela felt a sudden presence behind her, a presence which washed over her as if she had been silently overtaken by a bitter cold wind.

Spinning around, she saw through her own breath, which hung like ocean in the air, a darkened light beginning to quickly form. She retreated back,

inadvertently stepping into Bane as she gazed, wide eyed at the presence of something terrible which began to form within the spreading darkness.

The light of day suddenly changed to black of night, even as the natural shadows of the day changed to a dull illumination, as if nature itself had suddenly decided to make opposite both light and shade. Bane hissed and enveloped Shaela with his cape, instantly chanting words she could not understand, though they somehow seemed familiar.

Darkness flowed all about her as the ring of Hiska's blade against another's as the ground fell away from beneath her feet.

Shaela felt as if she had jumped to the ground as the earth impacted her feet. The darkness of Bane's cape flew from her as he left her not far from the battle raging on before her eyes, revealing Hiska backed against a large boulder by the attack of a Dark Harvester, a living blackness in the form of a ghost-like wraith from the plane of spirits.

It shocked her that she knew this creature, though she could not remember when she had ever encountered such a being. Within its ghastly, unnatural, hands it wielded death in the form of a serrated scythe as it bore down on Hiska, quickly beginning to overwhelm him.

From seemingly out of nowhere, Hiska's father leapt at it, as if he were suddenly brought into the fray, striking its blade away and shouldering it, knocking it back as it bore down on Hiska. An unearthly moan filled the air, mingled with hatred and malice as it turned on him, gathering its scythe back into position just in time to parry three more well placed strikes.

As their weapons locked, black lightning flashed between the two blades as chanting filled the air about them, thundering like a storm, filling the area with an unseen power. Regaining his balance, Hiska quickly joined the attack, falling in beside his father to help overwhelm their foe, his sword ripping through its rotted cloak and ancient decaying bone.

Quickly Bane unsheathed an icy-blue radiant blade and left her, flying toward their enemy which drew the nightmares of her childhood to her surface thoughts . . . and made them real. Bane entered the fray, his blade dancing flawlessly against the Dark Harvester, his voice thundering in unison with Mother's.

“Be gone! I banish you from this plane, never to return again under penalty of Death Pain!” A black energy arced up from the Mystic's fingers and fell upon their foe, illuminating the tattered fragments of its being as it shrieked in pain. Instantly it jerked and moaned, causing all the dead fragments within its physical form to fall suddenly to the ground. Shaela watched in terror as this monster

shrugged off Bane's spell by shedding all effected parts of its shattered body.

Turning upon Bane, it laughed, as if with the voice of countless souls in unison, its vestment of rotted cloth, as well as the bone structure of its being shedding from it.

Shaela saw it turn on Bane and move to him, its body shifting to his backside as quick as lightning. Bane spun smoothly about and parried several sudden strikes, his eyes widening in disbelief.

As she watched the stalemate, Shaela suddenly felt something behind her and turned, ripping her blade from its sheath as she dropped her staff. Talon flew past, causing her to stagger back as the force of his flight nearly knocked her down. He struck the Harvester fully in the chest with his blackened dagger, his weight behind it, driving it deep.

It was then, she felt an energy shoot into her from the Noth`Kur Aegis, instantly filling her body. As this energy filled her, she clearly heard a woman's voice speak, whether in her mind, or as another speaks with the tongue, she could not tell.

"It is you Shaela." The woman's voice calmly penetrated all her senses as the steel of Noth`Kur Aegis faded to black rivaling the darkness of Bane's eyes. Again she heard the woman's voice.

"It is you Shaela." Shaela shook her head, not understanding.

"What do you mean?" The voice came again softly.

"You conjured it by your will . . . it is the manifestation of your desire . . . Dark Child." Shaela then remembered the thought she had against Hiska. She was confused and terrified, as she saw her enemy turn upon Hiska once again, instantly pressing down in renewed fury upon him, even as the very fragments of its being began to shred under both Bane and Mother's spells of power.

"No!" She screamed and rushed forwards, joining the fight, her sword suddenly pulsating, throbbing with incredible energy.

As she struck it again and again, the Dark Harvester turned upon her, parrying her attacks, but did not strike back. Soon she noticed she was the only

one contending with it, but she had no time to wonder why. Over and over she slashed at it, desperate to save Hiska. She soon had it pinned against the same rock in which it had Hiska backed into.

She screamed at it as she pushed herself to destroy this thing, breaking through its defenses and striking true again and again as it seemed to kneel and shrink before her in a desperate attempt to ward off her blade.

As its scythe broke beneath her now necklace strikes, it groaned and melted in to the very earth before her, as if it were wax melting beneath searing heat.

Soon it was over, and as the battle ended, an exhaustion fell upon her, heavily bearing down upon her mind and body, driving her to her knees as if she were suddenly set upon by a heavy weight. She saw the earth tilt and sway as she looked over at Mother, who staggered slightly, supported by her Guardian. Bane dissipated into thin air, the others seeming to take no notice of his presence as Talon instantly back away, looking about the area, suspicious of another attack.

Shaela noticed the ground was tilted upright, pressing against the side of her face. The fear they all might fall if it didn't correct itself, entered her mind. She laughed as Hiska somehow managed to make it over to her and kneel beside her without falling. She could understand how Talon was fearless in this situation; he could fly. The sudden sensation of slipping sideways caused her to jerk and gasp, like one who awakens abruptly from a dream in which they fall. She clawed at the earth to hang on.

“Hang on to something!” She called out, grabbing Hiska's arm to save him. As she gripped him tight, a thought suddenly came to mind.

“Agrin Mortala.” She whispered as she grit her teeth, and willed the roots within the earth to form a sturdy cage about the entire group. About all five of them, the floor of the forest erupted as roots shot out of the ground, forming a dome around them all, encasing them within a living cage . . . safe.

The first thing Shaela noticed was Mother, who looked at her, speechless. She noticed the same expression with all the others. Raising a hand, Shaela laughed, still nervous about the fall through the trees below.

“You are all safe! Talon, maybe you could shift into dragon form and give us a hand here!” Hiska leaned down close to her and gently brushed her hair from her face, whispering.

“Shaela, Shaela, it is over.” She laughed again, then saw the earth begin to level out as Hiska pulled her up into his arms. Her mind began to clear as Talon began to take on Shadow Dragon form. For a moment, she looked about the area, then at each of them in turn, suddenly realizing she had collapsed . . . the earth had not tilted.

“Oh . . .” She stated in a wavering voice, suddenly desiring to hide. The Mystic shook her head, and then, for the first time Shaela could recall, began laughing. Instantly all the others did the same, causing Shaela to blush deeply. She slowly stood with Hiska's supporting arm and looked around at the web-work of roots about the group and waved a hand to release the spell over them. Like snakes, the roots instantly returned to their original location. As they did, Shaela sheathed her blade.

Above all, she avoided looking into her husband's eyes. What a fool she had mad of herself! She walked away from them all and retrieved her staff, feeling beyond foolish. As she turned, she shrugged.

“I'm sorry, I thought -” She stopped and turned to Hiska, still not making eye contact, silently promising herself she would never let her thoughts stray again. Mother wiped tears from her eyes and took her Guardian's arm.

“Maybe there's a rock I can hide under?” Shaela meekly jested.

“We will see you back at the Resting Grounds.” With a few whispered words, Mother and Father both vanished, leaving them with the dragon, who chuckled deeply and lowered to the ground.

“Need a ride?” Hiska walked over to Shaela, wrapped her in his arms and nuzzled her. He then scooped her up into strong arms, heading toward Talon.

Shaela threw Hiska a look, then shrugged sheepishly.

“Sorry.”

“Nothing to be repenting of. You did well. I like your blade.” She instantly

look away, feeling terribly guilty about having nearly killed her love.

As they began ascending into the sky, Shaela thought of something.

“Hiska, why did Mother not take us with her as well?”

“Transporting one you have bonded with is one thing, Shaela, but Transporting more is a power few possess.”

They arrived in the EverShade Jungle, setting down within the Resting Grounds. Talon carefully folded his great wings back as he landed, instantly eyeing a distant band of six patrolling griffons, each with a mounted rider.

“Shaela, Hiska, be quick; I cannot stay here with these soldiers of Gaunten present.” Quickly they both climbed down from Talon's back as the patrol turned and began to slowly head their way. Talon backed into the trees, trying to remain unnoticed, but the lead Griffon-Rider pointed their way as his Griffon screamed out a challenge. They were still quite a ways out, but Talon wasted no time in hiding himself within the jungle's cover, quickly changing back into his natural form. Shaela pointed at the six and whispered to Hiska.

“Stall them please.” Quickly, Hiska turned and jogged out to meet them beyond the tree line as Shaela made her way over to Talon and embraced him.

“Thank you for everything you have done for me since I first met you. I know you need to leave, but I wanted to quickly tell you something.” Talon returned her embrace and then turned into the jungle, parting from her. Shaela followed quickly after him. After a few minutes, he stopped and looked around, sniffing the air.

“I smell others; they patrol even within the jungle itself.” He turned to Shaela. “What is it you need to tell me?”

“I would like you to accompany me as I travel in the south, within the Fire Mountains, beyond the Volanar Rim. I hear there is excellent hunting there and prizes worthy of the effort.” A haunted expression burned to light within his eyes. She could have sworn he seemed startled, but Talon was a master of disguising his feelings. Still, she saw something, and she knew she was not wrong.

“I will wait for your summons Dark Child.” He looked down at the blade at her hip.

“Is it done then. You have revealed the Soul`Blade.” She placed a hand on the exquisitely crafted hilt, which resembled the tall figure of a reaper, cloaked in black, arms embracing a scythe.

“Yes, but I have many questions about her, and how she and I are bound to one another.” To her surprise, Talon backed a pace from her and bent one knee to the ground, slightly bowing.

“My Queen, I am here to serve. Ask and I will do whatsoever you command.” Shaela was stunned at, not only his actions, but his words.

“Talon, I am not a Queen. Why are you speaking like that? It's me, Shaela.” He looked up and pointed at the Noth`Kur Aegis.

“You have taken the blade up . . . again. You, my Queen, have been chosen by Bane. Do you not know yet?” Shaela narrowed her eyes at Talon, shaking her head, suspecting Talon was playing some small joke on her. The problem was, she knew him all too well; he had never been humorous.

“First Bane speaks in riddles, and now you further to confuse me even the more. Is it this blade? Is it because I revealed it? Mitcheio told me I had to reveal it again. Talon, if you know something, please, tell me.” Talon arose and closed the space between them, looking thoughtfully at her.

“Only one can reveal and wield Noth`Kur Aegis. Shaela, my Queen, you had that blade forged long ago by your finest blacksmiths. You, yourself, poured into it your most powerful enchantments, sealing them into the blade until the day you would, again, take it up.” Talon watched her expression for only a moment before gritting his teeth and shaking his head slightly. “Did not Bane tell you these things?” Shaela stared at her former mentor, watching a look creep across his face she could not discern. She drew away from him, her head buzzing with confusion and doubt, causing the beginning of a headache.

As she looked in his eyes, and as she recalled the years she had spent with him, Shaela knew he was being serious, though did not believe his words as absolute truth. In her studies with Mother, she had read of beings from the Underworld who would manipulate and use those in the other dimensions and planes as pawns for their own purposes, thus she remained doubtful of the truth in this matter.

Then she thought of Bane: He was not from Talon's world, and he had

spoken words which confused her, though he gave her no real details.

“Talon, what is going on? I recall a few things, which have troubled me greatly, though they were mere suspicions; things which have not been answered. Now, you call me your Queen, placing yourself willingly at my service. Talon, you are one of my mentors. The last time I reacted to my feelings, I nearly killed Hiska. According to the Noth`Kur Aegis, it was my thoughts and desires which brought on the attack against my husband. I recall a certain Werewolf, who, when he first laid eyes on me, called me by the title of Ambassador. I also realize just how simple it is for me to learn spells . . . spells which I should not begin to understand at this point in time.” She shut her eyes tight, remembering all the training with Talon and sighed heavily. Talon held out a hand.

“Shaela, this is serious -” “- I know it is Talon,” she cut in, “but this is disturbing. How did I learn the staff and blade so quickly? Now you inform me I personally had this blade crafted during the Age of War, and that I placed enchantments into it which were mine to wield?” Talon sighed, openly, becoming apprehensive. He quickly looked behind him as the scream of a Griffon echoed through the area from somewhere inside the forest, back the way they had entered. Shaela narrowed her eyes at Talon, ignoring the Griffon.

“Don't you leave me now, Talon, please. If they come, I promise you they will suffer your presence here. Even though Nishane Asmond is High King, they do not have authority to say who can and cannot be within this jungle. They are to keep the peace until negotiations have ended.” She drew near and grabbed Talon's arm tightly, drawing his attention. “Please tell me all you know. Talon, I need to know.”

Talon tensed for a moment, then sighed, relaxing. Bowing his head, he lowered his wings to the ground.

“I will tell you what I know . . . only what I know for sure, but first you must do me one small favor, if you would.” Shaela nodded.

“Okay, what do you want?” Talon gestured at her blade.

“Draw the Noth`Kur Aegis, so we can all council together. I am not sure

what I am allowed to tell you, and how much. All I've been instructed to do was to let you know that you are my Queen, and that you had the blade crafted long ago as a soul companion.” Shaela abruptly grinned at Talon, a dark glint forming in her dark eyes.

“Who instructed you to tell me this?” She punched him in the chest, seeing his instant reluctance to answer. “Talon, who gave you the directive to tell me this?” He bit his lip and remained silent, seeming to struggle within as he stared at her. “Talon, Arsia Vahkrin are solitaire creatures, living their lives alone, taking no sides in conflicts, and giving no allegiance to any. From what you have taught me, even your kind rarely interacts with each other. Why would you simply place yourself at my service?” He pulled his arm away and stepped back, raising his wings up, then folding them to his back.

“Draw the blade, please,” was all he replied.

“Tell me who instructed you to tell me all this, now!” She snapped at him, suddenly angry, frustration beginning to kindle like a fire within as her eyes suddenly blackened. A sudden silence fell between them both as Hiska appeared through the trees, eyeing Talon suspiciously.

Talon blinked and looked at Hiska, suddenly wary of him. No one moved until a Griffon, led by its rider also appeared, following after Hiska. The rider instantly drew his long blade and let go the reins to his flying mount, pointing at the Vahkrin.

“Kill!” He shouted and lunged toward Talon. Talon leapt back, bearing his onyx-black, razor-sharp teeth at the Griffon rider as the Griffon struggled through the density of the trees, taking an unlucky path toward Talon which hindered it severely. Shaela instantly held up her arms and shouted.

“Stop! He is not here to hurt anyone!” Again, Talon dodged the thrust of the rider's blade, ducking behind a large tree as Hiska leapt to the neck of the struggling Griffon as it wormed its way through two closely grown trees. Wriggling with all its might, it began to snap branches as it fought against the thick undergrowth that worked in Talon's favor.

Hiska gripped it about the neck and pulled, using his legs to gain enough leverage to pin it into one of the two trees it was struggling through. Instantly it screamed and choked as Hiska pulled with all his strength, clawing and pushing against the trees at either side of it in vain. For the moment, Hiska stopped its attack as the rider ceased his advances upon Talon. Backing down, he cast Shaela a rather shocked and surprised look.

“What?” Shaela pointed at Talon.

“I said, he is not here to fight us.” Shaela glanced over at Hiska, who was doing very well at immobilizing the Griffon. “Call it off!” She snapped at him, pointing at the Griffon. Hiska let it go . . . you, call it off, now!” Frustrated, he nodded as Hiska released the angry Griffon, leaping away from it. The Griffon instantly crashed back into the undergrowth and struggled violently to its feet, screaming in rage, turning on Hiska and snapping at him, just missing.

Quickly the griffon's rider leapt in between them, holding up his arms and dropping his blade, calling out, “Check, check!”. The Griffon struggled free of the area, growled and then snapped at its rider angrily. The rider raised his hands above his head and clapped them together twice. “Check, check!” Hiska stopped before Shaela and turned, bringing his blade behind, point down, hiding it as he waited for the outcome. Frustrated, Shaela glanced over at Talon, who kept out of visual sight of the Griffon, using a large tree to shield his presence.

“Check, check!” The Griffon rider called out a third time, nearing the Griffon slowly as he held his hands out to either side of him, then raised them high, palms up. Still agitated, the Griffon reluctantly settled down. The soldier placed a hand on its head, and as he did, it bowed in reluctant submission, growling softly. In a moment, it shook its head and nuzzled its rider.

“He is subdued. I will just get my blade and we will leave. You seem to know your business.” Shaela sighed in relief, waiting as he retrieved his blade, sheathed it and led the Griffon back out the way they had come.

Soon the three were alone. Hiska sheathed his blade and turned to her.

“I will go explain.” Without questioning her, Hiska followed after the

King's soldier, vanishing into the thick of the jungle. Shaela watched her husband disappear, then turned her attention to Talon, who came to her. In an even voice, he told her what she wanted to know.

“You gave me that directive.” A chill cascaded through her as he spoke. No words came to her then. She just stared at Talon, confused, feeling suddenly very, very lost. Shaking his head, Talon neared her and took her hands in his, looking down at her thoughtfully.

“Shaela, I need to leave now.” Shaela wanted to go with him, but the yearning to find her mother swayed her decision to go. Pulling a hand from his, she nodded in silence and brushed her hair back, sighing heavily.

“Talon, I apologize for the way I snapped at you.” Shaking his head, he backed up, chanting the spell which would open the way for him to return to his world. As the spell began to envelope him, he bowed, with a look of admiration fixed into his eyes.

“Please, call on me when you are ready to venture into the Fire Mountains. Then we will talk about this more.” She forced a smile and nodded, raising a hand as he vanished, leaving the area littered with beads of fading light.

Soon, she stood alone, pondering what she had learned. She did not know what to think about the events which led up to the present, and assuredly did not wish to know right now. What she did want now, was to find her mother. Above all else, she yearned to be reunited with her and deliver the message from her father.

Taking her time, she walked back, her thoughts taking another dark path, leading her to bend her intentions upon the Prima Catur, who she would seek out first. Bane had informed her she would save time if she heeded his advice. How would going into the territory of the Prima lessen the duration of her search . . . unless . . .

“Oh no,” she whispered, a dread beginning to creep into her. She found a place to sit and think. At length, Shaela could only come to one single conclusion, or assumption. Had the Prima Catur captured her? She thought about the

possibility, hoping this was not the case.

At length she sighed, stood and made her way back, unaware that, as she walked to the Resting Grounds, a creature followed, trailing behind her with no more noise than the shadows about her could make. It's slanted, piercing eyes watched her warily as it stalked after her, silent as a phantom, not an arms length from her, it's long wolf-like ears laid back against its neck.

When Shaela arrived at the edge of the forest, she noticed Hiska speaking with the man who had seen Talon. His Griffon mount lazily picked at some bananas in a nearby tree it had gotten into.

She watched their body language, noticing they seemed on good terms. She looked both ways along the seemingly endless treeline, spying out the other five riders, and their mounts patrolling along the forest's edge off in the distance to the left.

Before stepping from the concealment of the woods, Shaela felt a chill, like a soft caress of delicate fingers upon the back of her neck, startling her. She abruptly turned and peered into the shadows of the jungle, suddenly apprehensive, concentrating, reaching out to the endless beating of hearts in the area, but noticed only a few smaller animals going about their business.

There seemed to be fewer creatures than normal in the area, but she figured it was due to the Griffon passing through the area, and the racket they had caused. A small deer-like creature watched Shaela with eyes wide as it stood motionless against a mound of rather barren earth. She smiled and held out a hand to it, whispering the words of a spell which connected trust between the two of them. It struck the ground with its front left hoof, sniffed loudly, then tossed its head in a playful manner. She snickered and went to it, kneeling before this beautiful creature. Gently she breathed in its face and raised the back of her hand to its nose, stroking it.

“You are very cute, my little friend, but with these griffons stalking about, don't you think you should be a little more cautious?” It sniffed her face and wagged its short tail. The small creature was no larger than a small dog, like the one she had growing up. She remembered it following her everywhere until the day she and her father buried it in the back field, next to the barn.

“You know,” she gently whispered, “there are some nice roots not far from here. You could feast yourself upon them for days. I need to go. Don't let down your guard, or you may just end up like those roots . . . in the belly of another.”

She stood slowly and left the animal, smiling as she exited the forest's edge. Once out of the trees, she turned toward her husband.

As she walked away, she did not see the deer flicking its tail back and forth, eagerly watching after her. Shaela also failed to notice that simple mound of earth, by which the small animal stood, shift into the form of the stalker which had been following her. The deer did not see the shadow loom up behind it as it casually strolled off into another area. The shadowy creature faded through the trees as it follow Shaela, never stirring a single leaf.

As she neared, she caught the Griffon rider's eye and smiled as she rested her hand upon Hiska's arm. Hiska turned to Shaela and squinted slightly, then looked at the soldier of Gaunten.

“This is Shaela, my Ward.” The man smiled nervously, his hazel eyes lowering slightly as he bowed.

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Simion, a member of King Nishane Asmond's -” “I know who you are sir,” she interrupted. “Just know that unless you see fighting, never choose to act in such a manner again. You come from a civilized area of the world; a safe haven, full of laws and boundaries. Those boundaries are yours to heed, not the inhabitants of the EverShade. Here, you will forget your own biased prejudices and act as the sentinels of peace you were sent here to be. I hope I make myself perfectly clear. Do you have any questions or concerns about what I have just told you?” Straightening up in formal military fashion, Simion shook his head, then glanced at Hiska. Shaela threw him a severe look.

“I see you think to answer to my Guardian. You would make a devastating Ambassador for the faction you serve, I'm truly grateful to you for the lesson in etiquette . . . how not to act based upon preconceived notions, no doubt instilled in your training by your masters.” She did not know where her sudden thought was conceived from, but as she stared up at him, motionless, she felt the strong and sudden urge to draw her blade and run him through. After that, the pleasing thought occurred to her to drink the life essence of his Griffon. If she did that, she

could create her first undead mount which could fly. The advantages of having an entire company of such creatures to serve pleased her very much. To her annoyance, Simion broke the spell of her daydream as he stepped back, and bowed.

“I apologize for my actions, milady. It will not happen again.” The corner of her upper lip raised slightly, exposing a fang and catching his full attention.

“Simion, that Vahkrin I spoke with is, and always will be, a personal friend and mentor to me. Were it not for his aid in the past, nearly, eight years, I would be dead and the inhabitants of Edgewood would be under attack. Blood would be flowing on all sides as we speak. Yes, a dweller from the Underworld has aided us to save the lives of many men, women and children of my once home, and my now home.” She paused a moment, expecting Simion to, in some way, debate the point, but he did not. He simply bowed to her again in respect and submission.

“Please forgive my actions milady. I reacted unwisely to the situation in bad judgement.” She nodded in silent agreement, caring less for his apology than for an ogre's company. His decision to react would have only added the complication of her explanation to his fellows soldiers as to why their patrol had diminished to five, instead of the routine six.

“Please continue your patrols and mind your reactions for the future. I have many allies which your men might consider a threat based upon their own ignorance. Please inform them as best you can on this matter. I trust you can do that without revealing to them any specifics? Or should I find every patrol and inform them myself?” Simion shook his head.

“That will not be necessary; I will take care of everything.” Shaela noticed Hiska shift uneasily. She ignored it and waved a hand about the immediate area.

“Please leave the Resting Grounds, unless your patrol takes you through this area on your normal watch.” Simion immediately turned and gave a short whistle, calling his mount to him. Bowing formally, Simion then mounted and made a clicking sound with his mouth, signaling his Griffon to move. The Griffon screeched softly and proudly cantered away in the direction of the other five

Griffon riders, leaving Shaela staring after him coldly in a void of silence.

Hiska turned to her and silently watched her, admiration blazing in his countenance, showing mostly within his beautiful slanted, emerald eyes. Without emotion, she slid her hand along his arm and entwined her fingers though his, squeezing tight as she watched a total of three patrols in the area coming together. No doubt, Simion was delivering her instructions.

“Hiska, this needs to be over. I can't stay here. We need to talk in private.” Turning, she led him back toward the tree line, her eyes falling on the exact piece of ground upon which she had awakened so long ago when she was first brought here. Memories of their walks, and her intense studies as an apprentice of the Harritt Catur Mystic made her feel suddenly homesick and sad within. Things had gotten complicated, too complicated.

She led her husband to their favorite place; a small clearing where a log lay at its center. They both sat down in silence, gazing up as the stars began to appear, watching the streaks of light speed across the sky now and then. She recalled his patience and devotion to her, and suddenly laughed aloud at a single memory. Looking up at him, Shaela grinned.

“Remember the time I hid in the topmost bows of a rather large tree, and you had to rescue me when I could not get myself down?” Hiska nodded and laughed.

“I remember the complexion of your face when I finally got you down.” She grinned playfully at him, trying to rid herself of the feeling of insecurity nagging at her.

“It was embarrassing.” He squeezed her gently, resting his head on the top of hers lightly, a steady thrumming sound filling the night air. She could feel the soothing vibrations of his purr against her head and lazily smiled, feeling content.

“Hiska,” she stated, reluctant to change the subject, “I believe my mother to be with the Prima Catur. I suspect they captured her about the time you captured me.” The thrumming instantly faded away as Hiska tensed. She could feel the smooth beating of his heart quicken as he gently parted from her and stood,

turning, eyes filled with concern.

“Shaela, how did you come to this conclusion?” She pursed her lips and looked up at Hiska, deciding to tell him everything, leaving out the reason why the Dark Harvester had attacked.

After she finished, she stood and embraced him, suddenly afraid for their future. As always, Hiska rekindled the conviction of his loyalty to her by words she longed to hear.

“I don't care where you go, or who you become. I love you Shaela . . . I am with you to the end.” She burst into tears and desperately gripped him, fearful that one day he would move on to a place where she could not follow. She would change that . . . she would.

“Hiska, I am going to find a way so we can stay together, I swear it. I, we will find a way. Anything is possible in this world . . . all we have to do is find it.” She looked up at him, suddenly hoping they would be able to accomplish such a wish.

“We will search for a way, for the power, to protect your people, my people, even the Prima Catur. I know what I just said, and I know you have solid reason for hating them, as I should, but when is all this hatred going to stop taking lives . . . lives that cannot be replaced?” Hiska gripped Shaela tight as she fought to regain control of her emotions.

“Shaela, they have killed so many; they are naturally evil . . . they are more than natural hunters, or mere predators.” Shaela leaned her head back and brought her hands up to either side of Hiska's face, shaking her head.

“No, no Hiska, I do not believe that. Remember when we first met? Do you recall your intentions toward me? Hiska, look at the course of our lives now. In the beginning, we were two rivers flowing in opposite directions. That was then. Now look at our two rivers; they flow together.” She placed a finger on the temple of his head.

“You think, I think, you perceive, I perceive.” She slid both her hands gently to his chest, just over his heart. “I love . . . you love.” Reaching up, she

gripped one of his fangs and then took his hand, guiding his fingers to her teeth. Slowly, she matched his hand with her own, gazing at the union and smiled.

“Had one of the lumberjacks from the city untied me from that tree and killed you, I would have, then, been grateful the world had been ridded of a horrible, terrifying monster. But if I had known what I know now - then - I would have done anything in my power to stop him from harming you, even if your intentions were yet against me. We all need to let go of our preset, nurtured ignorance. We are all wrong in thinking the differences we have is what makes us enemies; that is our great undoing in this world.” Hiska narrowed his eyes at her and shook his head.

“You do not know the Prima.” Shaela smiled.

“And you didn't know this Human either. Now, we are married as husband and wife.” Hiska grimaced and focused on their connected hands, seeming to struggle with the idea she was presenting to him. She could see the conflict and doubt in his eyes as he stood there in silence, looking down at her. This was not going to be easy.

“Hiska will try, for you. What do we do now?” Shaela laughed and slipped her fingers down through his, taking his hand.

“You just slipped.” He gave her a strange look, his ears laying back. “Yes . . . you referred to yourself as Hiska again, as if you were speaking about someone else.” She snickered and brought his hand up to the side of her face, tilting her head into their interlocked hands and winked at him playfully. Hiska blew a puff of air into her face and gave her an odd look.

“You sound just like Mother. When you slept for all those years, she constantly told me the same thing. It was frustrating at first.” She sighed and nodded, closing her eyes.

“Such a gentleman, you are.” She opened her eyes and nuzzled him happily. “Now, where should we begin?” He shook his head and chuckled quietly, a familiar thrumming filling the air once more.

“Shaela, do you know what I've learned while in company with you?” She

nodded enthusiastically, then shook her head.

“No, what?”

“I’ve learned never to plan a surprise trip in advance.” She frowned, feigning a pout.

“Why not?”

“Because now we are off to find your mother, and then we are headed back to the Zurkel Mainland to explore a dangerous land. Then, who knows where you will lead us.” She sobered at his words, suddenly aware she was, once again, dominating the both of them with her own desires.

“I’m sorry Hiska. We could go on our trip before exploring the Volanar Rim, is that an acceptable compromise?” He thought for a moment, then nodded.

“Yes, I like that offer. Shall we go to the Prima Catur now, and politely request them to reunite you with your mother? I’m sure they will be pleasant about it.” She made a puffing sound and grimaced.

“Do you know the way there?” There was a sudden response, but not from Hiska, in a hiss of quiet laughter from the edge of the glade, startling the both of them. They turned to see Silvara leaning against a tree, casually watching them. Instinctively, Hiska hissed, his hackles rising as his hand shot to hilt of his Guardian Blade as he drew Shaela behind him in one fluid motion. Quickly, Shaela grabbed his hand.

“No! How will this ever work if we don’t try?” Silvara slowly stalked out into the clearing, holding out his hands to show he had no intentions against them.

“Peace, Harritt, I am invited here by your mystic leader, and so have sanctuary among my enemies, unless of course you wish to challenge her decision on this matter.” Shaela shook her head and shot Hiska a determined look, compelling him to back down.

“Please Hiska, let’s try. Will you go and gather what we will need for the journey? I wish to speak with Silvara . . . alone.” Hiska’s eyes widened in disbelief, to which she gave him a look that did nothing to move him. She lowered her voice to a deadly serious hiss, fixing her eyes sternly upon him.

“Hiska, I am not asking; do as I say . . . now.” Her Guardian flinched, as if she had just slapped him in the face. He gave Silvara a worried glance and immediately left the clearing without another word, vanishing into the jungle. After Hiska had gone, Silvara hissed, laughing cynically.

“Well spoken Shaela, Human. You actually are taking charge of your Guardian, and doing what you proposed. You are starting to control the Harritt, who is your servant. Now we all have Humans not only threatening our homeland, but beginning to dominate us within the EverShade Jungle.” He paused for a moment as if waiting for a reaction, then continue just as she was about to reply.

“Do you think they will depart soon?” She knew exactly what he had been implying. His words were meant to cut at her. Narrowing her eyes, she looked upon him, feeling the sudden urge to run him through the skull with her blade, just so, and watch him slowly struggle as his life essence faded. After death, Silvara would make an excellent undead assassin to serve her forever. Shaking her head, she banished the sudden notion, focusing upon her goal.

“Silvara, please, I need to ask you a question. Do you have my mother?” Without hesitation, he nodded enthusiastically.

“Yes,” he hissed evilly, “I do. In fact, when I learned that the Mystic of the Harritt Catur requested an ambassador to council with, I requested to come here personally. Not only was I sent to council with all the representatives of each faction in the EverShade Jungle, but I desired to speak with you directly. I enjoy your idea of creating peace between all the different peoples of the jungle and without the jungle. It's idealistic and wise.” Shaela smiled, yet a bit confused. She swallowed, suddenly nervous for some reason.

“You wanted to speak with me?” Silvara nodded and snapped his fingers loudly over his head. A few seconds later, a girl appeared from the trees behind him, adorned all in black, tightly fitted in leather clothing, with a band of black leather about her head that held her hair from her eyes. Upon the leather headband was etched blood-red symbols which she was unfamiliar with.

As she walked toward them, Shaela noticed her long raven-black hair, much

the color of her own hair, that fell gracefully about her shoulders. As she stopped beside Silvara, she looked at him, openly trembling. Her eyes were a green-yellow, with the unmistakable characteristic of a feline in them. Shaela's attention was drawn to her pupils, which were vertical, in stead of round like her own. The girl wore two daggers at her side, two on either arm, just below her elbows and another pair, one on the outside of either leg below each knee. Upon all her fingers were thin bands of black gold, excluding her thumbs.

Shaela smiled faintly at the smaller girl, who appeared no more than fifteen seasons. The girl smiled back at her briefly with the gesture of half sneer, half politeness.

“Shaela, I wold like you to meet my daughter, Rashi. I discovered her in the jungle as a baby and raised her myself. You see, like you, I also wish peace among our people.” Shaela raised her eyebrows in surprise and looked at Silvara, her mind once again, suddenly demanding her to find out everything about this, though she noticed a sardonic tinge in his voice. She suppressed the urge to flood the air with questions and bowed politely to Rashi.

“A pleasure to meet you. You are so beautiful.” Rashi's cheeks flushed crimson as she returned the greeting, squinting at her with penetrating eyes that captured Shaela's attention. A sudden ache in Shaela's heart caused unexpected tears to begin sliding down her face as she realized Rashi was the result of the union between Human and Prima Catur . . . something she could have had if . . . she shook her head, feeling a lightness of mind wash over her, as if she had suddenly stood and felt dizzy.

“I, I need to sit down milord, Rashi, please forgive me.” Rashi smiled, bearing the teeth of a Human , with modestly shortened fangs as she reached out and took Shaela by the arm, supporting her. Shaela sat down on the log, throwing Rashi a short smile as she made herself comfortable.

“Thank you.” Rashi knelt before Shaela, gazing at her curiously. She looked up at Silvara as if expecting something, waiting. Silvara looked down at Shaela, a small grin playing out in his hard eyes. No one spoke for a long while as

Shaela rested from the sudden spell. Just as she composed herself, and was feeling awkward at the silence, Silvara sighed and nodded to Rashi.

“I will expect you when you arrive. He bowed slightly to Shaela and quickly withdrew into the jungle, disappearing.

Rashi watched the edge of the clearing for a minute, then turned to Shaela, staring up at her in silence. After a time, Shaela gestured at Rashi's clothing.

“Those look comfortable . . . practical for stealth.” Rashi made a face as she curiously looked at Shaela's staff, saying nothing. Shaela sighed and held it out to her.

“It was a gift from my first master.” Rashi's eyes scanned over the staff curiously as Shaela watched her in wonder, noticing the differences and similarities between the both of them. She could have had a daughter like this . . . could have. Rashi looked at her staff.

“I like it,” she whispered and looked up at Shaela, noticing her tears.” Why do you weep?” The question broke Shaela's heart, causing even more tears to flow as she gazed at the girl. She did not know how to answer Rashi's question, and so remained silent.

Rashi stood and turned, watching the tree line intensely for a moment, as if expecting something. Shortly, she turned to Shaela, smiling down at her as Shaela glanced suspiciously over to where Rashi's eyes had been drawn to. Nervously, Rashi fidgeted and then spoke, as if she were trying to overcome some great reluctance.

“It's true, your mother is with my pride. I have permission to take you there to see her, but your Guardian should not go into that place, or he will be killed.” Shaela's amazement plainly showed on her face as she abruptly stood.

“Rashi, tell me, is my mother in good health?” The girl nodded soberly and lowered her eyes.

“Yes, she is doing very well. She has place in a culture not her own, and is respected by the others. We talk much.” Shaela smiled, feeling relieved at the news. Still, Rashi might be lying. She had given up hope of ever finding her mother and father long ago; hope was the enemy she struggled above all.

“Tell me about you. I am very curious to know how you came to be the daughter of Silvara. He said he found you as a baby in the jungle, but that seems

odd to me. There has to be more to your story than just that.” Rashi looked away, suddenly deep in thought.

“A long time ago, he captured a Human who was caught trespassing within the border of the Hunting Grounds. He won the right to own her, and took her on as a slave. Over time, she proved her worth by her hard labors. Once she learned her place, she did everything she was commanded by Silvara without being compelled.

He began to teach her his language. She learned quickly, impressing him, and soon decided to bond with her for life. Because of their union, I am here.” Rashi sighed, relaxing a little. “She always told me stories of both the Humans’ world, and the world of my people. I will introduce you to her when we arrive, if you would like.” Shaela nodded, feeling cold inside.

“I would like that. What is your mother's name?” Casually, Rashi looked at Shaela and smiled.

“Lauren.” Shaela's blood froze in her veins. She could feel her face drain of pale as Rashi smiled at her and nodded. Shaela stammered for a moment, then reached a hand out, catching hold of Rashi's arm. Instantly, she found the sharp edge of a dagger against her throat as Rashi reacted to the sudden grip of her hand. Slowly, Shaela let go, surprised at the sudden threat, and held her hands out.

“Rashi, we are sisters.” Her words startled Rashi visibly. She withdrew the dagger from Shaela's neck, sheathing it in one quick motion.

“I suspected you were when I first saw you; you look like her very much.” Rashi's voice was matter-of-fact, void of sentiment. She looked over Shaela, pointing to her hair.

“Mother's hair is black, yours and mine also. I apologize for drawing my blade on you; it gets rough in the EverShade all too often.” Shaela nodded in agreement as Rashi continued. “Father says I get a little jumpy at times, and I agree . . . but I'm trying.” Shaela smiled at her sister and stood. Rashi was a good hand shorter than she, but much prettier, so she thought. She was so curious to know all about her.

“Rashi, would you mind if I asked you some questions? They are personal, but I just want to get to know you a little better.”

“I don't mind.”

“I am very curious about the physical differences between you and I, and you and the Prima Catur.” Rashi shrugged.

“Well, you are taller, and that's a natural trait. Oh, look at this!” She cut in abruptly, before Shaela could ask her first question. She pulled her hair back and turned her head, revealing an ear, which had a slight point to it. Rashi motioned Shaela to touch.

“Go ahead sister, we are blood kin, you and I. Really, I won't draw a dagger on you this time, I promise.” Shaela smiled and raised her hand up, feeling her ear, noticing no real difference, other than it was pointed more like an Elf than a Human.

“Wow, how well do you hear?”

“Father says I do very well to listen . . . when I'm not daydreaming about finding you.” She smiled up at her soberly and blushed. “Finally, I get to meet you, my sister.” Rashi let Shaela probe her face and hair, allowing her to examine her hands as well, which had no retractable talons.

“In appearance, Rashi, you seem to be Human, but with the most striking eyes, which are very beautiful. If you are not careful when visiting Humans, you may just cause the men to stumble and fall.” Rashi blushed deeply.

“I have never seen more than two Humans in my life, though my fantasizing, which father disapproves of, takes me into the city at least once a day. Mother does not mind so much.” Shaela was curious about one more thing.

“What about a tail?” Rashi rolled her eyes at Shaela.

“I'm wearing breeches Shaela.” Shaela laughed, nodding.

“Ah, yes, so I am unaware and simple minded.” Rashi made a sound Shaela thought to be mockery, and took Shaela's hand, raising it to her own mouth. Just before opening her mouth, she stated, “I do have one more significant difference; I have fangs, though not so wonderful as the others.” Shaela gently probed her

teeth, noticing Rashi's teeth were as normal as her own before she had been cursed by the Vampire, yet she had two teeth on either side of her front teeth which extended down a full length longer than her normal.

“Rashi, what about your reflexes and how agile you are, compared to a Human?” Rashi frowned.

“The others back home, especially the boys, used to tease me, saying I was clumsy. They used to make light of me, well until about a year ago. Now they are all politeness. I can't imagine why they are suddenly so nice to me. Maybe father threatened them.” Shaela shook her head, suddenly grinning as she listened to her sister. Rashi stopped, noticing her look.

“What . . . what?” Shaela shrugged and smiled mischievously.

“You don't know why? What do you suspect then?” Shaela chuckled and shook her head at Rashi, who thought for a moment.

“You really don't know, do you?” Rashi shook her head, looking thoroughly confused.

“No, what do you think happened?” Shaela thought for a moment, wanting to tactfully explain it to her.

“Rashi, have you ever noticed what happens to a caterpillar after a time?” Rashi gave her a weird look and then nodded.

“Of course, they spin a cocoon. Then, after a time, they break free of it with wings. They are no longer a caterpillar. Rashi grimaced, narrowing her eyes at Shaela. “I don't understand.” Shaela sighed, suddenly enjoying her company very much.

“You have changed into a beautiful young woman in their eyes. You are no longer a little girl. Rashi, they see you now as a future companion. The boys that use to tease you are now men, who hope you notice them above the others.” Rashi's eyes widened, suddenly understanding.

“Wow, this could work to my advantage, right?” Shaela gave Rashi a thoughtful glance and laughed to see the look on her sister's face, obviously working up some mischief to try out later.

“I'm sure you could manipulate all you want, if you are careful at it,” she laughed. Rashi thought about it, then chuckled enthusiastically as she narrowed her eyes. As they enjoyed each other's company, Shaela focused on her sister's clothing in curiosity.

“These clothes you wear are very sleek. Do they bother you to wear tight - fitting leathers like that?” Rashi shook her head and sighed.

“No. Father says it is easier to creep about wearing these. Besides, I like them. Definitely more freedom of movement.”

“Where did you get the leather to make such wonderful attire, I may want some of my own.” Rashi thought a moment.

“They are panther skin, cured, tanned and dyed black from the juices of the Thornberry.” Shaela instantly panicked and looked fearfully to the clearing's edge, suddenly fearful of Hiska's return. Leaning close to Rashi, she whispered intensely.

“Don't tell anyone else what you just told me. Don't speak of it again, okay? If anyone insists, you are wearing deer hide, dyed black.” Rashi looked confused, but nodded, a look of innocence etched into her face.

“Okay, why?” Shaela looked about the area nervously.

“Rashi, have you not seen the Harritt Catur? Do you not know what race we . . . they are akin to?” Rashi frowned, shaking her head.

“Father brought me here to meet you. He did not say anything about . . . Shaela, what's wrong?” Shaela was suddenly baffled at her ignorance, confused at why Silvara would do this to her.

“Rashi, the Harritt Catur are akin to panthers. They esteem them as their family . . . their children.” Rashi froze, speechless, then, suddenly broke out laughing as she pointed at Shaela, a wicked gleam lighting her eyes.

“I lied. You should see the look on your face!” Shaela stopped and stared at her sister, flatly surprised. For a moment, she did not have one word for her. She fought with her tongue, silencing it for as long as she could, until it slipped out of her mouth.

“Jerk.” Rashi shrugged and grinned wickedly at her. She looked at Rashi and shrugged, faking a smile and thought of Hiska, hoping suddenly for his arrival. She sat down and placed her staff upright against the log and nonchalantly touched the hilt of the Noth`Kur Aegis in hopes of communicating with it . . . for advise and council, half expecting silence. She was inwardly surprised to hear the woman once again come to her mind.

You desire council on this matter, and you do well to seek it. Here is my mind: If this truly be your sister, you now have family. Tell me why Silvara would leave her with you within his greatest enemy's territory . . . with one who has slain his own kind? Shaela looked at Rashi, watching her slowly compose herself once again. She sighed and looked at her hands.

“I love the stars at night here.” Shaela looked up as she made simple conversation. Rashi looked up, a frown crossing her face.

“Yes, but I can't catch them.” Shaela smiled as she looked up, bending her mind in thought toward the Noth`Kur Aegis.

It does seem odd that Silvara would bring her here and then simply leave her with me unannounced and without worry for his daughter's well being. A warning tone in the response she then received caused Shaela so suspect Rashi was either an unwitting pawn of Silvara, or very good at what she was doing.

Shaela, one thing I have learned in my experiences . . . trust nothing you don't know to be absolute truth. Shaela pointed to a streak of burning light, trailing at an angle across the sky above her, even as she stretched her senses all about her suspiciously.

“That was a good one. Did you see that?” Rashi nodded and kept gazing up, looking for more. As she spotted an even more spectacular falling star, she smiled.

“Do you ever wonder where they come from, or if there are others out there like us?” Shaela nodded.

“Yes,” she whispered in awe at the trail just beginning to fade from sight.

“I've always been curious of that.” Rashi looked at her, the corner of her

mouth forming a smile.

“Mother always talks about what is beyond the stars. Her most asked question is, “When we die, do we go to them, adding the brilliance of our souls to each star?” She thinks when someone with a brilliant soul dies, there appears another star in the heavens above. She told me once that she thinks there are more out there than we see, but their deeds were dark while yet in mortality, thus they form the blackness of the curtain of night.” She looked at her own hand, silent for a moment, then whispered quietly, “I think the darkness of one's heart and soul, when death finally takes them, continues, as do the ones who form the stars that shine within that darkness. I think they continue to contend against each other, and that every falling star we see is the death of each soul of light that has passed on again in the supposed happiness of the hereafter we dream so vainly of.” Shaela looked at Rashi, astounded at her thought. Remaining silent, she waited for Rashi to continue.

“I believe there is not rest after this life, but a continuation of the struggle between good and evil, the contending ideals we see playing out before us as we watch in wonder at the heavens above. I think each star is the passing of a life which will never know true rest and peace . . . as we suspect.” She slowly narrowed her eyes at Shaela in silence, almost as if she were challenging her to share her opinion and beliefs.

“That is a dark thought Rashi. If it were true, where would that fading star go after its light was spent, you know, after it trailed down so gloriously?” Rashi's eyes glittered suddenly with tears.

“I suppose they become one with the dark if they have no light remaining within their soul.” Shaela felt a chill creep over her neck and face as she listened to her sister. She thought of the company in which Rashi had been raised, causing her to pity her sister. Rashi was wrong, for she, personally, had been to Al'Enara, and the Seven Havens. She knew the truth, if only one side of it, and suspected ignorance on Rashi's part in the conclusion of her beliefs.

Why was Rashi becoming emotional with such a simple expression of her

belief? Sighing, Shaela looked back up at the stars, waiting for another one to fall. When one finally did streak across the heavens, she seemed to enjoy it less. A thought popped into her heart then, which disturbed her, and she bent her mind upon the other at her side.

Am I darkness?

You are what you are, Shaela, nothing more, nothing less. Remember that light is not always good, and there be absolute darkness which is pure.

Shaela spotted a sudden shower of multiple streaks of light as she had never seen before. She watched them burn across the sky, one after the other, until they were spent. Afraid to ask, yet driven by curiosity, she asked one more question before lifting her arm from the hilt of her Soul' Blade.

Am I you?

Yes, the woman's voice softly whispered without hesitation.

It was then no wonder why Silvara had returned the blade to her during the council . . . she, the blade, had refused to accept him. In a similar way, she was now beginning to loath Silvara.

She suddenly understood why Rashi was here, and it began to eat at her, like an army of ants painfully devouring her to the bone. Tears flooded her eyes as she slowly turned her full attention to Rashi, who would not hold her eye. She had to break down her false beliefs if she were to save her from a monster whom she had dared hope would listen to reason and logic. Hiska was right, the Prima were natural hunters, evil and malicious. Softly she whispered to Rashi, capturing her full attention as their eyes met.

“Rashi, you are my blood kin. We need to be honest with one another, right?” Rashi nodded slowly, suddenly apprehensive as Shaela continued.

“How does it feel to be an unwitting pawn, to be played by the Prima Catur?” Rashi withdrew from before Shaela, surprised at her question. Shaela arose and retrieved her staff, suddenly very jealous of it. She felt its cool touch as she watched her sister narrow her eyes in confusion at her.

“Rashi, how does it feel to know our mother suffers captivity and mental

anguish because of a man who calls himself your father? Most of all, how does it feel inside to know that your father never had any love for your mother, and that he forced himself upon her to create a daughter to use in vengeance to strike out at Lauren's first born?" Rashi's face twisted in disbelief and doubt, but Shaela did not give her a moment to respond.

"How does it feel to think he loves you as his daughter, when his design, from the moment you were conceived in mother's womb, was to raise you as an unwitting servant of destruction and tool to break my heart?" Rashi began to shake her head, mouthing the words, no, no, no, no.

"Liar, liar! He is kind to me!" Shaela smirked at her sister, a mocking gesture, not caring what she thought at this point. It was, now, very clear what was happening. She focused on all life about her, feeling for the sound of blood pumping within any creature within the range of her vampiric senses, not surprised to feel her own heart, Rashi's and one other, which was gliding silently up behind her. She knew who it was, and so spoke to him directly as she looked at Rashi.

"What better way to get back at me for the Prima we killed, even if it was in the defense of our own lives. I wonder if you have ever, truly, sincerely looked into my mother's eyes with any form of honesty. Did you ever tell her the truth about what happened . . . how she came to be? You produced her so you could have the hope that I might still yet have a family, and that is the cruelty of your attack. You mean to show me what you think I can never have . . . crush my heart even as it begins to mend, make me suffer . . . before you kill me." Rashi shook her head, backing away from Shaela, thoroughly confused, even as Shaela felt the pulse of her attacker quicken and his sudden advance.

In one motion, Shaela unsheathed her blade, spinning about and parrying Silvara's attack as she discarded the staff. His eyes widened in disbelief as she shoved him back, suddenly raged at his assassination attempt. Quickly, Silvara composed himself, glanced at Rashi, hissed and attacked, determined to kill her. His focused attack was intense and smooth, and Shaela suddenly found herself hard pressed against a master assassin and veteran of combat.

Rashi watched on, frozen in horror, as if she had been spellbound by Shaela's words, a look of torment and pain twisting into her face.

“Father stop!” she cried, but was ignored as Silvara sneered at Shaela, locking both his daggers against her sword as he forced himself against her, nearly taking her balance, his face almost touching hers.

His cold yellow eyes brought back the painful memory of the attack that had nearly killed her years ago. Hatred welled up within her as she held him back, wary that her balance was dangerously un-centered against his.

The commitment to peace between she and Silvara instantly melted away at the memory of the attack on her long ago. Bearing her teeth, she had the sudden desire to feed off him, until he was merely a limp husk of a once great champion of his people.

As they contended against each other, Shaela's eyes shifted to black, her retinas changing to a ghastly sick yellow as she allowed herself to fall into bloodlust. Her countenance changed, her natural beauty transformed to a terrible perfection of loveliness and desire as she bent her mind on charming him into submission. Forcing images of pleasure into his mind, the promise of love eternal was his if he should he give in to her, played like the waves of the sea, flowing over him repeatedly.

Silvara faltered for a brief moment as she felt his will stagger before her charm. Narrowing her eyes at him, like some nocturnal monster, she felt him half willingly relax his blades. As she began to think she had him in her snare, he suddenly spit in her face, hatefully cursing her as his saliva hit her directly in the eyes.

Blindness shrouded her vision as she felt Silvara's weight press against her fully, his blades shifting in a familiar cutting sweep she had learned from Talon. Instinctively, she knew the shifting strike he executed was meant to unbalance her and then slice through her neck.

Without hesitation, she blended with his movement, giving him no resistance as she dropped to the ground, flowing past his energy, rolling forward

past him, ducking under the slice of his blade. Locking her blade to her center, she rolled forwards under his strike, counter striking him as she used her entire body to create a devastating arc of power, her katana slicing at an angle downward across his mid section, cutting deep.

As she rolled, she pushed off with her back foot, leaping as far past him as she could, even as his second blade arced in a second strike, just missing. As she rolled, she blending with the ground, rolling smoothly away from her enemy and coming up into kneeling position, facing her deadly opponent, sword at the ready.

Instantly she reached out with her senses, feeling his heartbeat take on an awkward beat as the smell of blood permeated the night air. She could not see, but her vampiric curse enabled her to sense more, and fight with more accuracy. Silvara screamed, falling to the earth, mortally wounded. From the sudden, erratic beating of his heart, and the uneven pulsing of blood through his body, Shaela knew he would quickly bleed out.

In an instant, Silvara was no longer a threat.

Even in her anger and rage, her thoughts bent upon her sister, softening her heart against Silvara, her father.

“Silvara, I can save you,” she yelled as loud as she could. “Please, don't do this! Live Silvara, live!” Cursing in agony, Silvara groveled in mortal pain as his blood flowed out onto the jungle floor. Amidst his weakening cries, she was shocked to hear two discernable words, which he spat out hatefully as he clawed at the ground.

“Filthy Humans!” Shaela felt Rashi's blood flush from her face, heard her gasp of disbelief. Freezing in place, Shaela tried one last time, yet remained ready for anything he might try as a last effort to kill her.

“Please Silvara, you don't have to die! Please!” Silvara buried his face against the ground and screamed in misery and hatred, his heart beginning to beat dangerously. Turning her attention to Rashi, who remained a potential threat, she waited, ready to do what she had to do if her sister decided to aid her father.

Sensing Rashi's sudden movement, Shaela readied herself for a conflict she

desperately wished to avoid, already regretting not knowing her own sister. To Shaela's relief, Rashi dropped her daggers and fell to her knees beside her father. She grabbed him, turning him over into her arms, helplessly looking down at him.

“Father, what can I do? You can't die, please don't die.” Weakly he raised a hand to the side of her face and smiled.

“Do you see what she has done? She is evil my love. Avenge me.” Rashi shook her head desperately, burying her face in his as Silvara shuddered once, then exhaled his last breath.

For a long while, she held her father as Shaela silently watched, her vision slowly returning. Watching Rashi weep was the hardest thing she could have imagined. What would she do now? It seemed inevitable what the outcome would be as she watched her sister weep for the loss of a father she, her own sister, had killed. At that moment, Shaela felt the bitterness of what Silvara had done.

Rashi gently lowered her father's head to the ground and turned to Shaela in silence, staring at her with tears flooding her face. There was nothing she could say to Rashi at this point. Her sister was a victim in Silvara's carefully conceived plot to destroy her in a hatred with no boundaries.

Terrified, Shaela waited.

Rashi opened her mouth to say something, but at that moment, there was the sound of something or someone approaching, closing in on them through the jungle. Numbly, Shaela looked, suspecting it was Hiska. As she focused her attention toward the sound, she felt the unmistakable urgency to cast a spell, as if she were being drawn to an area in which to cast it. The feeling was so overwhelming, she did not hesitate. Sheathing her blade, she turned, raising her hands high.

“Gargantuan,” she whispered, willing the forest to come to life. A short ways into the jungle, she heard the familiar sound of all organics in the area suddenly shift and mold together. As the spell was complete, she held up a hand, willing her spell to remain still until commanded. Quickly she ripped her blade free again and held out a hand to her sister, who was yet staring at her in silence.

“Rashi, come to me now. Something is coming. Please Rashi, I can't lose you now. Not after I've found you.” She didn't expect her sister to respond to her, but she did. Rashi silently ran to her, falling into Shaela's offered embrace.

She knew Rashi was in mental shock and did not trust her. She knew Rashi was armed, but she received her, wrapping an arm about her sister, carefully watching her as she heard unfamiliar snarling from the area in which something approached, making her skin crawl as if tiny insects were creeping all over her body. An unfamiliar smell came to her senses, warning her that it was not Hiska. Rashi pointed, managing to give a warning.

“Shifters!” Shaela's blood turned cold as she suddenly heard other movement about them both. With a howl, they burst into the clearing all about the two with a speed that startled her. Where was her Mystic Mother? She mentally called out to her, hoping she would respond. As she saw the pack rush into the glade, she grit her teeth, realizing she could not sense the heartbeat of these creatures. They were surrounded, alone. Even her Gargantuan could not save them now; there were too many.

Quickly, she pressed her lips against Rashi's ear.

“Rashi, you have every reason to hate me, I know. But know that I love you.” Tears streamed down both their face as Rashi looked up into her eyes.

“Shaela, Mother is a prisoner. I see that clearly now. I'm sorry.” They embraced as the largest of the pack neared, raising up over them, it's large ears rising up as it growled. Shaela's eyes shaded to blackness as she pushed Rashi to the ground, a last desperate attempt to save the sister she feared she would never get to know. She swiftly raised the Noth`Kur Aegis to strike, even as Mother's voice came to her.

They are allies, was all she heard in her mind before she lost the link with Mother. Confused, she looked at the Werewolf and suddenly realized she had seen it before.

“Orin?” Bearing its teeth, It shook its head and looked to the forest as the others formed a circle about them, facing outward. An unnatural silence fell about the area as Shaela's attention was also drawn to the trees.

Something was coming. She could feel that something was about to happen. What shocked her about this situation, was that she felt as though she had done this before. Something was familiar about this situation, though she could not pinpoint what it was.

Looking down at Rashi, she abruptly realized she yet had a family, and Rashi was part of it. It gave her hope and terrified her. At that moment, as she heard the sudden snarling of the pack about her, she realized what true fear was . . . to know she could lose, truly lose . . . family.

Shaela scanned the area about her as she heard what sounded like the howling of wolves, mingled with ghastly moans, the sound of which sent chills cascading up her spine. There was a skirmish within the trees directly ahead of her. She heard the ring of steel and Hiska's unmistakable scream. Instantly she bolted through the pack, rushing to his aid, but as she took the first step beyond the circle of defense, one of the pack pointed, locking his paw about her wrist.

“There he is, stay here!” Nearly jerked off her feet, Shaela caught her balance, desperately looking in the direction the Werewolf pointed. Within a few

seconds, to her relief, she spied another Werewolf and then Hiska sprint from the treeline, both their hackles standing on end. She noticed blood flinging from his blade as he ran, led by a Werewolf she had met before.

“Orin!” she called out in surprise, fully recognizing the one she had met in the cave those years ago. He was unmistakable. The head of the pack raced toward them, Hiska trailing behind. Snarling viciously, Orin called out to his pack.

“Let the Harritt Catur Pass! He is an ally!” As they neared, the others parted as the two skidded to a stop and turned toward the tree line. Hiska screamed a challenge to an unseen enemy. Shaela smelled fresh blood on him, and sensed, by the quick beating of his heart, he was wounded.

Pulling free of the Werewolf who yet gripped her wrist, she placed a hand on Hiska's back and chanted the words to the only healing spell she knew, but this time she bent her will upon magnifying the healing effect, picturing that golden path she had traveled to Al`Enara upon. Instantly, the wound on her husband's shoulder knitted shut, as if time had sped into the future to heal him in the present.

Hiska glanced back at her, his emerald eyes instantly relieved of the pain of the wound he suffered from, even as the darkened silhouettes of creatures began to manifest themselves all about them within the trees beyond the edge of the clearing.

Shaela caught his eye. As they looked at each other in silent communication, she felt an energy fill her mind and body. Bending her will upon her Guardian, she willed a portion of her dark energy into his soul, to share with him the advantage of the power she felt welling up deep within her. For a moment, she felt a bridge of connection between them. Reaching up, she gripped the side of his face, taking a handful of fur and skin tightly in her fist.

“Noth eshis surrin (dark embrace you),” she hissed, and willed power into his soul, filling him with the energy of death, and the power of the void, causing him to gasp, as if he had just plunged into frigid waters. The emerald of his eyes darkened instantly to night as she bared her teeth at him, feeling the energy of

power fill them both. For an instant, she fixed her attention on him, reaching out to feel his heart beating steady and strong . . . void of fear.

Letting go, Shaela looked to the trees and hissed as she suddenly perceived what was upon them. As she peered in amazement at the vague shapes within the trees, deep within her mind, a vision flashed, causing her stagger in shock.

In her mind's eye, she pictured a woman facing a terrible foe, sitting upon darkness in the form of a dragon. Shaela witnessed the woman bury a blade into the dragon's chest, killing it instantly, even as the dragon's rider reached out a shadowy hand to her, releasing a terrible energy upon her. She heard the woman scream and vanish before her eyes. The vision then faded from her mind.

Again, she touched her blade, casting the Reveal spell, then like some unnatural animal, she broke through the circle, taking a few steps toward the treeline, and raised her blade, which ignited with a searing flame of onyx hue. Snarling out a challenge, she felt the power Noth`Kur Aegis filled her with. She also felt the relic amulet about her neck began to pulse.

As the flame burst from her katana, to her utter astonishment, she began to recollect the past of someone very familiar. Flashing like chain lightning, images filled her mind without mercy. In the beginning, these images confused and bewildered her, until she realized those images were her own, not another's.

It was at that moment when Shaela remembered who she was.

A smile of triumph spread across her lips as she gripped her ancient blade. Without hesitation she willed the enchantments, binding her former self into the Noth`Kur Aegis, to yield her former power back to her.

She could not help but laugh as the power of the blade flowed into her hand, shooting up her arm and into her entire being, giving her a sudden rush of euphoria and strength. As she received her former power, the entire ring of Werewolves sent up a victory howl and readied themselves to meet their enemy.

She now knew what lurked at the forest's edge as her gaze swept the tree line. She laughed at them and readied herself for a glorious battle. Truly, she was bent upon vengeance - justice for the wrongs committed ages ago.

“You are too late!” she cried out in triumph. “Go back and accept the rewards of your failure from one who would gift you with less pain than I!” Shaela laughed again, lowering her blade and turning back, her attention fixing upon Hiska.

With a death-like calm, she walked back and stopped, facing him, peering into his eyes, a thin smile playing across her lips. She could tell Hiska was terrified, terrified of being rejected. The truth was, she no longer needed him to protect her, and he knew it. Raising a hand to the back of his neck, she grinned, her eyes shifting to snow-white. Leaning forward, she placed her lips against his left ear.

“I love you, Hiska,” she whispered, and turned, readying herself . . . waiting eagerly for the decision of her enemy.

Orin snarled out a challenge, glancing at Shaela.

“Well met, Ambassador.” She smiled and shook her head, focusing her attention outward as Rashi’s weeping came to her ears. Shaela sensed fear and confusion in her sister as she shifted her stance, regretting she was in this situation.

“Well, Orin, I see you made it. Where are the others? There were more when last we parted.” As she spoke, she felt her heart ache as she remember parting from him long ago. The only answer she got was a shrug as the vague silhouettes of the enemy suddenly leapt from the cover of the forest, charging into the center of the clearing, revealing themselves as they converged on the small band of defenders, appearing as knights in plated armor, mounted upon the backs of large wolf-like horrors with tails twice the length of their bodies; tails which forked at the end into two whip-like ends, fixed with serrated razor-like blades. As they poured forth, there seemed no end to their number.

“Rashi, stay by me. Watch my back, and stay low. That is the weakest point of their attack . . . because they are fools!” Orin barked out laughing as a shimmer of gray washed over him. Hiska looked at Shaela and shook his head.

“You love this!”

“I love their extinction!” she cried out in an unearthly scream that caused a visible wake of energy to flow out just past her allies.

As they closed in on them, just before the last patch of earth vanished beneath the oncoming horde, the earth fell away, breaking loose beneath their feet, as if the ground were a sheet of thin ice, upon which it could not bear their weight. Instantly they fell, both rider and knight, into a mist of churning gray fog, screaming in terror as they plummeted into the unknown. The earth then began to break away toward the forest in all directions, overtaking and claiming all who could not retreat back to the forest in time.

Shaela and her group retreated back from the edge for fear of sharing the same fate with their enemies. As the screams ascended from the mists, Shaela looked out across the widening gap, watching those who could not escape fall screaming to their doom. The earth gave way to the tree line and stopped as they all watched on in wonder.

The last of the Morog Knights to fall clawed desperately at the edge of the crumbling sides of earth in a desperate attempt to secure its footing, but failed. As it fell, it screamed in terror, plummeting down into the unknown depths, drawing the eyes on both sides of the battle to the scene.

Shaela and her allies looked into the gray mists as they literally stood upon an instantly formed pinnacle of earth, about which seemed an endless fall. Endless due to the screams yet ascending from within the mist.

Shaela looked at Orin in wonder.

“What was that?” The Werewolf shook his head, glancing at her and then glared at the other side, bearing his teeth.

“I thought you did that! Either way, it was timely and welcome.” The others around her looked to Orin for his next command as Hiska carefully neared the brink, peering down into the mists in curiosity.

Shaela turned her attention to Rashi, who was physically caged within a throng of Werewolf legs, her eyes stained with filthy tears as she looked down at the body of her father being trampled by the pack, though they did all they could

not to. Shaela felt a sudden sympathy for Rashi, but this was no time to let down her guard; their enemies were yet visible all about them, even though they seemed at a loss as to what would be their next course of action.

Shaela turned her attention from Rashi to the servants of an enemy she knew all too well from her past life, a life still not clear to her. Still, she knew enough now to know who she was, and what was hunting her. She feared for her own loved ones now . . . like before . . . when there was nothing she could do to save them.

It was impressive that her enemy had endured since she faced them in defeat during the Age of War. She remembered witnessing the entire obliteration of her own people, and knew history was about to repeat itself, or be finished.

The clearing of her memories stabbed her in the heart like a poisoned dagger as she recalled the last of her race driven into extinction . . .

. . . She looked out at the fallen of her people, witnessing the entire annihilation of the kinsman she grew up with. Tens of thousands of their bodies scattered across the plains within the Volanar Rim, heaped and piled before her as she felt the steady flow of their blood slowly oozing past her feet, penetrating her soft leather boots.

She ripped her blade from the last of the Morog Knights, and beheaded its mount in one swift motion, ending the remaining force of a once seemingly endless wave of destruction. Stumbling, she saw, as if from a distance, her tiara fall from her head, splashing onto the crimson earth, vanishing halfway into the stain of her people now stilled upon the ground. Looking to see who was still standing from this final assault, she felt a weakness beginning to challenge her strength.

Looking about the area, she saw her most loyal followers struggling to her side. They were faithful, as ever they had been, since the beginning of this insane conflict. Now, none of her people stood; she was the last. The Norst`Kin Lykkinnin, who had been a part of her life since she was a mere baby, grimly surrounded her in silence. All had taken many wounds, half their number now gone.

What a bitter price to pay for victory it was . . . so few . . . so very few. She locked eyes with her life-long mentor and protector, a Blood`Henge Assassin, plainly discerning his concern for her safety. Shaking her head, she grit her teeth in agony.

“Orin, I am the last of my own,” she lamented. “I fear death will soon embrace me in its endless will.” Orin reached out and snatched up her fallen symbol of royal status, then took her up into his strong arms as she noticed yet another wave of Morog Knights cresting the Volanar Rim in the far distance, like a wave of blackness spilling over the rim's edge and into the valley. She weakly looked up into Orin's savage, blood-soaked, face, forcing a weak smile as she raised a trembling hand to his long muzzle.

“I thought we got them all,” she wept. Orin pulled free of her hand with a jerk and looked at the enemy, now searching the entire plain, killing any who yet remained alive, even as others of Orin's pack came to them in silence, all shedding the blood of the wounds they had taken for their Queen. All of them looked to her, desperation in their fierce and terrifying countenances.

She was the Queen of the Shantirin (shan - tear - in), the dying soul survivor of a race which had existed here in safety for hundreds of years, nestled within the security of the valley of the Shahadrin within the Volanar Rim. Now the Shahadrin were dead, and she was the last of her entire race, slaughtered by an enemy known as the Moragothrin, a vicious and evil hearted race of beings of half shadow, half flesh, who served Goroath, the Jahtha of the Unholy.

She grimaced, jerking in pain as she felt something tear inside her, as if a clawed hand had gripped her mercilessly from within, ripping into her like the blade of the last knight she had defeated. Coughing, she spat blood and shook her head bitterly.

“This has gone on for so long Orin. It will be good to finally rest and join my people. I am not ashamed to have called you a friend, nor to join my loved ones in the next life. I fought along side them, with them, for them . . . from the beginning.” Orin looked around hatefully and howled in defiance at the enemy, who now made their way directly toward them.

Weakly, she gripped Orin and struggled out of his arms. Straightening up with considerable effort, she stood proudly before her chief servant and most beloved friend. Looking at the bloody tiara in his hand she winced in pain. Slowly she took it and returned it to its rightful place and picked up two blades, one not her own, the other, her now enchanted blade . . . the Noth`Kur Aegis.

Looking at the katana she had emptied her soul into, she sheathed it and unfastened the belt from her waist as Orin and his pack watched her in silence. Taking his hand, she pressed the Soul`Blade into his, closing his fingers about it, tears mingling with her own blood. As the tears streamed her filthy, once beautiful face, she motioned, signaling in formality her final decree as the Queen

of the Shantirin.

“Orin, the Noth`Kur Aegis is complete. I forfeit the bond between the blade and myself, severing my soul from it until the time it is once again revealed twice at my own hand, if that time should come. I curse the one who dares reveal the power within this, my Soul`Blade. Darkness will forever besiege the one who attempts to take it. The darkness of their future will be manifest to any who attempt to secure my personal powers locked into this blade, warning them of the danger before the spell is complete, giving a chance to withdraw their design, even as it is cast.” She spoke a few arcane words, sealing the curse into the blade and cutting her strength by doing so.” She staggered, almost fell to her knees, but Orin aided her to stand, silent and grim. After composing herself as best she could, she looked up at Orin.

“I command you to leave me now . . . bear this Soul`Blade to secrecy. All has been prepared.” With a weakening sob, she embraced Orin, feeling a sensation of slipping begin to threaten her. She would soon be dead. Sobbing in regret, she parted, looking into his eyes.

“You are the truest companion I could have ever been privileged to know.” Smiling fondly at each of Orin's pack, she bowed slightly, respectfully, as she whispered, “I love you all.” All present bowed in return, each placing the top of the right paw upon the ground before them as she began to hear the rumbling charge of the enemy in the distance. Orin placed a paw gently to the side of her battle scarred face, once an image of flawless beauty, weeping at their parting, a desperate look in his icy-blue eyes. He glanced at the approaching enemy and attempted once to sway her decision . . . something he had never done.

“There are only a few hundred of them remaining my lady . . . we can win this.” She would have been angry had Orin defied her command in the past. She might have considered punishing him for questioning her decree, yet now she only saw his devotion for her and wept as she embraced him again, regret filling her heart.

“I love you Orin. Don't ever think I haven't.” She looked up at him as he

continued to shed tears for the only time in his unusually long life. He had known her as a baby . . . since she took that first breath of life when she came into the world.

She recalled, as she parted from him, how she had fallen in love with him at a tender age, but had kept it a secret, knowing such a love would be rejected by her father. She wept as she raised the bloodstained blade before her, gazing one last time at him. Mouthing the words, “I will love you forever”, she turned and waited for those whom she knew would slay her. Without looking back, she called out to Orin as he departed.

“I will return!” The air suddenly filled with the long howling cry of the leader of the almost extinct race of Norst`Kin Lykkinnin, a nomadic people who had come to her own people long ago. For no apparent reasons, the Norst`Kin had offered their services to a long departed King . . . her seventh great grandfather. She had never asked Orin why they had come, or contemplated why they had remained among her people . . . they just were, and had been the strongest asset to the kingdom.

As she saw the Morog Knights close the ground between them, she knew she would most likely never know . . . and not knowing the mysteries of riddles and hidden things bothered her immensely. Resigning herself to the present situation, she whispered a quick prayer to the Jahtha her father had so often spoke of.

“Bane, sovereign and ruler of the dead, hear me now. I know you not, or even that you are real, yet I beseech you to aid me, please. Deathless I wish to be.” She did not expect an answer, having no faith that such a being actually existed. Yet, in this, she did not feel so alone.

What happened then shocked her. Bane had come to her, spoken with her, somehow holding off the enemy's approach for what seemed hours, days . . . she could not tell. She only remembered him consoling her, teaching her things which were hard to understand. He spoke of light and darkness, and the relationship each had one with the other. He filled her with the teachings of his ways, and, in

the end, when he departed, promised to teach her more one day . . . at some point . . . in the future.

During the time she spent in his presence, her heart was taken by him fully. It was as if she had always known him . . . forever.

She recalled Bane introducing a strange man to her, a being of the Underworld, offering him as a future servant and mentor, should things work out the way she had planned. She remembered accepting his service. The only command she had given him was to remind her of who and what she once was . . . when he thought the time to be right. She had pulled from about her neck the only relic remaining in her possession, the Relic of Ardur, the ancient symbol of her people. He had accepted it and then departed with the oath that one day he would find her.

At Bane's command, he quickly launched into the air, speeding after the Norst`Kin Lykkinnin, who were fighting their way through more of the enemy that had come over the rim from behind, attempting to break through their ranks and gain their safety beyond.

Bane spoke with her for a short time after, and then departed, a sadness in his countenance. When she found herself, once again facing her enemies, it was as if they had paused in time while Bane was with her.

In bewilderment, she waited for her enemy to fall upon her, but as they neared, they split into two groups, surrounding her on all sides, leaving an opening in their ranks. As she looked on them, her heart felt suddenly darkened within her chest, causing her to stumble. Quickly she regained her feet as she witnessed a black dragon circling above her like a vulture, slowly descending from the sky, a rider of shadow upon its back. It landed in utter silence, and for the moment looked upon. All she perceived was the form of a man. Yet it was more, like sickened darkness which had taken the form of a man . . . a King. Holding out a hand, he spoke to her in a deadly calm voice that intruded upon her senses, penetrating her mind and heart.

“Join me or die.” Reviled by his presence, she recalled walking to him and

calmly shoving the blade she wielded into the chest of the darkness he rode upon, slaying it. As the dragon fell, she was thrown back, losing her blade to the bloodied earth. She remembered in a haze looking up into its eyes as it arose from the shadow remnants of its once steed, its seething hatred burning like a cold black flame. Reaching out a hand, fingers spread wide, she remembered blackness . . . death without dying, weightlessness and warmth as her memories fled, leaving her in a state of ignorance; innocense, which was found in the arms of a proud and exhausted mother, who, from that day forward, loved and protected Shaela with the heart of a lioness.

Memories of her past melted quickly away, replaced with the fresh memories of her childhood, filled with the love of parents, kind and gentle, and a mother who taught her ceaselessly about anything and everything practical . . .

. . . Her past streamed back into her mind, the dam of ignorance cracking wide, to flood her with memories of who she was . . . mingle her life with that of a past life she did not wish to remember.

She choked, sobbing out in desperation as she looked at Orin, who watched her with ice-cold eyes. In a moment, Shaela slowly remembered half of the five hundred years of her past life. The shock of knowing nearly took her balance as she gazed in astonishment at her best friend. Slowly she neared him.

“It's you,” she whispered in awe and wonder as more of her past came to light within her mind. Reaching out a trembling hand, she touched the side of Orin's face in joy as he nodded, his long ears rising up, giving him the exact image of fairy tale dread. The Werewolf snarled and gathered Shaela into his arms, holding her tight to himself as he glared viciously at their enemies.

“Yes, we are come to you now, as we did of old. Here, I've kept this for you. I returned to the place you fell and retrieved your body and your tiara. When I buried you, I could not let go of it. I have protected the symbol of your royal status in hopes that this occasion would present itself.” Orin reached to his side, upon which a leather side-pouch was strapped, and opened it. Quickly he pulled out a steel box and flipped the lid back. As he did, she saw a diamond tiara within a red felt lining, perfectly intact. Her eyes widened as she reached in and took it, holding it up, watching it glitter in the light of the moon and stars above.

Looking up from the tiara, Shaela felt the pain of her people's loss. She had never mourned, nor had closure. Orin threw the box down and took it from her hands, quickly placing it on her head, adjusting it firmly into her hair in the proper, royal, fashion of her day. The other Norst`Kin Lykkinnin howled in unison as Orin lowered his hands and bowed to her formally. She reached up and touched the tiara, suddenly remembering when she had received it. *That was long ago, she thought, and this is now.*

Suddenly the Morog Knights wailed all about them, as if they recognized her and what the tiara symbolized. The wails of hatred and enmity soon changed

to battle cries as an assault broke out, in which the Morog quickly found themselves attacked from without the area as Shae`Hur, the Kazar of all panther-kind, appeared from the shadows and began swiftly taking them down, like wheat before the scythe.

It was not long before a large shadow suddenly sprang to life, tearing into their numbers as a monstrous bear form crushed into their ranks beside with Shae`Hur, bringing them down in a flash of both talons and paws.

Suddenly the entire region was filled with the sounds of battle as many other of the Kazar she had met long ago in the dark of a stormy night, appeared, aiding each other against the host of seemingly endless enemies, foes who had somehow invaded the jungle unnoticed.

Above them, suddenly the night sky was rent with the screams of a full command of griffons, their riders urging their mounts into the confused Morog, fighting desperately against this multi-surprise onslaught.

Orin released Shaela and snarled in frustration, instantly pacing back and forth along the brink, eager to join the raging conflict. Shaela quickly raised her hand, uttering the spell to command root, envisioning a net of thickly woven roots forming to make a strong bridge to the other side. She grinned in satisfaction as her desire quickly took the form of her will as roots began to snake out from the bank, impaling deep into the earthen of the pinnacle upon which they stood. Impatiently, Orin waited, pacing furiously back and forth with his pack, eager to kill the Morog.

“Revenge,” Orin rumbled as a bridge of roots lashed together, steadily growing stronger and stronger. Shaela turned about, pointing at the forest on the other side as she saw, to her dismay, a host of Morog replace the fallen. As she watched, her eye caught hold of a dragon falling from the sky, screaming a challenge as it burst through the trees, shattering the woods, taking down many Morog in one fell swoop, crushing them beneath the weight of its fury.

“Talon!” Shaela exclaimed in surprise. “It's Talon!”

As Talon raged into the bewildered Morog Knights, lightning, followed by an

instant crack of thunder, splitting the night air off in another area where the fighting had not yet commenced. As both Morog mount fell charred to the earth in great numbers, the light from the strike of lightning revealed a seemingly endless invasion of her once conquerors. A dozen more Morog charred instantly as a second bolt of lightning blasted them from above.

Shaela sensed her spell of root was complete, strong and ready to hold any weight. She turned to Orin and pointed to the natural bridge.

“Now! Go!” Instantly the Norst`Kin pack leapt across the expanse, charging into the Morog, furiously ripping and rending them asunder, wreaking havoc into their ranks.

Shaela looked about the area, doubting the outcome of this conflict . . . until behind her the Griffon Riders of Gaunten swept into the area like a cloud of locusts, taking down their enemy with deadly accuracy.

Neither Griffin, nor rider, was bent on killing, but flinging the Morog into the chasm. Hope dawned in Shaela's mind as she looked at their, now, not so hopeless situation. Now the tide was changed!

Though the losses on her enemy's side was heavy, still the Morog flowed into the fray, their numbers seemingly inexhaustible.

Shaela only wondered for a moment at how many their might be, but her chief fear and concern was not the Morog, but what drove them to battle. She had never seen them fight so intensely, for even as a Griffon bit into the body of one of the shadowed knights, and flung him into the mist, it gripped the Griffon, desperately clinging to it in the attempt to drag it down to the same fate.

As Shaela watched a Griffon and rider get pulled down into the mists, she felt a sudden heavy weight burden her mind and heart. The feeling was familiar, and it panicked her.

She scanned the skies above, looking for that familiar horror which had nearly destroyed her once. When lightning flashed once again, she spotted its silhouette. There, she saw it again, and as she did, her eyes darkened to rival Bane's. The dragon of blackness had moved to an uncontested area of the woods.

Quickly, Shaela grasped Rashi's arm, forcing her to look at her.

“Rashi, do you know anything about this attack? Did your father lead them here?” Rashi shook her head emphatically, dread falling upon her as she looked at Shaela.

“No, I swear I don't know!” Shaela released Rashi as Hiska guarded the only way to them, cutting down a Morog mount, void of its rider, as it leapt across the bridge of roots, desperately lunging past Hiska. It's target was Shaela. Rashi shook her head again at Shaela as she watched the Unholy Morog fall lifelessly into the chasm below.

“I swear, I know nothing about this!” Shaela raised a hand and cast another spell, pointing at the side opposite the first bridge, commanding another bridge of roots to form as the battle raged on, fearing the battle could still turn against them. She noticed Talon contending against too many foes, for his tactics were now strictly defensive.

The scene of her standing amidst the dead nation of her people flashed in her memory. She saw the carnage, smelled the blood, watched it flow. Her feet suddenly felt wet, like before, but when she looked down, she stood upon dry ground.

It was happening again. She was losing her people. This time, she had more power. This time it would change.

“Hiska,” she called out, “Do not follow me. Kill, just kill them . . . all of them!” Hiska screamed, instantly leaping across the bridge, aiding the others as they fought desperately to survive. Even Shae`Hur was being slowly overwhelmed, even as the great panther killed any that approached. The number of their enemies was nearly overwhelming, even against the ruler of the Harritt Catur.

Orin and his pack of werewolves still held the advantage as they slaughtered their enemy, felling them as though they were weakened dogs. The great bear seemed undaunted by the sheer number of the Morog who had changed tactics to take it out by overwhelming it in tides. Even so, it had taken many wounds.

As the second bridge became strong enough, Shaela made her way across it as a number of lightning strikes ripped into the enemy who were beginning to overwhelm the great bear. The force of the spell and the heat seared many, the thunder giving the great bear the moment it needed to continue its deadly path. It was obvious that Mother was here and there, but Shaela never spotted her a single time. The flash, the heat and the very air about the bear shook all to their knees, but left all allies unaffected. Yes, Mother was here, which was comforting.

She needed to leave, save her loved ones from death. It was her they wanted, only her, though she was baffled as to why they had hunted her down through the passing of thousands of years.

As she began to cross over the root bridge, Shaela felt something grab her from behind. Like water, she melted beneath her attacker and threw it from the bridge. As she had her attacker in mid-throw, she realized it was Rashi and stopped, pulling her sister to her, causing her to land safely at her feet, instead of off the bridge. Rashi's eyes were wide with fear as she gripped at Shaela desperately.

“Shaela, no!” she screamed. Rashi clutched her tight and looked up at her in desperate terror. They froze, looking at each other for a moment, neither breathing. Shaela suddenly realized what could have just happened and recoiled at the thought.

“Rashi, I need to get away from here! It's me they are after, not you! I need to go if I am to save you all!” With that, Shaela wrenched free of the intense grip Rashi had on her and bolted across the roots, almost falling as her foot became entangled. Recovering her balance, Shaela kicked loose, then sprinted across the span.

When she reached the other side, she ran along the fray, staying low. At the first chance she darted through her enemy as they focused their attention upon Talon, who was proving quite a challenge to them. Quickly she passed through their ranks, escaping notice, only to come face to face with one who silently waited for her upon the back of a familiar, blackened, dragon of shadow and

darkness.

She stopped, raising her blade, her heart pounding so hard in her chest, she suspected the Shadowmancer could plainly see it. Quickly the rider raised a hand, fingers extended wide. Darkness streamed forth from the tip of each finger, flowing out quickly.

“You escaped me before . . . not again.” Shaela leapt back just in time to avoid the silent snap of the dragon's jaws as it tried to take her. She scrambled back, avoiding the tentacles of death. This time she knew there would be no escape, for she had not prepared an escape in advance as she had done in the past.

“Stop, stop, I yield!” she screamed in horror and desperation as she retreated back toward the brink which had been created during the conflict. “Let them live, and this time and I will join you without resistance!” The dragon froze in mid bite as the Shadowmancer clenched his fist and withdrew his arm. The tentacles instantly pulled back as he looked down upon her in triumph.

“Swear it! Swear your unbreakable allegiance to me. Swear the Unbreakable Oath, now!” Shaela stopped at the edge and looked over, seeing the gray mist writhing within the reach of her shaking hand. She stood slowly and dropped her katana, hearing the battle raging on about her . . . of death taking her friends and allies into eternity.

Slowly she raised herself up before the Shadowmancer, under the menacing glare of the dragon, which hovered just above her ready to strike. Smoothly she knelt, bowing her head to the ground in submission. Sobbing out in misery, she looked up and choked out an oath, seeing in her mind the carnage of people strewn out before her within the once protection of the Volanar Rim.

“I swear, I will follow you for eternity, milord, if you yet live by sunrise!” Willing the Gargantuan into action, she dove to the side, snatching up her Soul`Blade. In one fluid motion, she hacked at the neck of the dragon of shadow with all her might, deeply wounding it just below the head, even as its jaws snapped shut, cutting the leather of her dress.

Her spell obeyed her will and command, smashing down upon both dragon

and rider, imbedding both their bodies violently into the earth.

The positioning had been flawless, perfect. Again and again the massive organic creature pounded down upon her enemy, driving it deep into rents in the earth made by the impact as she hissed a spell, hatred filling her to the point of madness.

Where once there was pitch blackness, now there was a void and a shadow within, showing no sign of her once beautiful eyes. Shadows, like creeping flames, licked up through her hair as she screamed at her once killer.

“Agrin Mortala!” She shrieked in hatred and malice. “You took from me my kingdom, killed my people!” Roots burst up from the earth as soil exploded about the area in a burst of power that instantly skewered through both dragon and rider, rending both their bodies as the Gargantuan continued to relentlessly pummel them into the earth. “If there are others like you, I will hunt them all down and send them to you, this is my sworn oath. Die!” A terrible energy filled her mind and body, causing the jungle about her to moan and instantly wilt. The power she stripped from the organics in the area built up inside her like a flash flood.

She could feel it needed to be expended, or it would turn upon her. Even the Gargantuan, which was still stomping her enemy, groaned and began to be undone. Leaping to the hold, in which her enemy weakly struggled, she threw out her hand and released raw power down at the Shadowmancer as Shaela’s eyes suddenly changed to a golden brilliance.

A wail rose up, so terrible in its cry, the sound halted the battle, forcing most all present to cover their ears and fall to the ground in agony. Morog voices rose, blending with the death screams of their master.

Shaela covered her ears, trying desperately to block the pain of its penetrating wail from her head. Its screams pained her mind, as if the inside of her head had suddenly cooled to a freezing temperature. Multiple lightning strikes cracked, striking the area where the Shadowmancer continued to struggle, as Shaela fell forwards, the intense weight of exhaustion ripping the strength from

her body as she felt the searing blasts of nature tear and burn her enemy to char.

Before the strain and chaos of her mind set in upon her, she lifted her eyes to see many of the Morog Knights scatter into the jungle, seeking escape wherever they could. Some leapt into the chasm, screaming as they vanished into its unknown depths.

As she lay convulsing, Shaela fought a blackness that washed over her mind and body in a merciless wave of chaos . . . and lost.

Sunrise came, shedding its light upon the scene of carnage before them all. The remaining Griffon Riders volunteered the duty of disposing of the Morog and their riders, casting them into the gray mists within the yet remaining chasm.

As they labored to rid the forest of the bodies, Shaela beckoned Hiska to follow her, leading him to the spot where the shadowy remains of a foe lay who had slain her long ago during the Age of War. As she stood before its remains, crushed into the shattered and broken earth, she remembered all too well the power of its magic, which had sent her headlong, spiraling into shadow and chaos. If she had not prepared the Noth`Kur Aegis . . . she trembling with anxiety before a foe who could never hurt her and those she loved again.

Tears flowed quietly down her face as her thoughts flowed back in time. She remembered growing up among her people, all the experiences she shared with them. Now they were dead and gone. Wrapping her arms about her thin frame, she wept for a time, as Hiska's wrapped her in a security she loved and so desperately needed.

He was always there for her, just like Orin had been. Looking up at her husband and faithful Guardian, she managed a fragile smile and leaned her head against his arm.

“Hiska, I am going to tell you everything I remember. I don't recall much of my past life, yet it comes to me here and there. I will try and relate most all I know to you. It is yet partially obscured, and is like looking through a mirror, half fogged over by steam.” Hiska began grooming her tangled hair as she carefully began a story, starting with her first childhood, long ago during the last years of the Age of conflict . . .

“There were rumors of war on the borders of my land. My people lived within the Volanar Rim, the same region Tomakk is from. We shared our existence with another race, known as the Arakin, a people who were brilliant, but not adept in the art of combat and physical warfare. My people, known as the

Tyrians, which is what I am, were protected the Arakin in trade for their knowledge of magic, enchanting and of the subtle cunning of their ways. In return, my father, who was the King of the Tyrians, grew very fond of them and sealed both races together in loyalty by taking to wife the firstborn daughter of the King of the Arakin.

“Together both nations became the Shahadrin. Together we were strong amidst the turmoil of the outside world, and its growing hostilities. While our two races prospered and thrived, the world at large crumbled around us, seemingly ignorant of our existence . . . until nearly twenty years into the Age of War, or as others call it, the Thousand Year War in which the Shattered Lands were born. During this time, I was born into the world.

“There then began to appear savage creatures in the borders of the land, beyond the Volanar Rim, down in the foothills of the mountains, which, up to that point in time, had shielded and hid us from the chaos beyond. When the fighting began on our borders, that is when a fierce race, known as the Norst`Kin, who are true-race Werewolves, boldly entered our land.

“These were terrifying creatures which could shift into the form of man, Wolf or Werewolf. They entered our city undetected by every watch, trespassing the castle of my father, two-thousand strong. We did not see them coming, and my father feared the worst. But, to our great astonishment, they did not come to kill us, but to offer their services as guardians and protectors. Their presence quickly became appreciated as terrible creatures, driven by the masters of war, began to enter more frequently into our ream, hunting all in their path, bent on death for no apparent reason.

“The Norst`Kin swept an entire army of Morog Knights - a new and vicious enemy - away with few casualties. Some of the Morog must have escaped the Norst`Kin, for more came a few months after. I was then ten years of age.

“One of the Lykkinnin, Orin, took it upon himself to stay at my side and train me in the ways of combat. In fact, I am the only one that knew this, but Orin was at my birth. I believe Orin was a scout. He is the same who now pursues the

fleeing Morog Knights in this jungle. He is a terrible enemy, and a blessed ally.

“For years he was my mentor in magic and with all manner of hand to hand combat, pushing me to my limit and full potential.

“I also received training at the hands of the Arakin, learning the dark arts of magic, and of the binding of enchantments upon both living souls and inanimate objects. By the time I was no more than twenty-five seasons into my life, I was adept with all manner of weapons and magic. I prided myself on being a gifted enchanter, though there were some still in the kingdom who possessed the skill and knowledge beyond what I had learned.

“My father and mother were both killed by a group of Shadow Assassins brought up from the Dimension of Shadow to serve our enemy. That is when I became the ruler of my people. From that time forth, Orin always referred to me as Ambassador, the title which he called me when we first met him in the ogre cave.

For years, I led my people against all manner of invaders, as the battles of the outside world raged on. Even in the secreted heights of the Volanar Rim, my people, who then looked to me in faith to guide them, were caught up in sudden and endless chaos.

“Years passed into decades, and, to my disbelief, I realized I was not aging past my prime. As the years rolled by, bathed in blood, I witnessed the generations of my people pass before my eyes as I remained untouched by it. I never found the answer to that great mystery, even though I sought it out.

“Five hundred years of war put us hard to the test as I fought to save my people from extinction. Yet, it was all in vain. Realizing the inevitable, I had a blade, a katana, which was my weapon of choice, forged by the most skilled master blacksmiths. When it was finished, I called on the most powerful enchanters to aide me in the creation of the Noth`Kur Aegis . . . the Soul`Blade. The attempt was risky, but successful, and just in time.

“Not three days after I had cast myself into the blade, sealing my will and knowledge into it, my land was overrun by endless waves of our enemy, the

Morog Knights, who began the final invasion, slaughtering my people day by day in one last battle. I gave Orin charge of the Noth`Kur Aegis, commanding he and his pack, which had dwindled to a mere handful, to carry it to secrecy until I would one day reclaim it, if the Fates allowed. That is when I was killed by the chief of the Morog, known as the Shadowmancer, the same who lies dead before us now.

“The powerful enchantments of the Noth`Kur Aegis could not save my life, but I was spared the endless darkness of the Shadowmancer's attack. At my own hand, I was cast into the void until the time was right when I would be reborn in the City of Edgewood, the Human daughter of wonderful people who raised me.

“Hiska, my former name was Ishanti Serrinian, and I was the Queen of a nation which fell victim to the horrors which ravaged my land during the Age of War. That is my story, though much of my past is still yet veiled from my memory. I do not know if I will ever remember all my past, such are the risks and side effects of what I did to escape. Truthfully, I would much rather forget it all. I fear that one day, I will remember that I am evil and traitorous and vile. I am truly terrified at what will next come to my recollection. Hiska, I never would have done it if but one of my people yet lived. I was truly the last of my race, alone with the exception of Orin and the strongest of his pack. Of Orin’s race, I believe only about three score, maybe more, survived. I know there were females among them. Bearing offspring over the millennia, they had to have grown in number. Where they would be, I have no idea.”

She watched Hiska as he stood looking down at the body of the Shadowmancer, speechless. She was beyond the point of emotion. In fact, she felt numb and drained, though the strain of the power she had used was diminishing because of Bane's gift to her. She thought for a moment on him, and then returned to the present. Looking to Hiska, she wondered what he thought about her now.

“Hiska, It confuses me as to why the Shadowmancer sought me out again. I need to discover why it continued to hunt me, even after destroying me so long

ago. Who am I that I would be tracked in such a manner? Hiska, I love you with all my heart. Please -”

Hiska tightened his hold on Shaela, pulling her into his sheltering arms, holding her protectively, a gleam beginning to burn within his emerald-green eyes. He stared at their fallen enemy for a time, deep in thought. After a long silence, Hiska looked deep into Shaela's eyes.

“We go rescue your mother, then we head south to the Volanar Rim. Shaela, this cannot wait. We will put off our get-a-way until this mystery is solved.” Reaching up, Shaela began to work her nails over his neck and up under his chin happily.

“Thank you Hiska. I am glad you are who you are. Truly, I don't know what I would do without you. Still, we have earned the right to a get-a-way, yes?” Hiska shifted and pointed at the body of the Shadowmancer.

“Yes. Shaela, we should search the body for anything useful. Maybe you could find something on it which would give you some clues to begin with.” Shaela yawned, curling up in her husband's arms, shaking her head.

“I need to rest now. When I awake, we will do it.” She shifted a few times as weariness overtook her, throwing her into a dreamless sleep. After three hours, she awoke, a negative feeling overwhelming her, causing her to suspect she had done something wrong.

She withdrew from Hiska's arms and stood as he watched her. Stretching thoroughly, she managed to work out the feeling, pointed at the fallen Shadowmancer, then turned to Hiska.

333 “Let's get this over with.” Hiska quickly blocked Shaela from the body and began carefully picking through the bloodless corpse himself, relieving the body of physical objects; there were nine. When he was finished, they both returned to camp and placed the items neatly in a row upon the ground. Shaela added the items she had acquired in the past to the nine. She had never found out what the properties of the amulet or the potions were. Now she could reveal the items herself. Eagerly, she cast the spell of revealing, feeling a power which enlightened

her mind, bringing to light the nature of each.

As she finished equipping herself with what items she thought would be useful, Mother slowly approached without her noticing, watching her as she readied herself for the journey she was about to embark upon. She watched Shaela busily prepare herself, taking care to get everything perfect. When all seemed set in order, the Mystic of the Harritt Catur broke the silence.

“When first we met, I sensed something great in you.” Shaela jumped, startled by Mother's sudden appearance, instantly falling to the ground before her, as is the custom. She placed her forehead to the ground as she knelt, hands out before her, fingers extended wide as she knelt, and waited. The Mystic's eyes softened as she approached Shaela, touching the back of her head with a single, ivory-white claw. Shaela stood and looked at her, trembling with sudden emotion, tears beginning to flow. Slowly, she embraced Mother, breaking down emotionally as she held her tight, feeling her embrace returned.

“Forgive me if ever I caused you grief, Mother. I hope you can forgive me for the intrusion . . . the deception. It was never intended to cause this.” Slowly Mother raked her razor-sharp talons through Shaela's long dark hair, tears forming in her own eyes.

“Daughter, I heard your tale as I remained hidden from you. It is filled with sorrow beyond my comprehension. My beloved Shaela, there is nothing to forgive. You are always welcome here, as this is your home. You are my family . . . I am yours. Do not doubt my words, or you will offend me greatly. Do you understand?”

Shaela held her tight for quite some time, and then slowly parted, feeling an unmeasurable weight lift from her heart and mind as she slipped both her hands into the Mystic's. The Mystic squinted at Shaela, squeezing her hands tight, then made a short hissing sound.

“I told you never to bow before me again, and you disobeyed my directive. I should punish you for your rebellious nature. You are reckless and forgetful.”

They looked in silence at each other for a moment and then both began to laugh quietly through their emotions.

“Mother, I wish there was some way I could repay you for all you have done for me.” The reply Shaela received was in the quick embrace and a quiet whisper.

“I will ask for payment later . . . daughter,” she chuckled. They both parted, looking upon each other with unpretentious love and affection. Mother turned her gaze to Rashi, who was sleeping by a nearby fire.

“Take her with you and train her. I hope she heals from this experience Silvara has diabolically thrown her into, for it lies heavy upon her heart. There is one more thing you must do before you continue your preparations to leave.”

“Anything Mother,” she stated soberly, wiping her face. She followed Mother over to the fire, where her Guardian produced a large, very full, sack. Curious, Shaela looked at it as he handed it to Mother, who opened it and reached in. Before pulling the contents of the sack out, she looked at Shaela.

“Shaela, your past is filled with torn and ragged memories, filled with pain and misery, all but useless to you now. But the experiences you have been forced through can make you stronger than ever, if you will let go the rage, the hate and hopelessness you hold within.” Pulling out the content of the sack, Shaela's eyes widened as she beheld the black satin dress she was wearing when she was lost in the EverShade Jungle years ago.

Reaching out, she took it as a thousand memories flooded her mind. The fabric was rotted, moth-eaten and torn in too many places to be repaired. The once beautiful dress she fancied above all her wardrobe was now only a reminder of the trials she had been through. She smiled at the memories, both good and bad, feeling her heart begin to break as a sudden yearning to go back where it was once safe. She knew a way, yet, by doing so, history would no doubt repeat itself. She came to as Mother placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, peering deeply into her eyes, holding her attention.

“Shaela, like the past you were torn from, and as the pain of those memories haunt you, even as the sight of this dress haunts you now, let it represent what

once was, not what is. Throw it into the fire, and as you do, let go of all the negative cultivated by the past. Seek to rebuild, not to wear the rotted, tattered, good for nothing fragments of your past into the future. It does no good to dwell upon misery.”

Shaela looked at the dress in full understanding. She slowly lifted it up over the flames of the fire as she glanced down at Rashi, who she thought was sleeping. Rashi quietly watched her, tears flooding her beautiful face in silence as she watched Shaela lower the symbol of her past into the flames. As the fabric caught fire, she lowered the dress and let it go, focusing on letting go all the pain and misery bottled up within her.

As the dress consumed within the flames, Rashi stood, facing her, trembling openly, looking at Shaela in silent mourning, causing Shaela's heart to break for her. She dared not embrace her little sister, as she so desperately wanted. She waited as Rashi looked down at her hand in silence, tears pouring down her face. Slowly she took Shaela's hand in hers, then embraced Shaela.

“Oh Rashi, I am so sorry . . . so very sorry.” She felt hope as her sister tightened her grip on her, nodding as she buried her face against her.

The Mystic of the Harritt Catur smiled, turned and walked away, joined by her faithful Guardian, who lead the way back to the Resting Grounds.

Before parting from her, Rashi gained enough control of her emotions to whisper, “Let's go get our mother.”

Glossary:

Abilities:

Audible Projection: The Guardian can share with his or her ward, what he or she hears.

Classes:

Druid:

The path of the druid is rather complicated. The would-be druid must learn the languages of animals in all their varieties, as well as the type of each tree. There is more to this, but you must read the books in order to get the full picture.

Guardian:

An advanced class of protector and warrior who takes on the responsibilities and task of ensuring the safety of the one he or she guards.

Mystic:

A Mystic starts out as a Healer. After learning every spell know to the Hear class, he or she can then advance to the class of Shaman. After learning all Shaman spells, he or she can then request The Mystic Trials. If successful, the title and powers of the Mystic will be mantled upon him or her.

Creatures:

- Ancient Willow: The King of the Willow Natur. The Ancient Willow that offered to teach Shaela of the darker ways of the Druid.
- Blood`Worm: A 10' blood-red, voracious, worm of the Underworld.
- Folix: A 35' eel-like creature that befriends Shaela.
- Prima Catur: Like the Harrit Catur, the Prima are a race of half Humanoid, half lynx-like jungle cat. Their hatred for the Harritt Catur, as well as the Humans, is endless and unyielding.
- Talon: Halon`Thur (Shadow Dragon). Talon's true identity is Arsia Vahkrin, a Death Bringer. Talon not only saves Shaela's life, but sees to her training, after taking her into the Underworld.
- Vahkrin: The following are the various breed of Vahkrin:
- Arsia: Death Bringer
- Gorgonoth: Flesh eating brutes. Unwise and dim-witted.
- Shaedar: Master of the Badlands.
- Vuolg: In appearance of the Mirellian, or Sardakk, Elves, the Vuolg ever plot to rule and reign within the Underworld.
- Wardenoth: Insect-like creatures which have the appearance of preying mantic, yet walk upright.
- Waterchild: Enchanted creatures of pure water.

Names:

Bane:

Jahtha of the dead.

Bryant:

City Guard, whose family owns a bakery. Bryant used to deliver breads, pastries, and many other edible goods to the inn Shaela's parents owned. Bryant aids Shaela to escape the clutches of a tyrant, risking treason and possibly execution.

Chin:

Male Fairy who taught Shaela the spell of Light.

Cyphis:

The Vampire responsible for changing Shaela into a Vampire. Cyphis is slain by Talon.

Djuri:

Female Sardakk Elf Guardian of the Essence Magician's Guild.

Elestra:

Vuolg sorceress who trains Shaela in the ways of the necromancer, as well as the healing arts.

Hiska:

Harritt Catur Warrior and companion of Shaela.

Jewl:

Mistwalker race. Jewl befriend Shaela.

Shae`Hur:

The Great Panther.

Shaela:

Human female, separated from her mother and father during her 14th birthday excursion through the Ever`Shade Jungle.

Talisen:

The Mystic Mother of the Harritt Catur.

Places:

Earthen Plane:

The realm upon which mankind resides.

Ever`Shade Jungle:

A vast expanse of jungle woodlands wherein dwell the Harrit Catur, as well as many other forms of life, both sentient and non-sentient.

Resting Grounds:

A safe haven for the Harritt Catur.

Vermillion Forest:

A mass area of timberland, the size of which rivals the enormous geographical region of the Zurkel Mainland upon the Earthen Plane.

Utaemia:

The space and time in which are all the planes and dimensions.

Zurkel Mainland:

One of the many continents upon the Earthen Plane.

Spells:

Agrin Mortala:

Command Root.

Titles & Terms:

Forever-Guardian: One who takes on the task of guarding something (an object, a place, an idea, another person, etc.) for the rest of his or her life. While most Guardians are bound only to guard something for a time, or temporarily, a Forever-Guardian is bound to protect and shield something for the rest of his or her natural life. A Forever-Guardian can be released from such an oath.

Jahtha: Title of one who has ascended the realm of mortals.

Jahthein: Title of one who has risen to great power.

Maiden of Death: Bane gives this title to Shaela, though the meaning of it was unexplained.

Non-Sentient: A creature that cannot calculate by its intelligence.

Example: reason, multiple, divide, etc. A non-sentient creature is a basic instinct creature bear, wolf, cat, mouse, etc.

Sentient: A creature that can calculate by its own intelligence and wisdom (i.e., reason, multiple, divide, etc.). A sentient creature is not driven by mere basic instinct.

Example: Human, Sardakk Elf, Dwarf, Harritt Catur, Prima Catur, etc.

Species: A general category for most all creatures that are within the same family of a specific creature. While Dragon identifies what one may be speak of, it is not specific. There are many types and breed of dragon within

vastness of Utaemia.

Examples: 1. Fire, Electricity, Water, Sigil, Acid, Rune, Winter, Hunter, Lizard, Wasteland, Earthen, Rock, Gem, etc.

2. The brown bear, black bear, the Kodiak, as well as the giant black, brown, Kodiak are all breeds within the same species.

The Dark:

A place of living darkness. One who enters therein will either succeed the Trial of Onyxia, or be slain, devoured by The Dark, forever lost.

The Great:

A title bestowed upon the King or Queen of a species.

Example: The Great Panther, Shae`Hur: King of all those whose blood flows with the black panther.

Ward:

The recipient of another's protection. Example: One being officially under the protection of a Guardian is known as a Ward.