

## Chapter 1: A Fallen Warrior

The crimson droplet leisurely wound its way down the elf's arm to coalesce with the other droplets gathered on the oak-wood bench. He had a misshapen right arm, twisted in a grisly way from a battle of centuries ago. His golden eyes gleamed with intelligence. Unlike most others of his kind, his hair was jet-black, and a beard was etched upon his visage. Still unlike others of his kind, he was muscular, rather than lean. In fact, the only way that his half-Elvin heritage was apparent, was by the slight curve of his ears. He had a dark woolen scarf wrapped around his neck, tattered like the rest of him, though it was his most coveted possession. He was outfitted in studded leather, preferring it to its heavier counterpart, ring mail. To top off his attire, he was draped in a heavy cloak that lay still in the darkness of the night. An ornate dagger was strapped horizontally to his belt, within easy reach if trouble bared its hideous fangs. Jutting above his right shoulder was the golden hilt of his Elvin long sword, *megil en i haran*, or *haran*. Inscribed in the ancient script of the elves was "ohtar haran kallo en I Tel'Quessir," wrapped like a serpent across the hilt of *haran*. This half-elf, hidden like a thief in shadows, had taken an Elvin name as if to curse his human father. He had once been known by a human name, but now he called himself *Lumbule*, or in the Common tongue, *Shadow*.

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Lum irritably wiped away the blood that was forming on his forearm again. "Dirty human structure," he muttered irritably, looking to all in the bar a raving drunk. In more ways than one, he was. He was drunk with the hurt of losing friends, and the constant struggle that he held within himself. He ached to be able to do something, anything, to help in the constant skirmishes against the hordes of *Ackmire*, the northern kingdom of sorcery and death. Also, his human and Elvin sides fought constantly for dominion of his being. This day, as all others, the Elvin side had won. A patron across the room, one that Lum saw often while on his nightly drinking binges, stumbled across the room to where Lum was seated. The patron slowly realized that he had gotten up and walked halfway across the room, then quite suddenly toppled over into Lum's lap. The half-elf gently propped his nightly counterpart into a sitting position, where he promptly tumbled onto the floor when the half-elf released him.

Lum reached over to pull the man back onto the bench, when he heard the tavern door open with a resounding crash. The man-elf quickly leaped up, expecting an attack. All he got for his trouble was a sore neck. The door was in shambles, a few feet from where it should have been attached to the frame. Crouching through the door lumbered an ogre, of all things. Ten feet tall, the beast was a hulking humanoid. Greenish, sickly looking skin covered the monster. He, now it was apparent that it was male, had a long topknot that snaked its way down his back, ending at his ankles; the only thing covering him

was a loincloth of debatable origin. The ogre was unarmed, but that meant nothing, as he could demolish the bar with just his fists. And then he spoke.

“I bring no harm to human no more,” He rumbled in a voice not unlike rocks crashing together.

“I have message here for a man-elf that comes from far away,” Lum shifted deeper into the shadows upon hearing that.

“I see you, man-elf,” The behemoth said mockingly. “Do not be afraid of a ogre, for you have slain many my kind before.”

Lum spun out of the shadows, unsheathing his sword faster than the human eye could follow.

“I am here beast, come and make my day brighter.”

“I come not to fight, but to give message as I say before.”

“I can do without a message from the likes of you,” Lum stated, casually edging closer to the beast.

“Stay where you are, or I might have to give a different message to you, man-elf.”

“I don’t take to threats kindly. I could slay you before you even took one step.”

“That is true, but I t’ink that you need listen to this.”

“Well, I don’t want to mess up this nice establishment any further than you already have, so fine.”

The ogre sidled over to about 5 feet away from Lumbule and extricated a rolled parchment from his belt. Lum snatched the parchment from the ogre and quickly backed away. Unrolling the parchment, Lum began to get a tad worried. It read:

To the hero of the Valor War, I dare not name you in this letter,  
but a kind ogre that ‘kill man no more’  
agreed to bring this to you. Here is the gist of it: I need you, as a human,  
to come and help us fight the hordes of Ackmire. They swarm our gates  
daily, and we don’t know how long we can hold out. Various human  
and even some elvin tribes have gathered within the city walls. But the

Elves won't take orders from a human commander, and the humans won't take orders from an elvin commander. Oh, believe me, the elves have tried to take command from us lowly humans, but to no avail. we're a heartier lot than they think, as you well know.

You are an expert strategist, and the most important thing that you try to ignore, is that you are half-human and half-elvin. You may be able to unite this rabble, and even stop loathing humans. Maybe.

Talant, Governor of the free lands

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The horse's tail swayed gently in the pre-dawn breeze. The Stallion had a braided tail, as it was not a show or riding horse but a hunting horse. The individual strands of hair were intricately twined about one another to form a masterpiece. His conformation was sixteen hands high and he was very stocky. He was a Dun, having a yellowish coat color with a hind stripe the color of snow. The Dun was fitted with a bridle, which it despised, if horses can feel such emotions. He was at a slow canter, but the leagues were slowly being eaten away. The horse knew, as animals can sense such things, that his rider was edgy. Before they had taken off, his rider had reeked of assurance, but now they were getting closer to what the rider was after. The rider suddenly kicked spurs into the Dun's side and cracked a crop along the Dun's flank. Now the Dun was running at a full gallop, trying to outrun the pain that traveled down his spine but to no avail. Onward the horse ran, onward toward its own doom.

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The rider was Elvin and obviously so. The rider's hair was a silvery color, the same color as the moon when night is at its darkest hour. It snaked its way down the rider's back, two braids threaded together not unlike the Dun's tail. A tight-fitting tunic was tucked into snug breeches, and both blended into the environment. A cloak laid spread out behind the figure, rippling in the wind. It blending into its surroundings as well, creating a strange effect. It looked as if part of the rider was missing. The tunic was visible under a body sash that had three sheathed knives on it at various locations. Peeking out from under the rider's clothing was boiled leather armor, more sturdy than normal leather armor, but limiting movement. To top off the attire, the rider wore leather boots that were the green color of the forest, but not magical like the cloak, tunic and breeches. Strapped to the saddle was a special bundle for the hunted. The rider was not going to kill the hunted with the knives sheathed in the sash; the rider was going to kill the hunted with a very potent poison found only in the lands of Ackmire.

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The sun hung on the horizon, as is the sun's habit in the early hours before dawn strikes. Lum looked quietly over the rooftops of the slumbering inhabitants of Dimshare, a large city in the southern reaches of the Freeland. The sun raised magnificently, the new-born sunlight dancing like little sprites across the rooftops of Dimshare. The western section of the city was splayed out before Lum, a huge collection of mismatched buildings. Looking to his left, Lum saw life starting to stir within an alley down the street. Drunks stumbled their way back into bars for another day of drunkenness. Cutpurses and other such scoundrels creped out of the alleys alongside the drunks, looking for more victims this day. The Flaming Pig, his favorite bar and the one that he had met his ogre 'friend' in last night was just beginning to show sign of life; some of the stumbling drunks found their way to the doors of the Pig, while others stayed where they had spent the night. Lum quickly turned away from the window when he heard a scratching sound. It was only a mouse, trying to find a way out of Lum's room. Lum obliged the mouse by throwing it towards the rising sun. I need to get an early start so that I can make Jingen in two weeks. I still wonder why they would want a half-breed like myself to lead the free-men and free-elves. Lum acknowledged only to himself that he really was half-human, and not a full-blooded elf.

Lum shouldered the pack that he had stuffed full last night with essentials such as dried beef, three canteens filled with fresh water, fishing line, hooks and a skinning knife. He strapped his bedroll onto his back, and was on his merry way.

He quickly made his way down the narrow stairs of the Hook line and Sinker the Pub-inn where he had spent the night. Coming out into the commons room, he bid farewell to the mistress and made his way out through the shabby door. On his way out, he ran head first into a filthy human, whom he promptly shoved to the shoddily-paved road. The human quickly made his feet, roaring mad and charged Lum. Big mistake. Lum easily dodged the human's left hook. Then he tucked the human's left arm under his left, pulled downward, then quickly jammed the human's arm upwards. Pop! His shoulder came clean out of its socket, and he was writhing in pain on the dirty street. Lum continued on his merry way. He took a left from the inn and was at the western gate within ten minutes. He showed the gate guards his Freeland pass and was on his way to Jingen.

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The rider, now the hunter, watched and marked the way the hunted had fought the human. The hunted had no name or race to the hunter. He was simply the hunted, prey for the hunter. The hunter silently made way

across the rooftops, following the hunted. When the hunted made it out of the city, the hunter silently slipped around the guards.

“Hold it, what are you doing there?” came the cry of a guard behind the hunter.

The hunter slowly turned around and bared teeth at the guard, then swiftly removed a dagger from the body sash. The hunter used the right leg to give leverage, and leapt off of the right wall, then used the left leg to ricochet off of the adjacent left wall. The hunter landed behind the guard and promptly inserted the knife in his spine while simultaneously breaking his neck with the other hand. The hunter quickly made it out of the city, leaving a mangled corpse behind.

## **Chapter 2: Bad Dreams**

Silence echoed throughout the courtyard. Marble columns sprouted up around the scene, like neatly planted trees, subject to the weather but not succumbing to it. They branched out on the left and the right, bearing a balcony above. One column jutted up behind them. The floor beneath them was made of concrete; hard to sit upon, yet it fit in with the rest of the surroundings. A gilded rug lay spread out beneath their feet, but could not hide the severe look of the Terrace. The marble columns were a sadistic shade of red, looking like nothing so much as blood. The palace was swathed in that color, proclaiming publicly to all that it was a place of profound evil. The silence was suddenly broken; two figures within the terrace argue loudly, voices rising heatedly by the minute. The sky above the two was overcast and dreary, befitting of the scene. One of the pair within the terrace was female. Long, pointed ears peeked out between golden locks, which cascaded down her spine and settled near her waist. Slender limbs made up her body, adding an unmistakable grace to her movement. Her face was a pleasant oval shape. Almond-shaped eyes the color of pure gold were partially obscured beneath her glower. She wore a golden dress, the same pure color of her eyes, that, while conservative, left no doubt as to her femininity; the dress hugged all of her curves, leaving almost nothing to the imagination.

The second figure stood across from her, hands balled into fists that betrayed his anger. He seemed to be night while she was day. He had hair the color of a moonless night; a person could almost lose themselves just glancing at it. His eyes were the same light-absorbing color as his hair. He wore heavy robes, the same color as the marble column sprouting up behind him. His visage was fixed into an angry glare.

“Please,” The elvin woman begged, tears seeping from her almond eyes. ” let my son live away from this evil place. He does not bear your accursed magic-”

His backhanded blow came out of nowhere, snapping her head around and putting her on the gilded rug.

Blood seeped from her cut lip, staining the rug.

“I have told you,” The man ranted. “again and again, that I own you and the boy!” His masculine baritone echoed off of the surrounding columns. “He is my son and I will do with him as I wish!”

The woman slowly rose, sucking on her torn bottom lip. The evil human continued on. “I try so hard to provide for you and my son. Why would you ever want to leave me?” He fixed her with his heart-stopping gaze.

“I am not here of my own free will; you captured me and now rape me whenever it strikes your fancy. At least I have only borne one child from our accursed couplings.”

“Nonsense. I fell in love with you and knew that I couldn’t live without you by my side.”

“Oh,” She mocked. “So you kidnapped me, and now mistake subservience for love? You’ve told me often enough what will happen to my son should I resist your ‘charms’. Before, you held me in bondage with your magic.”

She spat at him. His fist streaked through the air to collide with her jaw, cutting open her upper lip and depositing her on the ground once again. He stared down upon her, his eyes taking in her shape.

“You are the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes upon.” He complemented her, as she staggered to her feet.” You live like a queen, and yet you wish to leave? I give you the finest things in life, what more could you possibly want?”

Blood dribbled down her chin as she locked eyes with him. “Freedom.”

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Lumbule awoke with a cry, unsheathing his dagger and stabbing wildly at an unseen foe. His dagger was more of a long knife, really. Ten inches of cold steel was bared at an invisible enemy. Nightmares cannot be fought. A dragon was worked into the blade, a dark depression on each side. The hilt and sheath had numerous dragons in crooked, unbroken rows, the tail of the dragon ahead clamped in each mouth. Lum could feel the dragons working into his flesh, so tightly was it that he held the hilt. He re-sheathed his knife without looking and slowly sat up. He was drenched in sweat. It had been decades since he had last thought of what had transpired that night. He glanced up at the moon, an odd crescent shape this night. He knew he

would never forget what he had seen, peeking under that stone door leading out to the terrace. But why now, all of a sudden? Years after it had happened, he had had those dreams. Nightmares. Elves had centuries to think about the past. Even a half-breed like himself couldn't let that nightmare wash away with the centuries. He only wished that it would.

Spring was in full bloom, as were most of the flowers. The darkness teemed with unseen life; insects chirped and buzzed. Frogs croaked out into the night, calling forlornly for female companionship. Birds called out their nightly calls; an owl hooted in the distance, chasing down some unseen prey. The lonely howl of a wolf echoed somewhere nearby. Overhead, the stars were blotted out by a serpentine shape. He quickly dismissed it as some large bird of prey; it looked to be very close though, if its size was any indicator. The stars quickly winked back into existence, so he passed it off as having just awoken. The half-elvin, half-human Lumbule unbuckled his belt, placing his dagger on the ground. In the same movement he reached over his right shoulder and smoothly, effortlessly, removed haran from its sheath. There were still a couple of hours before dawn; he intended to use that time to prepare for the trials ahead.

He battled with an invisible enemy.

He fought his nightmares.

### **Chapter 3: The Nature of Things**

The small town of Dregar, named for the dragon-like men that used to dwell in the area, was more of a village, really. Nestled among the towering peaks of the Socheks, this little place was sheltered from most of the wide world. It lay right on the border between Doshere and Hahkmire. The village and a few surrounding farm houses encompass five square miles. It was like stepping into a different world, stepping into that five-mile area. If a traveler looked around after crossing that boundary, he could tell where nature receded and civilization sprouted up. Looking around, that same traveler could see the surrounding forest, waiting for civilization to be lax one moment; in that one moment, it seemed, nature would reclaim its dominion along the border. Dregar was the only town within miles of the Pass, which was the only way through the mountains and into Hahkmire without going southeast and north into Ghaban. The towering peaks of the Sochek Mountains traveled along the expanse of the border. Then, they made their way west and north into Rhodon. Kevin Grobet was the traveler this day, as he was many days, come into town from a farm nearby. He had come into town to buy a few essentials that his family couldn't produce on their farm. Kevin always marveled at how nature and civilization had such distinguishable boundaries here. He made his way down the worn dirt path, curly brown hair waving in the breeze. His sea green eyes took in the weapon smith on his right. He stared in awe at the various blades laid out before him. Swords and

knives of all kinds were arranged in orderly rows. Many different kinds of hilts were attached to cold steel blades: wire wound, silver, brass and even a few gilded hilts. One blade, more so than the rest, caught his eye. It was made of pure silver; a dragon was worked into the blade, a dark depression on each side. The hilt and sheath had numerous dragons in crooked, unbroken rows, the tail of the dragon ahead clamped in each mouth. It was a fine piece of craftsmanship if he said so himself. And he did.

He reverently picked up the gleaming blade, marking well its superb craftsmanship.

“Hey, aren’t you William Grobet’s youngest son,” the burly blacksmith asked, coming up beside him.

Kevin was startled out of his reverie. The blacksmith made Kevin feel like a child, even though he had seen sixteen summers. He was not a child! The smith had a thick brow that shaded a face that looked as if it could forge steel. His brow was drawn up, meant to put the person under his glare at ease. It didn’t work very well.

“Why yes, I am. This is the finest blade I have ever seen.” Kevin confided.

The blacksmith let out a deep belly laugh.

“Would you like to own that knife son?”

“Would I ever, but I don’t have enough coinage for it.”

“Well, how about I give it to you and you come to work for me for two months. Then this town will have two blacksmiths. I help you, you help me sort of deal aye?”

“Well, the blacksmith trade has always fascinated me, really.” Kevin looked up into the blacksmith’s eyes in wonder. The smith smiled at him, as an adult smiles upon a child. In this, he supposed, he was. “My mother would let me, and I can finish my chores on the farm before noon most days.”

The smith looked down upon him. “It will not be easy labor, lad, but it will make you strong.”

“Oh, I am up for the task Mr. Blacksmith sir.”

“Now we’ll have none of that ‘sir’ stuff around here. You’ll call me Mr. Cashar. After the two months, you will learn the first part of it.”

Kevin jumped up and gave a shout of glee. He was running off to tell his mother the great news before Mr.

Cashar could tell him to act his age. He only realized a few moments later that Kevin was acting his age.

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The energetic boy came racing in the door, adding to the confusion while Francis Grobet prepared dinner. Francis had dark brown hair with eyes to match. She was wiry, but not thin; she was with child again. She appraised her son from the corner of her eye. Maybe boy was the wrong word; her son was growing into a fine young man. And to think, she had only seen twenty summers when he had come into her life. She remembered well that youthful vigor.

“Now calm down Kevin. What’s got you so worked up?”

“Mother...” His breath came in ragged pulls.

“Just sit down and let me get you some water.” He obediently pulled out a wooden chair and sat down at the table. His mother brought in a bucket of water, fresh from the well. Frequent earthquakes caused the ground to shift often, making some of the springs shift as well. The backyard was full of holes, testament to the intensity of some of the quakes. William, Kevin’s father, often had to move the well, digging more holes as he tried to find the stream again. Rain was infrequent enough to warrant this method. Francis dunked a cup into the bucket, gingerly handing it to Kevin. He gulped it down, some spilling down his chin to join the sweat that already plastered his shirt to his chest. Their home had been lovingly built by William; he had used sturdy oak, which the area had in abundance. He had to build onto it as his wife had more and more children; the fourth was on its way.

After Kevin had gotten his wind back, he began to tell her what had him so excited.

“Mother, the blacksmith, Mr. Cashar, told me that he would apprentice me!” It was impossible to miss the tone of longing his voice took on when he talked about one day being a smith. Now all she heard in his voice was a silent plea.

“I may be your mother, and the Gods know that I love you, but I don’t own you Kevin. I can’t run your life. I know how much you want this; your father won’t disagree with me. Not in this.” His chair toppled over backwards as he raced to embrace her. He loved his mother so much; he would make her proud. Make them all proud.

“You forgot to get the supplies didn’t you?” He groaned and apologized. She couldn’t blame him. Not really.

“It’s only mid-day. I’ll run back into town and get them before the day’s gone.” He promised. “And Mother,” She turned. “I’m still going to do my chores around the farm; nothing short of death would stop me from helping you.” He flashed her his boyish grin as he slipped out of the door. Not a boy at all.

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William and Philip Grobet were tending the livestock, an important and necessary part of farm work. Sheep were amiable enough, often bleating their satisfaction at one thing or another. Chickens, on the other hand, were upset more easily; the family was careful not to disturb the chickens with loud noises. William, while still a fairly young man, had a receding hairline. His hair was black, while his eyes were sea green. His son, Philip, shared his eye and hair color, while Kevin had things from both William and Francis. Their little girl, Mary, had her mother’s features and her father’s facial features. William was still in good shape despite the toll life on a farm took on one’s body. He was lucky that he was still able-bodied. Philip had only seen twenty summers, so he was fit to do most of the work. The farm would pass to his oldest son when he perished. Philip could do any job on the farm with careful precision; William could let the boy handle the work whenever he needed to rest. He walked over behind the barn, inspecting the condition of the oak. While he tap tap tapped on the wood, making sure it had not rotted away, Philip continued milking their cow, Bess. William carefully studied the bottom of the barn, checking for cracks or water damage. He noticed an odd thing next to the barn: a pair of forest green boots stood together near the edge. William walked around the side of the house. “Phil,” He called. “do you know where these boots came from?”

“What father?” Came Philip’s brief reply. William glanced back towards the edge of the house. The boots were gone.

“Nothing son, just thought that I saw something.” He must have been more tired than he had thought. After carefully surveying the area, he found boot prints leading towards the house; no one in the family wore boots.

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Mary Grobet played with her dolls, oblivious to what was happening in the outside world. Her daddy would tell her soon enough, she knew. Daddy liked to come in off the field and share stories with his two sons and his little girl. He had probably shared all of his tales with Philip since they had started working together two years back. Mary had only seen eight summers, so she only gathered eggs from the ‘chicken house’

occasionally. She tried to play games with the birds, but they didn't seem to appreciate her meddling. Nor did anyone else. So she rarely disturbed the chickens. Mary smiled. It was fun though. Her two dolls, Ann and Marie, were discussing 'adult matters'; she often found it fun to make her dolls play grown-up. Little did she know that the chance to live out grown-up, and not just play it, would never come her way. The hunter had just found some prey. The blood curling sound of the precious eight-year-old girl's screams was abruptly cut off by a gurgling sound. The Hunter feasted upon human flesh.

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Kevin merrily skipped his way down the worn dirt path, blissfully ignorant of what was happening within his home. He was still excited over his mother treating him like a man; he would have to live up to her expectations. As he trod along, whistling a cheery tune that he had heard in a pub one time. He blushed at remembering the words to that tune. He stopped dead in his tracks; the most beautiful and graceful creature ever to walk to the face of the earth stood before him. Her black locks ran down her back, reminding him of nothing so much as waves. Intelligent, blue eyes peeked up at him. She was quite a remarkable girl. She smiled at him, that special smile that it seemed she only gave him. Maybe she did. He quickly closed his mouth, lest he start drooling on himself.

"Hello Elizabeth. How are you this fine day?" Still she smiled.

"How are you, Kevin?"

"I couldn't be better. I've just been accepted as a blacksmith's apprentice to Mr. Cashar, your father."

"That's great, Kevin. Daddy already told me of it; I'm so happy that you're going to be closer now."

"Those were my thoughts as well; having you near is even more important than living out my dream. I would try to give you the world; you have but to ask." She laughed, drawing him into her mirth. They were quickly laughing about something that they had already put from their minds; they were really joyfully celebrating their love for one another. And now they could be close, almost under the same roof. They both smiled at the thought. Kevin stopped laughing, pushing her back to arm's length. "You didn't happen to 'persuade' your father into apprenticing me, did you?"

"And what if I did?" She smiled mischievously at him.

He pulled her into a kiss; a deep, passionate release that teemed with emotion. They surfaced for air. That kiss told her more than words ever could have. He had already forgotten about his errand; she could make

him forget about anything. Hand-in-hand, they quickly made to the blacksmith shop. She pulled him into her room, where they could be alone. At the moment, everything was right with the world. Kevin Grobet's world was about to change forever. In a terrible way.

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Francis Grobet's scream came when her little girl's had ended. That scream could have awoken the underworld, so terrifying was its sound. A wooden spoon slipped from her nerveless fingers, already forgotten. She raced down the adjacent hall, her heart in her throat. Maybe Mary had just been screaming, as little girls sometimes do. That was all it was. She didn't believe a word of it; that cry had had been real horror, and it had cut off far too soon. Reaching her baby's door, Francis quickly looked around, surveying the small room. A pair of forest green boots stood in a corner. The horrifying sight around those boots froze her heart. A shriveled, wasted corpse lay on its side, clutching two dolls to its breast. Blood stained the wooden floor around it. Now that she looked closer, hoping, fearing, she could see chunks of flesh missing from places on the corpse. Then she let out a scream so mournful that a wolf would have turned tail and run from it. Someone had murdered her baby. She buried her head in her hand, unable to stop weeping. Raising her head once again, she raced over and cradled her little girl in her arms. She didn't notice, but the boots were gone. Bloody boot prints made a trail down the hallway.

#### **Chapter 4: Prey for the Hunter**

The ghastly cries of the woman reverberated throughout the small room. She still knelt upon the floor, the wasted corpse of her little girl held to a shoulder. She rocked back and forth, clutching her dead child and moaning in an inhuman voice. As she moaned and wailed, the hunter watched. The sadistic elf knew that the woman would have to be silenced soon. But the sight of such terror and pain was exquisitely sublime to the hunter. The forest green boots stood four feet behind Francis Grobet. She was oblivious to anything except her suffering. It was rapture. It was unfortunate that the elf didn't need any more blood to survive on; the child's blood had been enough to sate the voracious hunger of magic. Magical creatures, such as the hunter, always had something that they couldn't survive without. For some, it was simply food and water; others required extremely intricate things, such as a specific blood type, or even a certain plant, rock, or gem. The hunter required quite a few things; a magical creature infused with evil attributes within the borders of Ackmire always did. Some of the creatures had been people once-elvin, human, dwarven. A lot of them had probably even been good people. But the vile magic of the Ackmirien King so twisted that person that they weren't even recognizable as anything but beasts afterwards. For some, they had a specific task. Once that task was completed, the creature sometimes died, or even reverted back into the being they had once been. The random insanity of the King of Ackmire knew no bounds. He had infused the hunter

with the sole purpose of tracking down the hunted. The hunter bore no name for the hunted, but the hunter remembered him from the past. The elf knew that the hunted must die. The hunter would not feast upon elvin flesh though. Only human flesh and blood was required to continue living. The hunter was no animal, after all, but a proud elf who loathed all humans and all things human. Elves were superior to every other race; why should elves not feast upon their inferiors? They were just animals after all. It was their right by birth! The hunter closed the distance between the woman in three steps, sky blue eyes fixed upon the prey. Madness danced in those eyes; the insanity of magic.

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William Grobet broke into a dead run, his son Philip not far behind. That was when he heard the blood curdling cry of terror. It sounded like his little girl, Mary. It was abruptly cut off, but there was no mistaking what the cry had been: a death cry. He ran faster than he had ever run before, icy dread fueling his adrenaline. A second cry, not long after the first, but more mature, made his blood run cold. He had never heard such a sound from Francis, had not known that she could ever be so terrified. He had never been this scared before either. Or this angry. William was a very passive man; he never engaged in the drunken brawls on his occasional visits to the local taverns. He had always thought words were more effective anyhow. For him, they always were. But you couldn't reason with death, nor did he intend to. The anger crushed the fear, consuming him with the need for vengeance. There was room for no other emotion beside hate. Hate was all-consuming, slapping reason in the face. William Grobet gave himself into it; he gave into hate.

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Philip Grobet raced behind his father, fear gnawing at him, eating through his insides. An axe was clenched in his fist. His fist had gone white from clenching the axe too tightly. Philip clenched it all the tighter, racing to catch up with his father. His baby sister, only eight-years-old, had probably just died. There was no way around the fact; he didn't try to hide from the truth. The only thing left to do was to right the wrong that the parents of the murderer had done: giving birth to their child. He would soon correct that mistake. It was then, that he heard a piercing cry cut through the silence of the night. It was his mother.

“Mother!” Philip cried, tears streaming out behind him as he picked up speed. His father went down in front of him; he looked to have tripped over a pair of forest green boots. Philip pulled up short, sensing that all was not right. His father lay still; still as death. The air above the boots shimmered briefly as a knife flew through the air. It embedded itself in Philip's chest. Two more followed the first, embedding themselves in his throat and forehead. The air shimmered above the boot; he saw hair the color of the moon when night is at its darkest hour. He quite suddenly, and unexpectedly, tumbled over into the grass; his

limbs wouldn't move the way his brain told them to. He was cold and he couldn't draw breath. What was wrong with him? And then he remembered. He was dead. The world was obscured by a mask of crimson.

## **Chapter 5: A Sleepless Night**

He stood across from her, contemplating the idea of freedom for a moment. The thirty-year-old Lumbule-still a child because of his half-elvin blood-knew that the man tossed aside the idea of freedom. He probably thought people doing what they wanted to do, free to revel in anarchy, was an insane concept. He didn't understand the true meaning of freedom-to be able to work towards any future. No dream was too far away in a free-man's mind. Recognizing that the possibility is there, a free-man can do anything he wants. Not that attaining a dream is easy-free-man or not. Nothing is ever easy but "if you fail, try, try again." The man didn't see the value of freedom. He liked the monarchy/communist government.

It granted control.

"Freedom is nothing but a fool's notion." He uttered contemptuously. "A government must maintain control of the people, lest they do things that don't need doing. If we have fifty people who want to become cartographers, we can't have all of those people wasted on making maps! We leave ten of them alone, chosen randomly-for fairness' sake. The other forty we distribute to the jobs that are needed. It's the only system that will work flawlessly. Without laws, there can be no government. Those who secretly practice a trade different from that which we tell them is theirs- we kill."

"You and your silly government disgust me!" The proud elvin woman shouted at him.

He gave her a smile of indulgence; a parent teaching a child the ways of the world. She raised an eyebrow in mock acceptance.

"So these 'sheep' need guidance?" He nodded. "And the government can guide these 'sheep' into helping one another?" He smiled at her understanding of such a complex idea. "So in essence, these lowly peasants are doing the God's work?" She gave him a questioning frown. He stroked his hairless chin, contemplating her acceptance.

He already knew the answer to her question.

"You see, my dear," She didn't make any comment, content to listen to his deranged reasoning.

“Our society flourishes because the Gods themselves help! Magic is the strongest its ever been, allowing persons with magical talents to be demi-Gods. To abuse that power is wrong; the government has the only authority to fuse magical properties into a subject. And only willing accomplices to the government’s greatness would do so. We are not inhumane, as you may think; we only take volunteers and help them better serve. As to your question, our priests teach-as I’m sure you know-that the Gods help only the good and smite down the wicked. Tell me, my wife, why have they not hurled a catastrophe down upon our empire?”

She glared at him, smiling at the same time. He didn’t notice her glare; or he chose to ignore it. She answered his question.

“Because we are good; the Gods won’t level our empire because of a wicked few. And they wouldn’t strike down an evil empire because of the good people.”

“But that is where we come in.” He explained. “The Gods may not want to strike out at evil, but we do. We find these evil ones and annihilate them. Even tiny villages are not purged of evil until we put them to the torch. We find many witches this way; only witches scream in agony when the flames consume them. It betrays their wickedness. We have purged the world of hundreds of thousands demon spawn. In some village, even the children are put to the torch. Evil knows no bounds.” He turned towards the pillar behind him, the back of his hand caressing the smooth marble. “The palace is swathed in this color-the colors of blood-to remind us that all are susceptible to evil’s clutches. No one is immune. Often, those possessed people give no indication that they are in his clutches. That is when we put them to the inquisition. They usually confess to their vile crimes while under the scrutiny of the inquisitors of justice. Even children are known to confess; one child confessed to causing a new life to be still-born. Ghastly creatures, demon-children. Only children are truly innocent, so demons often choose to possess them. After confessing to their vile crimes, the person is then burned at the stake. That is the only way to purge the soul of an evil spirit; their piercing cries mean that the demon is being expunged. Unfortunately, the body usually doesn’t survive. But at least their spirit can go into the underworld cleansed of evil.”

He turned back to her as a sob escaped her lips. Tears streamed down her face, dripping off of her ovoid chin. He gave her a puzzled look, seeming truly perplexed.

“Whatever is the matter dear?”

She spoke between sobs. “Do you not find anything wrong with torturing children and then burning them to death?” He gave her a sympathetic glance.

“I do, but that is the only way to tell...” He looked uncertain, as if trying to explain sunlight to a blind person.

“The inquisitors of justice merely question the children; it is the adults that they torture. Adults are harder to deal with. One with a pure heart would gladly accept the pain. To prove their innocence. Some are actually innocent. Those who confess must be guilty; why would they confess if they were not?” Her golden eyes flashed, as did the blade of the dagger she held in her left fist. He looked confused for a moment.

That was when she lunged.

Time seemed to slow down as she dived towards him. Crickets chirped, insects buzzed. The night was alive with activity. It was after midnight. The world plunged back into focus, it seemed, as she dived past him, a slight flick of her wrist blinding him in his right eye. She went into a roll, coming back to her feet.

He was standing before her. She gave a surprised gasp. “How...” She began.

“Simply magic, my dear.” His right eye was whole, unblemished. Her dagger clattered to the gilded rug with a muffled clang. “You forget. I am a sorcerer of some talent. I simply backed away when I saw the glint of steel; I left an afterimage of myself in my place. Quite effective, I must say, but it only lasts a few seconds. Good thing you didn’t hesitate.” She numbly stared at him. “Since you want your freedom so much, I’ll give it to you.” Her eye betrayed her suspicion. And hope.

“But I’ll be keeping the boy.” With that sentence, he dashed her hopes on the rocks. “As for your freedom... you will find it in the underworld! Die bitch!”

He held his palm out from his body, fingers spread. He pointed his hand in her direction.

“Nooo! Alka, run!!”

A thin blade of black energy scythed towards the elvin woman; she held up her hands, trying to keep the black energy at bay. The thin blade of energy traveled on, unhindered by the Elvin flesh. It cut most of her fingers off and then cut her in two. Her legs thumped down upon the rug, her torso landing face down. She moved her head to the side, looking towards the terrace’s only entrance—a stone door.

And then, she died.

Golden, almond-shaped eyes, startlingly like those fixed in death beneath the balcony, glistened with tears for the life that had been quenched. The one those eyes belonged to was a combination of the human's dark features and the deceased elvin woman's light features. Jet-black hair tumbled loosely down the boy's back, stopping at his shoulder blades. His dark brow, raised in frightened sadness, was in stark contrast with his golden orbs. As long as he lived, people would notice and remember him not for his deeds, but for his strange appearance. None of that mattered at the moment to the young half-breed; only one word could convey his anguish at the scene he look upon.

“Mother...”

## **Chapter 6: Abandoned**

As Lumbule traveled down the worn game trail, he pondered. About everything. About nothing. As Lumbule thought, the sun made its inexorable way across the sky. It was about mid-day; Lum had traveled well over a day, not even stopping the previous night to sleep. The dreams hunted him. They hounded his every step, haunted his every waking moment. When he closed his eyes, it got much worse. He saw his mother's golden eyes, devoid the spark of life, staring at him. Accusing him. Despite that he knew she wouldn't have blamed him for her death; it was his father that the blame solely lay upon. And he knew that his father's heart still beat, even though it had been nearly three hundred years since his father had murdered his mother. Her last words had for him, telling him to run. His elvin name was Alka, meaning 'light' in the common tongue; she had lived for him. He had been just a child, scared and not knowing what to do or where to go.

His father had found him near the door, bawling his head off. He had given Lumbule a hug of sympathy, of understanding. His father raised him with an iron fist, never showing anything but the smile of the beast within; the teeth of the beast came later. Father was strict with him, but was never physically abuse to his boy. Only mentally. He liked to degrade Lum, trying to make Lum see the value of his words. But Lumbule was too much like his mother. His father even went so far as to rename him Engli.

“An engli is a fallen angel.” he used to explain to Lum. “They are neither holy nor evil, they just are. They watch everything through the eyes of a human. They cannot kill, unless in self defense, but they can direct others to do their bidding. You will never be able to act, to kill, or to protect. You can only defend yourself... or kill yourself. Most who have engli blood running through their veins curse their ancient ancestor, Sebastian the fallen angel. Unfortunately for us, he reproduced. You and I, son, are the last vestige of his power. His curse. That was why I didn't kill your mother before. I had to provoke her into attacking me. But I didn't lie to her. The curse of the engli also allows someone to live as long as a full-

blooded elf. I have centuries of vibrant life to look forward to! I am already the oldest human even to walk the planet, at two hundred and eighty-three years of age. You don't get to have half of an elf's life, but a full one. But never get close to someone, for you will not be able to protect them. Except with your blood. This is the first time in history that elvin and engli blood has mixed. You are an unprecedented creation m' boy. Now an engli sees through human and elvin eyes. Interesting, very interesting."

Lumbule hadn't believed his father and told him so. He had gotten a backhand slap in reply. Those hits were not in self defense, but blatant arrogance. His father told him his secret though.

"I simply convince myself that I'm being attacked, and my magic allows me to breach that weakness in this shield woven by the Gods. Too bad that you don't have magic; you will suffer through your life. The breach in the shield still won't allow me to kill, but I can usually slap the ignorance out of most people." The dark-haired man looked towards the majestic mountains rising towards the blue sky behind him. "Your mother was too ignorant for her own good. She was a dangerous woman, filling your head full of silly notions. Such as freedom. Hopefully I can correct that."

And try to correct Lumbule's ideas he did. But even at that age, Lum understood the ideas of right and wrong. And the idea of freedom; to hold a person or a people in bondage by tyranny was not right. He wanted to be free, to be truly free

Lumbule was startled out of his past memories by a bump on the worn road. Now that he looked around, he realized that he had converged from the forest path onto the main road without realizing it. Lumbule looked around, searching the sky. The sun was on his right, which meant that that way was west. He quickly knelt down and pressed his left hand upon the earth, palm first.

"Talk to me taure, tell me your tales." Lumbule incanted, gently stroking the worn earthen patch. A slight rumble was the only indication of the earth doing anything. Lumbule's head came up, his body lithely following suit. He was headed in the right direction, but he was traveling slightly west, which meant that he would have to veer onto a road that headed northeast a piece before heading due north. He continued down the road, those horrible memories dogging his steps. The sun sat in the middle of the sky, beating its heat down upon those who braved its glare. Tall, slender pine trees grew along the sides of the road; some of the boughs leaned out over the road, shelter for the weary traveler from the sun's angry glare. Lum briefly stopped to rest beneath one of the limbs, finally hidden from the sun's toxic rays. The rough tree bark felt good against his tired muscles; at least the tree gave him support. He had been walking without rest for a day and a half now. He carefully slid into a sitting position, mindful of his useless right arm. Three centuries ago, in the most fateful battle of the Valor war, the twisted magic of Ackmire had been cast upon him. The wizards on the Freeland's side had not been able to do anything to cure the wicked

sorcery, but they had been able to stop it. If the magic had spread any farther, he would have been theoretically dead. The magic would have eaten away all of his muscle tissue until even blinking would have been beyond him.

Lum had stopped not only because he was tired, but also because the pain traveling up and down his arm would have eventually put him on his knees. His arm was fiery torment, exquisite agony, endless suffering. And yet, he could not bring himself to amputate it, or to get another person to cut it off. Learning mastery of the blade had not been easy. He had done that only with his right arm. After losing control of that same arm, he had had to re-learn the art-with his left arm. The agony was preferable, though, to his arm acting of its own accord. His right arm was still in the vile clutches of the same sorcerer that had maimed it. Sometimes, of its own volition, his right arm would snake its way up a tavern wench's thigh, or rest itself on a bosom. He had no feeling in the arm, so often he was drunk and out of sorts when it happened. Some women actually enjoyed the 'admiration', but more often than not, he received a slap in reply. Sometimes it even earned him favors of the sexual kind. Such was the way of things. He often thought that the mind of the sorcerer was lewd, seemingly making his right arm do things at random.

The Valor war seemed like it had been just a bad dream, but he had the scars-both mental and physical-to prove that it had been all too real. Lumbule pulled out a worn piece of parchment, nearly three hundred years old. Scrawled upon it, in a cursive hand, was a poem. A poem of the last battle during the Valor war.

The old parchment read:

I wear this stain upon my breast  
Laid, is this burden upon my chest  
Stained, is this existence, full of blood  
The heart beats  
I cannot sleep  
Crimson fills my vision  
My heart aches, but I must take  
Arms up once again  
Crimson fills my vision  
My heart breaks, but still I take  
Arms up once again  
Freedom is the word I spake  
When Crimson claimed us all

Lumbule rested his left hand on the corresponding knee, contemplating that heinous battle. A great friend of his, a human, had written that poem. Right before the horde had descended upon them. The army of darkness had stretched from horizon to horizon, its end not in sight. Goblins, orcs, ogres, and giant-kin had bore down upon them, sweeping away nearly all who had opposed them. That night they had lost fifty thousand men. That had only been the beginning; nearly one hundred and fifty thousand men had been injured that night as well. Their army had nearly been sliced in half, plunging from five hundred thousand to three hundred thousand able-bodied men in a single day and night! The battle raged for two weeks, until the enemy was reduced to molder. The Freeman had survived with a scant fifty thousand men. A lot of

those fifty thousand were injured, some unable to ever walk again. Many more died after the battle was won. But it had been won. At a horrific cost to life. Michael Stronum had given Lum the poem as a parting gift. A parting from the mortal world.

Lumbule slowly made his way to his feet, the pain still lingering in his arm, but numbed for the moment. Golden eyes glistening with tears, he slowly made his way towards Jingen. And towards freedom.

\* \* \* \* \*

The little farm house lay on the outskirts of the small town of Dregar; Lumbule had come upon this house many times before. The setting sun made a breath-taking panorama behind the tiny brown house, cloaking the front of it in shadows. As Lumbule was about to pass by the house, as he had many times before, he noticed a peculiar odor surrounding the little domicile: death lurked about the house, a silent predator, ever vigilant. The half-elf inhaled the air, catching the scent of death all about the brown dwelling. Lum slowly and carefully unsheathed the jeweled dagger strapped to his back. Looking down, he saw bloody boot prints making a trail towards the house. Slowly following the prints, careful not to disturb them, he made his way inside the house. The house was awash in a mask of crimson; blood stained every possible nook and cranny. Lum had never seen carnage on such a level before; various human organs and body parts left no doubt as to what had done this: only creature of Ackmire was capable of such horror single-handedly. Lum saw the same boot prints everywhere, a bloody trail winding through the house. Blood dripped from the ceiling, splattering his golden locks with gore. He found the first victim in what appeared to be the kitchen. It looked to have been female, evident by her exposed chest. It looked as if the beast had ripped out her heart, probably devouring it. The trail continued on down the hall; Lum quickly followed. The hallway was compact, only about 10 feet long and 5 feet across. What he saw in the next room nearly stopped his heart. A tiny, wasted corpse lay sprawled in a corner of the room, a testament to the evil of the creature. Through the elf's nature sense, Lum had the special gift to feel auras-the life force of living things. The aura that the creature exuded reeked of perversity. This thing wasn't even who it used to be; it had been totally consumed by the magic, but the creatures of Ackmire always kept their appearance. If anyone had known the unfortunate person that had been twisted, they would still look the same, except for that magical hunger that lingered in their eyes. He could feel the family that had been lost here, going about their daily rituals, never guessing that it would be their last day in the world of the living. Lumbule sifted around in the gummy fluid, searching for clues. He found two dolls lying near the child-at least he assumed it had been a child-and carefully picked one up. The instant he touched it, he felt the child's pain and anguish as she was being devoured. He dropped the doll, as if it had burned him. He was starting to get queasy, so he made his way back down the hall, and through the front door. He was greeted with bared steel.

