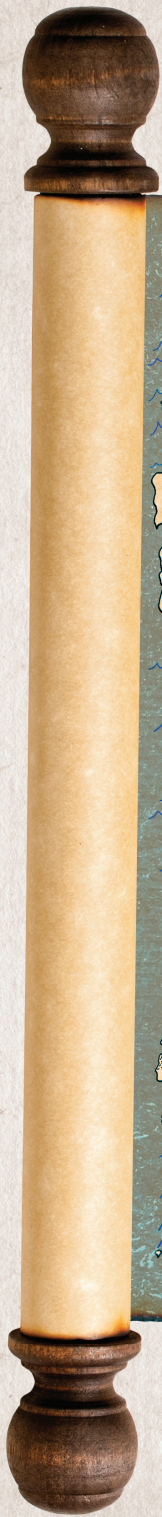


FAR  
FOREST  
SCROLLS  
Rise Above  
the Storm





## Pantheri Knights and Squires Citabel



**Pihari**

**Šcelfo**

**Bellae**

**Luhtar**

**Jumearux**

**Surea**

**Gmelli**

**Zontas**

**Louhaj**

*After battling there, the Tournament of Flags held no comfort. The Knights and their allies are targeted as traitors. The Dragon Battle turned disastrous as Finn fell to one of the fiercest dragons in all of Verrgaard. An early blocking spell shielded the dragon, prolonging the battle and ultimately leading to the death of the beloved Knight. Bellae met Eaglian Arend and Elf Kainen, who warned her of an impending disaster and the upcoming, enigmatic quest. As the Tournament of Flags was set to restart, revitalized with new, but flawed, hope, a group of beleaguered Proliate and Magicians blast into the arena.*

# FAR FOREST SCROLLS

Rise Above  
the Storm

BOOK THREE

Too often we allow the cursory moments of our lives to melt into the tedium of habits and banal activities of day-to-day living. Outwardly, we refuse to admit how loath we are of the challenge of change. Instead, we prefer to live within the treacherously thin, fraudulent bubble of the status-quo. The world has the unwelcome, unauthorized habit of dishing out challenges—some insignificant, others abominable, life and death that require us to fight, or be washed away in the gelid, pitiless sands of eternity.

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Scrolls from 1000 C.Є.  
discovered during an archeological dig  
in the Far Forest region of England,  
the soul of this ancient fantasy tale  
is reborn in your mind's eye.

Author: AAAA (Alpha Four) ~~~~~ Illustrations: AAAA & Paganus  
Scroll translation to English: Radek Novotny PhD ~~~~~ Image Restoration: Altier Restoration



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*Our excursion through Book Two withers as we tumble upon the stormy fields of Book Three. Uruz denotes strength, courage, and primal power, symbolizing the complexities of the territorial war threatening to tear Verngaurd apart. This woodcarving was on the third wooden chest in the Far Forest of England. For Verngaurd, and those encountered in the first two books, Rune Uruz unleashes the brutally raw and untamed struggle coiled to encase the globe within the ferocious power of a world at war.*

Whether living in disdain or ignorance of its existence, those of us encumbered with consciousness are snared in a web of interconnectedness, an intertwined lacework as fragile as dew but as monumental as the air we breathe. A thousand acts of kindness evaporate under the gust of a single wound or wafting cruel word. The humanity that supposedly defines us is afflicted with the same delicate, easily evaporated, temperament.

As individuals and as a society, we constantly, and precariously, balance primal power with intellectual integrity. We all live within our own experiences, and too often our interconnectedness is severed and our diaphanous compassion obliterated by the constraining primal forces of greed, hate, mistrust, and jealousy, which tip the scales of civilization into base and savage violence.

The world is saturated with enough of everything but contentment.



*Carved under the lid, Uruz Reversed symbolizes the monumental missed opportunity Verngaurd had to avert disaster and come together. This failure upsets the precariously balanced equilibrium of primal power and intellect/reason.*

*{Aside: The rune carvings found in the chests from Far Forest are the Elder Futhark (the oldest runic script). The Elder Futhark is divided into three Aettir/families consisting of eight runes. Each Aett of eight runes is named for a god associated with the first rune. Jera (Book One) and Hagalaz (Book Two) are from the second Aett known as Hagal's (or sometimes Heimdall since little is known of the Norse god of weather-Hagal). Uruz is from the first, or Freyr's, Aett.}*



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*A sincere welcome back to the world of the Far Forest Scrolls. Return to its embrace, increasing (we humbly hope) your Wisdom of how to Live.*



Peractio

## End of Book Two

The door to the holding chamber under the coliseum opened the next morning. “Knights and squires, this way,” a Proliator guard commanded.

“All of us?” Arquero asked.

“Everyone follow me,” Friar said, grinning broadly.

As they left the darkness of the holding area, the crowd erupted in applause. Curious, but unsure of what was going on, the Knights and squires followed Friar towards Veneficus levitating in the center of the arena.

Raising his hands for silence, Veneficus began, “Over this Tournament we have grown closer, learning to stop focusing on differences and to celebrate what we have in common. The Knights agreeing to finish the Tournament despite the devastating loss of one of their own symbolizes the courage and resolve of the inhabitants of Verngaurd.

“We have to, and we will, come together to defeat any and all enemies!” he said to a deafening roar of approval. “Let us turn the tragic death of this Knight into something constructive, something healing, a harmony across our lands.

“There is one last task I must attend to before we open the final day of the Tournament,” he said, drifting down to earth.

Black flags and shields magically appeared where each country’s own colors had just been as the arena floor became inundated with competitors from all of Verngaurd.

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“Welcome, warriors of Verngaurd! We stand together, united in our spirit and resolve!” Veneficus said, smiling. “I would like to bring back an ancient tradition of the Knights one last time. When a Knight died, a charmed pin called a kalma-kunnia was given to the oldest child. Sired deep in the forges of the Northern Dwarves of magic metal supplied by Magicians, it was indestructible.

“When anyone in Verngaurd saw the kalma-kunnia, great honor was bestowed upon the wearer. Their parent was a hero who gave their life for our future. Such a gift has not been given in over a century. But today, that changes,” he said as the bandaged Ritari and Sorea parted to open a path. Tears blurred Bellae’s vision as Veneficus approached.

“Desino avta,” he said, his voice no longer amplified.

He knelt to be eye to eye with her. “As his Inion it is fitting that this gift goes to you.”

He pinned the award on her cloak, and the two embraced warmly as the stadium erupted into cheers.

Veneficus released her and chanted something inaudible, immediately flying upwards. “If you are not too tired of applauding, let the third and final day begin!” he said, his voice amplified again.

A great cheer erupted as the Knights circled Bellae to congratulate her. She pulled up her cloak to get a better view of the mysterious silver medallion with a yellowish glow. It consisted of two rhomboid shapes with the one on top slightly askew, making it look like a small box with the lid open.

Bellae felt dizzy at the constant stream of hands, congratulations, and faces of warriors from the different nations passing before her. After what seemed like hours, the crowd began to thin.

*Her Knight dies, and she gets all this attention?* Jumeaux huffed enviously.

“Let’s begin! Competitors in the distance run assemble!” Veneficus said, still levitating above the arena. All the shields and flags turned back into their nations’ standard colors.

*BOOM!* A loud crash from the northern part of the arena rocked the stadium. Magicians had blown apart the northern gate, which now lay in splinters. Several bloodied Proliate Red Guard and a few Magicians

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stumbled into the arena. As they moved closer, it became apparent they were carrying numerous injured people. Blood was so ubiquitous in the ghastly scene that it was hard to tell whether the blood was theirs or from those they carried.

“STOP! Listen to us!” one of them yelled fiercely. He coughed, sending an eruption of blood from his mouth. Shaking his head, he added, “Everyone stop!”



*Figure 52: All previous goodwill quickly evaporates as battered Magicians and bloodied Proliate warriors stream into the arena, carrying countless dead and assisting numerous wounded civilians.*

The untamed power of Uruz erupts as we commence Book Three. For Verngaurd it symbolizes the birth of the face of our fragility: pride, our frail fondness to fall for the camaraderie with “our” group, and treacherous ego as the forces of primal power snake their way around reason, choking out compassion and embroiling the world in a storm of discontent.



## Chapter One

# Wake for Those Asleep

### Scroll I: Joy, Not So Long Lasting

**T**he first three Proliate through the north gate of the coliseum carried lifeless bodies of children. Screams filled the arena as the warriors parted to allow them to pass. The first Proliator held a frail boy, his dead body draped limply over the warrior's powerful arms. His mouth gaped open, caught in an eternal, silent scream. Each step towards Veneficus caused the boy's dangling arm to swing in torpid, powerless arcs. He wore pale blue clothes, covered by a yellow cloak, designating him a Piscinian. The thin, almost wasted, boy had disheveled brown hair and a dark, gaunt complexion.

"It's Sumar!" Bellae screamed, the first to recognize his deceased body. She ran a few steps towards him before stopping at the sight of the scores of arrows piercing his body. Stiff, crusting black highlighted the deadly punctures in outline, while molten red tracked away.

To the left another warrior carried a dead Piscinian boy with a pair of nunchaku wrapped uncivilly around his neck. Dull, gray eyes bulged in frozen horror. His extruded and swollen blue tongue slapped limply against his cheek.

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There was an old man wearing the simple tan colors of Ager being carried to the right of Sumar. His fragile old skin was littered with multiple bruises. Blood oozed in gruesome black and red streaks from his eyes, nose, and mouth. They carefully laid the victims down at the feet of Veneficus. Behind them, dozens more followed. Their much-abused armor displayed the brutality of the fight through myriad scrapes and battered dents, with generous dashes of blood as accents.

“The encampment to the north has been ransacked,” a Proliate officer declared in a fatigued voice.

“What?” Veneficus asked, astounded.

A shaky female voice cried out from behind the Red Guard. “They killed all the children and most of the elderly. They killed him!” The woman sobbed, bursting between several of the Proliate. “This was my babe!” she wailed.

The last sound merged into a howl of pain. Stopping, she fell to her knees near the boy with the nunchaku wrapped around his neck. She moved her hands around the boy’s face, careful to always keep them a fraction of an inch away, as if an invisible barrier of horror surrounded him.

“You did this! Kill that Elf! You bloody pointy-eared...” the woman shrieked as she suddenly rose and bolted towards Kempe. The large Elf from Creber stared in dumbfounded silence. He remained motionless as the woman began beating on his leather chest protector. Several Proliate restrained her, and she finally collapsed in a heap of misery. A shocked silence settled on the crowd. Ritari glanced at Friar, who returned a wide-eyed look of utter confusion and dread.

*It’s happening, Friar thought. This is where Verngaurd fractures.*

Veneficus moved to examine the bodies. “These weapons and arrows are definitely those of the Elves of Creber,” he said, looking suspiciously at Kempe.

“We had nothing to do with this,” Kempe replied helplessly. Panic and fear etched on his rough, dark brown skin. He looked to Friar and Ritari for some help, but both were too stunned to say anything.

“What happened? What did you see?” Veneficus asked anxiously.

“Those tree bark monsters killed my boy,” the sobbing woman

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muttered. A man, presumably her husband, fruitlessly attempted to comfort her.

“We were stationed to the north of the encampment,” one of the Proliate began, “where the people of Piscium and Ager had congregated. Early this morning, a band of Elves from Creber and Northern Dwarves descended upon them out of nowhere.”

Angry murmurs buzzed through the coliseum.

“We were called in, but by the time we got there, they had taken almost everything of value and killed all the children and elderly.”

A gasp of horror went up, quickly followed by angry yelling.

“Silence!” Veneficus yelled. “We will hear the entire account.”

“When we arrived, only a few dozen attackers were still around. Initially, they fought fiercely, but we quickly put them to flight, injuring most of them.”

“They were definitely Elves of Creber and Northern Dwarves?” Veneficus questioned.

“They were trying to kill us, which makes them kind of hard to miss. I did not specifically see Kempe,” the guard answered. “But the survivors described him well enough. He’s bigger than most Elves, and you saw the response of the poor mother.”

Kempe scoffed, anger overtaking him. “I don’t kill innocent people or children. Plus, no Elf of Creber was within a mile of that encampment.”

“Liar! How do you explain your weapons and arrows?” someone asked.

“They must have been stolen,” Kempe answered.

“How did your nunchaku end up on my dead child?” the father asked, his eyes red with tears and swollen with anger. “I *saw* you!”

Kempe reached to his side where his nunchaku normally sat, and his head swiveled in panic, searching for them. “I had them last night...” he stammered.

“Revenge! Kill them!” a voice rang out.

“NO!” thundered Veneficus, levitating again.

“Listen,” Kempe pleaded. “We would never do this—the forest provides all that we need. Plus, it makes no sense. We would never just kill the elderly and children, leaving witnesses to easily identify us later.”



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The crowd burst into angry comments that blurred together.

“That didn’t come out right,” Ritari whispered.

“You think?” Friar said, his anxiety rising.

“So you’re saying you wished you had killed us all?” a villager yelled, further inciting the crowd.

“Justice!” a man from Piscium yelled to the rousing agreement of the crowd. “We know you have been aiding the Dark Warriors, but this? Arboreal miscreants!”

“Wait!” a woman’s voice rang out. “I saw the last of the fighting,” she said, moving near the dead boy.

“Gleoi Dea!” Bellae whispered excitedly as the Knight continued. “I saw the way those Elves and Dwarves were moving, and it was unnatural. I can tell you, they were not *real* Elves or Dwarves, only made to look like them, by dark magic.”

“A likely story, coming from an Elf!” someone shouted.

“I’m a Knight!” she said sharply.

“Those pointy ears tell me you’re an Elf, sure enough,” a grubby little old man said through a toothless grin. A round of laughter went around the arena as his eyebrows rose in appreciation of the attention. He held his crooked fingers out and waved like a king on parade.

“Kill them! Kill all the Elves and Northern Dwarves!” someone yelled.

“Wait!” King Abernan of the Northern Dwarves yelled. “We had nothing to do with this. Those are weapons of the Elves.”

Kempe and Friar looked at him aghast for selling out the Elves.

“It is true enough,” Abernan said defensively, their stares boring into him.

“We must stick together and keep our heads. There must be a rational explanation,” Friar stated.

“Yeah, the explanation is they did it and need to pay,” the twisted old man wheezed. He beamed as a fresh round of laughter and murmurs of agreement greeted his comment.

“Gleoi Dea is right. We are being manipulated,” Friar yelled, but few heard him over the angry din.

A loud clanging noise distracted them as a bloody Draak sword

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rattled to the ground. “This was found near one of the dead,” a Proliate guard said somberly.

King Abernan was genuinely confused. “We...had nothing to do with this.”

“Yeah, we heard your story. No one believes you, nonhuman scum!” an angry voice howled.

“That sword looks real enough to me,” said another.

“It’s coated in real blood—the blood of *our* children!”

“Remember we Western Elves had nothing to do with this,” Bondi, the ruler of Western Elves said. Herra Isanta, their sleek warrior, stood next to him.

A murmur, half approving, half disapproving, went up through the crowd.

“It’s true!” one of the bloodied Proliate yelled. “They had nothing to do with it.”

“Please, think about what we are allowing to happen,” Friar pleaded. “We are back to infighting, tearing ourselves apart!”

A man from the crowd limped forward. “First, the Dark Warriors ravage our lands while you Knights do nothing. Now, your closest allies are going on racial killing binges, and what do you do? Nothing! You have no authority in these lands anymore. Hail to the Magicians and Proliate, our true defenders!”

Shouts of infamy and hatred filled the arena. The adrenaline-filled admiration and hope for unity that had prevailed during the ceremony for the Knights were obliterated under the violent, herd-mentality loathing.

Veneficus’ eyes locked with Friar’s. All previous optimism was replaced by sadness and shock.

When Veneficus said nothing, Friar shouted, “This makes no sense!”

The crowd murmured angrily, as one shouted, “Of course, killing innocent children and defenseless elderly makes no sense!”

“I mean it’s a set-up. You heard Gleoi Dea—the White Wizard is using dark magic to drive us apart.”

Angry yelling bellowed forth.

“Why would the Elves of Creber and Northern Dwarves attack on the last morning of competition?” Friar asked.

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Several shouts answered. “They are dimwitted nonhumans who know no better.”

“They couldn’t wait!”

“I don’t think this is helping,” Ritari whispered to Friar.

The Knights, Elves of Creber, and Northern Dwarves gravitated together in the center of the arena. The rest of Verngaurd congealed around them.

“This is starting to feel claustrophobic,” Luchar growled.

“Enough!” shrieked Veneficus, his eyes filled with rage and uncertainty.

He levitated higher over the crowd as the shields and flags around the arena once again shifted to black for mourning. “I would like everyone to return to their barracks at the Zenia. I am canceling the last day of competition and placing a curfew on the Citadel.”

A murmur of disapproval roared from the crowd. “Justice!” someone screamed.

The parents of Sumar limped weakly towards the Knights, their eyes wide with horror and vacant with loss. Sumar’s father stopped suddenly as his thoughts turned to the moments before the tragedy struck—getting ready, walking around their tent, Sumar’s smile, smelling the spicy tea brewing, talking to his wife about what they would plant next year. The simple series of memories, while unpretentious in nature, were powerfully attractive, serving as a last hold on reality—a refuge, when life was normal. The memories of that morning would become worn thin from repeated use over the coming years until, eventually, growing wide enough to obscure his view of the beauty of present-day life.

Shaking his head to bring his mind back to the present, the level of hatred behind his eyes rose. His thoughts rushed back into the emptiness of his son’s death like a flood.

“You cowards are responsible for his death!” Sumar’s father said, swinging a bony finger at the Knights. “I would expect this from the nonhuman vermin, but never from you. I see now that your day is truly over. You are weak and pathetic!”

Tragedy, slipping eagerly into the cordial fold of hatred, sparked a craving for raw revenge, spiraling him into the ancient solution of wanting to inflict harm on others under the fraudulent promise of easing his

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own suffering. His eyes flashed loathing before dulling as he collapsed in a fit of sobbing.

Gimelli reached down to comfort him. Suddenly, his wife slammed into her, sending the squire flying back. “You stay away from him, my family, and Piscium!” she screeched as the crowd cheered. Hatred and tears swam as violent collaborators behind her eyes.

Friar looked at Veneficus and mouthed, “We need to leave, now.”

Billowing black clouds suddenly engulfed the blue sky lulling above. The large heavy clouds churned and gyrated as they sped across the sky.

Veneficus thundered, “There will be no more violence! I will personally lead an investigation into this massacre, and those responsible will have justice heaped upon them. No one, and I mean no one, will take justice into their own hands. The Knights, Elves of Creber, and Northern Dwarves will be escorted to the Zenia, and after questioning will be allowed to leave.”

The crowd let out a fresh round of boos.

“Strange things are happening in our lands, but I assure you the culprits will pay,” Veneficus boomed.

Several divisions of Red Guard appeared and separated the three beleaguered nations from the angry crowd. As their ring was closing around them, Bellae looked one last time on the limp body of Sumar. His dark eyes were open, staring lifelessly ahead. His right arm extended out towards her, as if reaching for help. The Elfin arrows were still upright, standing at silent attention.

A murmur went through the crowd as several Southern Dwarves began to push against the Proliators escorting the Northern Dwarves. Thunder and lightning crashed out of the dark sky as a sheet of rain pounded down on the coliseum.

“I said, no more violence!” Veneficus shouted, raising his crosier ominously. He shot his head back and let out a frustrated howl of outrage. With all traces of the suns gone, the arena was plunged into an uneasy darkness. The black flags ringing the arena fluttered violently in the wind and rain. “Get them out of here!” he yelled.



*Figure 1: Veneficus lets his frustration storm out.*

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Dejected and embarrassed, the Knights, Elves of Creber, and Dwarves of the North departed. Bellae looked at Veneficus floating menacingly above the crowd. He looked fearsome outlined against the raging sky, an epitome of his mood. Occasionally, he would swing one of his arms down and lightning would flash ominously. The good feelings of the morning vanished as quickly as the sunshine. If not for the pin on her cloak, Bellae would have wondered if the ceremony ever happened.

### **Scroll 2: Of Elves and Men**

“Ailante, thank you for seeing me,” Friar said to the leader of the Elves of Creber.

“These are troubling times, my friend,” Ailante responded, his green eyes sad and disheartened. He wore soft gray robes with a tree emblazoned upon his chest.

“How did the Magician questioning go?” Friar asked.

“Actually, not as bad as I anticipated. After the response of the crowd, I half-expected them to pronounce us guilty.”

“If I didn’t know you and the Northern Dwarves were innocent, I would have believed it myself. The treachery of the White Wizard is evolving, becoming increasingly complex and sophisticated,” Friar stated. “First, they only attack around us. Now the Dark Warriors impersonate you and the Northern Dwarves with black magic to frame you for a massacre. Their deception is driving a wedge between the nations of Verngaurd.”

“Their plan is working,” Ailante said. Suddenly, he seemed tired and sat down. “The Magicians and Proliate will surely find us guilty and declare war. If they don’t, the White Wizard will keep pushing until they do. You were right, Friar. I can’t fathom how you knew this day was coming, but you were right about war against the Proliate. Many of my most trusted advisors were against us committing to your complex, and frankly, brutal battle plan, but I trusted you and I am glad for it.”

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“We should still try for a diplomatic solution, especially with Veneficus,” another Archerian said.

“Agreed,” Friar stated. “Peace shall be our hope, but if the reality is war, we shall be ready. They underestimate us, and if we shock them with a major defeat, we should be able to bring them to the negotiating table to focus Verngaurd on the Dark Warriors.”

“Your plan is elaborate and ferocious,” the head Elf commented.

Friar sighed. “I’ve heard that complaint before. However, with the Proliate’s sheer numbers and superb training, I see no alternative. We have to level the battlefield.”

“Will Jaa or the Southern Dwarves fight with us?” Ailante asked.

“Uncertain times breed uncertain answers,” Friar responded. “After the massacre we were just framed for, I don’t know. It might convince them to fight with the Proliate. I trust Princess Hamaza, but Queen Antiopay dislikes the Knights. The Southern Dwarves have clearly shown their intention to side with the Proliate. We can only count on the Knights, Rebelde Plains, the Northern Dwarves, and your Elven warriors.”

“The Western Elves allegiance to the Proliate is a foregone conclusion,” Ailante sneered. “Anyway, we are leaving the Citadel to make the preparations for Finn’s funeral. I regret the circumstances, but it will be nice to see you in Creber,” Ailante added, as he and the other Archerians filed out.



The Knights stood in separate groups outside the Citadel. Even its normally sparkling white marble seemed gray and lifeless against the dreary sky. The two Veli and their Knights would head directly to their respective castles. The advance guard of the Liberum Knights would take the siege machines and extra equipment directly home. Heading to the Forest of Creber to bury Finn, with a single supply wagon, included

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Friar, the Knights from Liberum: Ritari, Lovag, Sorea, Luchar, and Arquero, the squires from Liberum: Gimelli, Bellae, Scelto, Jumeaux, and Lontas, and Gleoi Dea from Taiheart Castle. Honey would pull a makeshift wooden travois with Finn's body.

*"I can carry you and Finn,"* Crann pleaded with Bellae. *"Send Honey to Liberum."*

*"Friar has already made up his mind. Let's just get along."*

Crann neighed in protest but said no more as Friar and the two Veli went off to talk.

"I spoke with Veneficus, and things aren't good. He's the only one not convinced of our guilt in both the matter of the massacre, and aiding the Dark Warriors. I think it is safe to say the war we feared is coming," Friar said stoically.

"The bloody Proliate are spreading like wildfire!" Veli Falciss growled. "Their numbers just within the Citadel are enough to overwhelm us."

"You would think they were too busy training and praying to reproduce!" Veli Pingius laughed. When it was clear the others did not think it was funny, he stopped.

"I know you have been against parts of my plan, Falciss. Right now, I need us all to commit," Friar said.

Pingius' jolly face took an earnest tone. "I'm not in favor of provoking a fight."

"We will not move until forced to do so. However, if we have to fight, it will be on our terms," Friar stated. "Work on the drills I gave you. Keep in contact and stay alert. Most of Verngaard is turning against us—we will need to move soon. Questions?"

When no one spoke, Friar said, "Safe travels."

They recited together, "Wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice," as they gave the Knights' salute to each other. The Knights and squires of Liberum watched the others head east.

"With all the hostility, I don't like the idea of traveling to Creber with so few Knights," Ritari whispered to Friar.

"I agree, but the siege engines and supplies would slow us down and never make it into the woods. I don't want to leave them unattended at



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the doorstep of the Forest. The Elves already left to make burial preparations, so we didn't have much choice," Friar answered as they headed into the gray, towards the west and the Way of Trepas.



"Quite a sight," Ritari said, after they had been riding for many hours.

Friar remained silent, staring at the massive walls of Temple Ovest towering to their north. In front of them they could see the soaring Tingij Mountains, and to the south were rolling plains.

"I know that look. Coming up with more ideas, are we?" Ritari asked.

Friar laughed. "Yes, you could say that."

"I wouldn't want to try to butt my head against those walls," Lovag quipped. He craned his neck up to look at the gigantic white walls lined with countless fluttering red flags bearing Tallcon's phoenix image. Proliate peered at them from the ramparts with the same respect a horse does a fly—nothing but a nuisance.

Friar's hope for peace was fading, and the dark skies overhead seemed to be following them towards the Way of Trepas.

## Scroll 3: Wet Walk—Long Talk

Late the next day, Friar turned one last time to look at the shrinking Way of Trepas as the Knights traveled southwest, towards Creber. The Tingij Mountains loomed claustrophobically high on their left. The jagged tops stared down menacingly like spear tips, daring anyone to cross. The ragged range stretched itself across the middle of Verngaard from the Ice Falls of Lake Glasere in the north to the Mohado Mire in the south. The Way of Trepas was the only significant break in the monstrous sierra. Their height stood in sharp contrast to the flat Rebelde plains stretching out under waving rows of tall grass in front of them and to their right.

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A fine mist pelted Bellae and cast a heavy, dreary smudge across the landscape. The earth itself appeared to be mourning for Finn, and the gloom seemed so weighty that it would never depart, as if magnetically drawn to their melancholy.

The dismal scenery added injury to insult at having to transport her Knight, friend, and surrogate father. Bellae could feel the emotion and hurt bubble up within her, materializing as tears hastening down her cheeks. As her fount of cathartic tears neared the bottom of its well, she began to feel the slightest bit better. Looking up, she could only smile at the sky's response. *Even the rain is broken into pieces*, she thought as the mist lashed against her face in a fine spritz. Absently, she grabbed the medal from Veneficus, the kalma-kunnia.

“Ow!”

As her hand brushed against it, she felt a shock as a disturbing pair of eyes flashed in front of her. They looked familiar, but she could not place them. She seized her Inion Medallion and rubbed it, unsure of what just happened.

“How are you?” a voice startled.

Replacing the medal inside her cloak, she nodded at Friar Pallium and his cautious smile. Despite his thin grin, a layer of sadness rested over his expression.

Letting the tears streaming down her cheeks serve as her answer, she silently stewed, fed up with people asking how she was, sick of trying to answer, and tired of feeling guilty that part of her was mad at Finn for leaving. A rush of tears were drawn up from the deep well of pain within her and splashed onto her face.

Closing her eyes, Bellae willed another image to take the place of Finn's lifeless expression, but none came. “How do I stop seeing his dying face?”

“Pick somewhere that you enjoyed, a special memory. It doesn't have to be complicated.” Looking up, he said, “Think of something with Finn and the rain.”

Bellae thought for a moment, and then smiled. “I loved how the rain ran over his skin, making the softest of waterfall sounds as it ran through the rough grooves of his skin.”

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Friar nodded, keeping silent to let her enjoy the memory.

After cantering for a few minutes, Friar spoke, “I have seen too many die and watched different people from all over Verngaurd deal with it. Tears can be cleansing—each one that falls is an offering, reclaimed by the earth, which somehow manages to push up our spirits and bring us back into balance.

“I wish I had a magic answer for your pain, but I don’t. Death is all around, every day. Sometimes it’s dramatic and painful like the death of our friend, but there are less noticeable examples that we swim through every day. As the seasons change, grass, flowers, insects, and animals die in incredible numbers.”

“If this is supposed to cheer me up, it isn’t.”

Friar Pallium chuckled. “No, I suppose not. The point is, just because something is intimately familiar doesn’t mean we understand it.”

“I just miss him.”

“It is a mistake to think we can hold onto something or someone. What you love, you should love now, in the moment. Nothing is eternal. Not us, not our emotions, none of the wondrous things we see around us.

“To love with passion, to soak up each moment in the present, to enjoy every second with them, that is perfect love. You did that, Bellae. That is not a bad measure of successful living.”

Bellae was filled with so much emotion she thought she might explode. An effervescent sensation began to burn deep within her stomach. Burying her face in Crann’s upright mane, she let the emotion flow. After a tumultuous cry, she felt tired.

“I’m not doing so well at cheering you up,” Friar said, gently patting her back. “The similarities between the words ‘morning’ and ‘mourning’ have always amazed me. Both present us the opportunity to be ‘reborn’ into a new phase of our life, a little wiser and stronger.”

Bellae looked puzzled. Friar watched her with a wisdom born of passing years, patiently waiting for her to process and then speak her thoughts.

“Friar, how can death bring wisdom?”

“Any event that prompts us to contemplate life, the future, is a worthy endeavor and often leads to greater wisdom. No one wants death

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to happen, but there are some things we can't control. The discerning person will use it to broaden their understanding."

Bellae's expression had transformed to frustration that was now mingling affably with confusion. "Friar?" she pleaded in consternation.

"I didn't mean to frustrate you. Few squires have been closer to their Knight than you were to Finn.

"Death is the worst and best thing about our limited time here. It can be a motivator, inspiring people to succeed with the little time we are granted. How we act and our accomplishments stand as our only true legacy. Our actions should serve as gifts to the future, making things better."

"The real question is, where is Finn?"

Friar looked intently at the young squire. "Bellae, the moment you were carried through our gates, I knew you had been born with an old soul. You just asked the million-pound question. The number of answers you get depends on the number of people you ask. The Proliators believe in Tallcon and rebirth. Jaainians believe the northern spirits and lights are a refuge for their dead. The people of Ager consider death as the mother of sleep. They believe we practice every night for the ultimate sleep of death, and our return to the earth. To my mind, no matter how you look at it, standing between the bookends of eternity is a massive, and in my mind, unfair amount of literal and figurative pressure."

Ritari cleared his throat loudly as he galloped up to them.

"Yes, Captain," Friar said.

"We've been advancing a long time. We're exhausted and wet."

"Oh, really?" Friar asked jokingly. "In my day, we used to travel twice as far, uphill both ways, with no horses or supplies."

Bellae and Ritari chuckled. Ritari suddenly laughed hysterically.

"It wasn't that funny," Friar remarked.

"I was thinking of what Finn told me after the dragon burnt my hair, 'When this is over, you have to tell me who does your hair. It looks absolutely fantastic.'" They all laughed so hard tears of joy replaced, and masked, those of sorrow.

"I miss him," Ritari said, becoming solemn. A small commotion erupted behind them. Scelto signaled he had it under control as he held back Jumeaux.

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“Jumeaux has been extra sarcastic, cracking exceptionally bad jokes,” Ritari said.

“For some, sarcasm is cast out like a shield to avoid pain. His passive aggressive behavior is pushing people away because he is afraid of showing how much he loves you. Letting yourself love is a set-up for potential heartbreak. So, acting tough is a defense mechanism to make it seem as though we don’t care,” Friar said.

Bellae rotated to see her brother. He was sulking, no doubt reeling from being chastised. Even in the dreary, smoky drizzle, Friar’s words made her see him in a new light. Bellae thought of all the people he had lost, including their parents. *Maybe the only thing worse than not knowing what happened to our parents is knowing, and living through, what happened.*

“Still, it’s a funny way to show love,” Bellae stated.

“By *not* showing affection he is protecting himself against loving too much,” Friar answered. “In his mind he is throwing a protective wall up, to not get hurt, when in reality the lost opportunities to love, to risk, weigh down his soul, and such a jaded act, if performed long enough, becomes reality, blunting his heart.”

Ritari scoffed, “I don’t know. Sometimes people just act like jerks.”

Friar nodded. “Understandable. The world, unfortunately, judges us solely on our actions and words, never taking into account the past we endured, our heart, our motivation. It is a reminder to make each deed count, because our actions, not intentions, often define who we are.”



“Will we make it to the forest tonight?” Bellae asked after another day of travel.

“No. We don’t want to enter the forest at night. The Elves are fiercely protective and, I would imagine, even more so after what happened at the Tournament,” Friar explained.

Luck seemed to be with them as Arquero brought down a large buck, and they found a series of large trees to make camp.

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Later that night, Bellae sat up, surrounded by the others but feeling infinitely alone. Everyone but the first watch, Friar, and Ritari slept. Bellae had purposefully placed her spot on the outskirts of the camp, closer to Finn. She looked at the pitch-black outline of the Forest of Creber. *That's where you grew up.* Despite abhorring the circumstances, she was anxious to see his home.

It stopped raining, but the ground was still damp and uncomfortable. She slid towards the supply wagon and looked underneath the wheels to study the wrapped body of Finn. A thick canvas was tucked protectively around his linen-shrouded body, which had been so lovingly prepared during the AnFilleadh ritual at the Citadel.

"You keeping time?" Ritari asked Friar. Bellae froze to avoid detection.

"You don't want to stay up all night?"

"Can, just prefer not to," Ritari said, smiling.

"I'm keeping time. Hopefully, the weather will stay dry."

Suddenly, a loud, almost panicked, screech blasted through the air.

"What the..." Ritari asked.

"It's getting closer," Friar replied. "I heard a softer version of that cry several times already."

"What is it? A Watcher?"

"I don't think so...but not sure."

*I know. My friend, Arend, Bellae thought, imagining the magnificent Eaglian watching over her. He's letting me know he's here for me.*

Checking that her mice friends were still asleep, and feeling a little more secure, Bellae reached out and placed her hand on Finn's corpse. With cavernous questions about what she would see tomorrow swimming through her head, she finally drifted under to sleep.

## Scroll 4: This is Good

Veneficus stood near the fire, looking back at the prophecy scroll he had finally found as it magically hovered over his desk. Withered streaks of age flashed across its yellowing parchment like lightning

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strikes of fragility and age. A bored-looking Valo floated nearby, throwing a sleepy, disinterested light onto the scroll.

Frustrated, the Magician shook his head. He had been reading and rereading the tattered scroll all night. Despite his intense effort, the contents of the ancient scroll seemed strangely distant. He had never forgiven himself for letting the animal talkers steal the Macht Power Crystals in the first place. They used a feeble, misguided excuse about “preventing evil” from using the Macht Crystals to destroy the world.

“I know what’s good for Verngaurd!” Veneficus thundered.

The startled Valo threw out more light as the golden gargoyle stretched groggily from his ornate pedestal.

“What is it?” the gargoyle asked. Fluttering his spiked wings, he flew over to the desk. His upturned nose sniffed at the scroll while he flashed his sharp teeth.

“Good of you to wake up, Irvikuva. You’ve been sleeping too much this century. I was just lamenting the Ainmhi Caint.”

“Bloody traitors!” the gargoyle huffed, his eyes flashing rage.

“Indeed, only I can keep Verngaurd safe, prevent it from falling into evil.”

“Exactly, delusional fools. Then creating this stupid prophecy scroll to ‘protect the crystal’s location.’ What a bunch of malarkey!”

“My spies showed great resolve in acquiring this scroll.”

“They also showed a lot of torture and sharp blades,” a Valo smirked.

“Actions required for success were executed,” Veneficus assured. “When I first obtained the prophecy scroll, there were still plenty of mindre or lesser crystals for our crosiers. Now, not so much.”

“Are you saying you got complacent, Big Guy?” a Valo leered.

Veneficus’ eyes blazed, but his rage quickly subsided as he remembered his dismay when the Ainmhi Caint managed to steal the prophecy scroll back.

“I can’t believe they thieved it from you again,” the gargoyle Irvikuva said. “As I remember, it cost them many a life to pilfer it and even more when you retrieved it back.”

“Yeah, many of them suckers died a very, very unpleasant death!” a

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Valo said cheerfully. “Good times! Good times. Then the Ainmhi Caint disappeared—good riddance.”

Rumors flew wildly as everyone speculated on their fate. Most believed the Proliate or even the White Wizard had exterminated them.

“They were gone but replaced by the dreadful League of Truth,” Irvikuva said, shuddering in disdain.

“Their self-righteous aim of ‘guarding and protecting’ the stolen crystals? Absurdity!” Veneficus voiced. “Is this the original scroll, Irvikuva?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

When Veneficus first examined the recovered scroll, eons ago, it had seemed different, but enough time had passed, doubts lingered. Now, with a desperate shortage of mindre crystals, crisis zoomed forward like a rapidly approaching arrow.

“It’s the boy, then? The brother? Not the girl?” Veneficus asked.

“It would certainly make more sense that it is the girl, the animal talker,” the gargoyle said. “However, the Ainmhi Caint are just devious enough that they would go with the less obvious choice for the Chosen One, the brother of the last Ainmhi Caint.”

A knock startled them.

“Come in,” Veneficus called out gruffly as the gargoyle, hating company, flew to his pedestal and instantly froze back into a statue.

Lidenskap and a thin, sickly looking Magician entered. They stood in silence as Veneficus stared at the scroll, his left hand reaching towards the yellowing and cracking parchment before suddenly stopping. He could recite it by heart but still liked scouring the words for hidden clues. His arm stood frozen for a moment before retreating back into his blue robes.

Sitting heavily in his chair, he waved his hand. “Lidenskap, go.”

Another Valo light appeared and swished over to the Proliate general.

“Wow, wow, wow. Graced by *THE* general himself! I’m honored to spread light upon your righteousness!”

“More like self-righteous,” another Valo whispered. “Pomped-up general, I say.”



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Lidenskap scowled but ignored the floating lights, “Sir, we just had a griffin fly in from the scouts of the Ragorsaf Outpost. A large force of Dark Warriors is amassing near the northeast corner of the Forest of Creber. It appears that multiple smaller squads, the ones we are used to dealing with, are congealing.”

“Interesting,” Veneficus said, but his tone was one of distinct indifference. His eyes stayed fixed on the scroll, willing it to speak, recounting the truth. *The boy, or the girl? Which can solve the riddle of the prophecy?*

He wished his magic could entice the scroll to let him know if this was the original scroll or a forgery. However, the Ainmhi Caint had enough magic to block most of his enchantments. “Will they attack the Forest of Creber?”

Lidenskap scoffed, “It’s more likely they will be joined by the traitorous Elves!”

“What strength are the Dark Warriors?”

“Their numbers are still growing. However, it appears to be enough to form a large company or even a small battalion,” Lidenskap answered.

Veneficus paused. “So, in the hundreds?”

“Thousands.”

After another pause, Veneficus finally looked up. “You and Storlax should ride in that direction immediately. A brisk, pious, all-night ride should do your soldiers good. I leave it in your capable hands to determine the number you will need to deal with them. Don’t move against them until we know their true strength and target, in case it’s a trap.”

“Excellent,” Lidenskap replied.

The Valo hovering near him mockingly mouthed the word, “Excellent.”

Veneficus stared at the general for several moments. “That’s all,” he said curtly. Lidenskap bowed and left the room. Veneficus rarely dealt directly with Storlax since, years earlier, the two had fallen out when Storlax demanded to attack the Knights.

Turning to the sickly looking Magician, his sunken and pale complexion made haunting by the sallow light of the Valo, Veneficus asked, “Fino?”

“Any decision on the scroll?”

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“My gut tells me there’s something wrong, it’s not the original,” Veneficus confided.

“But, sir, it has been in Magicians’ hands for centuries.”

“Ah, but it is precisely the time when it was *out of our hands* I am worried about. Those egotistical Ainmhi Caint had just enough magic and time to make a forgery to throw us off,” Veneficus huffed. “The fools thought they were protecting us but have only made us weak.”

“It seems as if time has finally caught up with the prophecy scroll,” Fino wheezed.

Veneficus paused, mentally weighing his words before nodding. “If the prophecy is not interpreted quickly and the Power Crystals found, we shall have to fight the looming war with good intentions instead of enchantments! Unless the lesser mindre crystals are reunited with the Macht Crystals soon, our crosiers will be glorified walking sticks.”

“Should we inform the other Magicians and the Academy of Magic? They are already inundated with rumors and innuendos.”

Veneficus looked down. “I have to admit, I never foresaw the severity of this catastrophe. Many times I have wondered if we shouldn’t limit the Magical knowledge to one hundred Magicians—like the old days. In some ways I only agreed to the Academy of Magic being formed in order to find the one who could help us solve the prophecy. The animal talkers have strong, intrinsic magic and would be easily recognized.

“I hope we will find the Power Crystals before disaster strikes. Unfortunately, this war will drain the mindre faster than ever. We have no choice but to trust the scroll. It’s the boy, Jumeaux, brother to the animal talker that is the Chosen One.”

Fino sighed heavily. “Perhaps we should have moved earlier. The boy was just here for the Tournament.”

Veneficus’ eyes widened with anger. “What should we have done? Kidnap him? Take him before I was sure?”

“If need be, yes. We must have him, this Jumeaux,” Fino said boldly. “We have wasted valuable time debating whether this is the original or a forgery.”

*Am I that out of touch with my fellow Magicians? Do they think me a fool?* Veneficus wondered. Planning and caution, taking nothing for

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granted, these were the pillars that had kept him in power for so long, longer than any of them could comprehend. He stared with scorching intensity until several beads of sweat oozed out onto Fino's frail brow under the vigor radiating from Veneficus.

"He's gonna blast you!" one of the Valo whispered with wicked delight.

"Nope. He's going to dismember him," another whispered, chuckling quietly. "You will be a 'Fino puzzle' with lots and lots of itty-bitty, tiny little pieces."

Fino's eyes widened, his already pasty complexion completely washing out.

"Quiet, you fools!" Veneficus huffed, his eyes softening. "Fino is correct. Now is the time to move. This recent development with the Dark Warriors might serve our purpose well. Unlike the Proliate, I don't believe the Elves of Creber are helping the Dark Warriors. Assuming they aren't, even thousands of Dark Warriors would be far too few to move against the Elves barricaded within their fortress of trees. Therefore, the White Wizard must have sent them after the Knights traveling with Finn's body."

"Reasonable, but why?" Fino asked.

"It should be obvious. The White Wizard is onto the prophecy and after the Knights and Jumeaux. Imagine if he is the only one with magic." Veneficus rose and began pacing. "The chaos of battle shall provide the perfect cloud to allow us to move in and get him, passing it off as a 'rescue.'"

"Oh, golly, Master V, that sure is an amazing plan!" a Valo sneered sarcastically as the others snickered.

"Shall I inform Storlax of the target, and that we will join them?" Fino asked, ignoring the floating menaces dancing maliciously around his head.

"No," Veneficus thundered. "He can handle himself militarily, but I don't want him blundering into our mission. Let them take care of the Dark Warriors while we get Jumeaux. I will tell Lidenskap. I trust him."

"What of the girl?" Fino asked. "Do we grab the animal talker as well?"

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“I think it wise. Bring Bellae here as well to hedge our bets. If the legend is true, it should be pretty easy to tell who the so-called Chosen One is to solve the prophecy. The League of Truth is cunning and relentless and could have altered the prophecy scroll we now possess to throw us off.”

“I understand the situation,” Fino said, bowing with a slight smile, feeling quite proud of himself for thinking of Bellae. Veneficus’ laugh wiped the smile off his face. Fino stared at him with disappointment and confusion.

“You understand? Do you?” Veneficus asked, his laugh turning deeper. “That makes one of us.”

“Yeah, dingleberry, now there is one of us who understands!” a Valo laughed.

With a wave of his crosier, Veneficus magically hurled the floating light across the chamber.

“Thank you so much,” the light muttered sarcastically after slamming into the wall. “I *totally* deserved that well-justified, completely warranted, entirely suitable, quite equitable punishment. My back, if I had one, I am sure, would feel better after crashing into the hard stone. So thanks.”

Changing tone and ignoring the light, Veneficus continued, “Inform the other Magicians I will join you. We ride hard through the night. Once we catch up to the Proliate, we shall speed them along with the prodigious volo enchantment. I do not think we will arrive in time without it.”

“Ye-yes, Supreme Master,” Fino said, nervous about riding with Veneficus.

“Have several reserve forces ride out after us to secure Jumeaux and Bellae in case they get past us. Make sure they have griffins. You may go.”

“Hey, Pasty Boy, go eat some red meat,” a Valo whispered to the sallow Magician.

“Maybe eat some liver you anemic louse!” another advised.

“After five to six years of that, you might get some color in your pale-arse keister!”

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“Oh, do shut up and let Fino hurry off!” Veneficus thundered.

Another Valo sarcastically mouthed, “Oh, do shut up!” repeatedly as Veneficus laid his head on his desk. Reaching out, he rested his hand on the tattered scroll, *Soon. The prophecy will be revealed, and the Chosen One will be on his quest to return the Macht Crystals to me.*

## Scroll 5: That Will Wake You Up

“Friar!” Arquero said, shaking him.

“I’m up,” Friar said groggily, stiffly moving his blanket back. There was a hint of sunrise off to the east, but the Tingij Mountains created enough of a hurdle for the Mardin sun that it was still fairly dark. The fire’s sleepy embers simmered while everyone else still dozed.

A surge of fear flashed into Friar’s mind. “Are we under attack?” he demanded, springing up. There was no time for stiffness now.

“No, just something odd.”

Friar woke Ritari, and the three men walked up a small hill, peering toward the eastern horizon. A lone figure stood in stark contrast to the brightening morning sky. His weight was shifted to his right leg, and he seemed completely at ease.

“At first, I thought it was just some farmer or villager. However, he has been standing there alone for a full hour, and I saw him brandish a sword at me a minute ago. I can put in arrow into him from this distance,” Arquero suggested excitedly.

“It’s a Dark Warrior,” Friar said.

Surprised by Friar’s answer, the other two scrutinized the figure more closely.

“Permission to take him out?” Arquero requested, unslinging his bow.

“No!” Friar said quickly. “For every scout you see, there are several others watching. If we kill him, we are likely to provoke an immediate attack. They want to take control of the situation by getting us to react hastily. Wake everyone and send Gleoi Dea to me.”

Ritari returned with her, and the four watched the motionless figure on the skyline.

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“We will ride hard for Creber,” Friar said. “If the Dark Warriors pop up in front of us, as I suspect, we will stand and fight while you break off and ask the Elves for help.”

“But it’s just one guy,” Gleoi Dea expressed.

“Plus, he’s behind us, not blocking our way to the forest,” Arquero added.

Friar scoffed. “Some lessons you must learn the hard way. Others you can acquire from an old man who has been in this situation before. The Dark Warriors are trying to bait us into a mistake. Trust me, we are surrounded, and when we are so bloody close to the Forest of Creber.”

After a questioning glance at the lone warrior, the Knights quickly readied themselves in somber silence.

A loud screech stung the air. Bellae felt a chill, sensing the panic within the Eaglian watching over her, Arend. She felt foolish. The call last night was not to let her know he was there—it was a warning.

They quickly ate cured meat before heading south towards Creber, away from the lone Dark Warrior. They had traveled at a good pace for several hours when a break in the shiftless clouds could be seen to the east, promising a sunny day.

“There,” said Arquero, pointing to a shadowy figure briefly peeking up behind and to their left.

“How can they keep up with our horses?” Ritari cried in frustration.

“They are in absurd condition,” Friar responded. “I was half expecting an attack by now.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?” Arquero asked.

“No, I don’t think so,” Friar replied grimly. “It likely means they’re waiting for greater numbers before springing their trap.”

“Their scouts are sloppy. They keep showing themselves,” Ritari stated.

“No. Never underestimate them,” Friar said with surprising vigor, born from painful memories. “They’re baiting us into sending some of our Knights to take out their scouts. Then, they would ambush and kill them. Sometimes they torture or mutilate their bodies in plain sight to try to get us to charge in an unorganized and ineffective manner. We learned that the hard way during the Dark War. They are fearless, maniacally intelligent, and patient. Act impulsively and you lose.”

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“Are they targeting us?” Ritari asked.

“We wouldn’t be able to see them if they weren’t. Their raiding parties have been platoon strength of twenty to thirty, so I would expect about that number waiting for us.” Friar swiveled, “Scelto!”

The large squire pushed his horse forward.

“Do you know where the extra bows and weapons are?”

“Of course.”

“When the time comes, you are in charge of arming all squires.”

“Yes, sir,” Scelto replied.

Without warning, Dark Warriors appeared on the horizon directly in front of the Knights. They stood in ranks on the last hill before the Forest of Creber. The dense forest and the refuge it promised stood tantalizingly close, yet frustratingly out of reach.

Feeling exposed and vulnerable, ineptly shielded by only his cloak, Friar Pallium whispered, “I know you.”

“The scouts *have* been herding us all along,” Ritari grumbled.

“Should we try to go around them?” Lovag asked. “We could ditch the supply wagon and Honey can move quickly, even with Finn’s sled.”

“No,” Friar stated plainly. “This is certainly not the entire force. They won’t show their true strength until it’s to their advantage. That hill is concealing their numbers.”

“Will the Elves send help?”

“I doubt they can see us. So, unless Gleoi Dea can make it there, no,” Friar answered. “I would guess the Dark Warriors have most of their reserve troops to our right. They probably expect us to try and go around them to get to the bulk of the forest. Gleoi Dea, we will drift in that direction while you linger to our left. When I give the signal, we will charge to our right, while Gleoi Dea breaks left, around their flank. I need to see the speed of that kameli of yours.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Friar!” Lontas shouted. “Behind us!”

To the north of their position a Watcher gracefully hovered thirty feet off the ground. His ice-blue eyes narrowed in their cocoon of red as he shrieked. Arrow after arrow flew towards him. The Watcher easily batted them away with his magic. His four wings beat feverishly as his

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crackled brown skin flaked with each powerful movement.

Abruptly, another creature streaked through the air towards the Watcher. His majestic head and fierce yellow beak made it to within a few yards of the Watcher before being flung to the ground with magic.

“The Watchers are fighting each other!” Luchar said.

Bellae whispered to Lontas, “It’s Arend...I mean, the Eagl...I mean, it’s the creature watching over us.”

“Who’s Arend?” Lontas asked but was distracted as several new Watchers filled the sky surrounding the young Eaglian. His large yellow eyes blazed with determination. His human torso had two massive wings for flight while his legs held brown feathers over sharp yellow talons.

One of the new arrivals grabbed the Eaglian and brutally flung him to the ground as he squawked in pain. With amazing agility, Arend sprung back up and flew headlong into the pack of Watchers. Two grabbed his muscular arms while a third pounded his abdomen and ribcage with powerful blows.

The source of the arrows became evident as a young Elf sprinted forward, yelling fiercely and firing arrows at the Watchers, who merely laughed in disdain, easily blocking the projectiles.

“Floating guy and bladed-bow warrior are approaching from the southeast,” Arquero said indifferently. “Again, probably not the weirdest thing we’ll see today.”

Tacet-Vand levitated by them in a flash. His wizened face and balding head were a blur as he passed, his simple robes fluttering briskly. He raised his wooden crosier, and a bright light shot out, arcing across the sky and scattering the Watchers, who howled in pain.

IleZuri ran effortlessly up to the Knights. “We’ll hold off the Watchers as best we can, move towards the safety of the forest. I’m sure you’re aware, but there is a massive army of Dark Warriors blocking your way.”

His long blonde hair flowed onto a red cape and old, but solid, silver and bronze armor. His fearsome bow held multiple sharp blades on either end. “Bellae, I will do my best to protect your friends Arend and Kainen.”



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Friar nodded. “We appreciate the help.” *How can Veneficus think Tacet-Vand is behind some of these troubles?*

Lontas looked at Bellae, his eyes full of betrayal. “Arend?”

“Sorry,” she said sincerely. “The Eaglian and Elf came to me after Finn died. They told me not to tell anyone, plus I still have no idea what’s going on,” Bellae said, seeing his despondency.

Disappointment clouded his face. “I’m not just ‘anyone,’” he said, more than a little hurt at the exclusion and feeling dense at not recognizing an Eaglian.

Bellae embraced him. “I know you’re not. Won’t happen again.”

He nodded, patting her shoulder.

With an occasional nervous glance to the battle raging to the north, the Knights continued to move forward while straying to their right as Gleoi Dea began to wander left. The details of the army in front of them slowly began to crisp. They were at company strength, around sixty or so warriors, and formed a single line, each one maliciously swinging a different weapon with anxious glee. Huge smiles adorned the faces of the Dark Warriors, suggesting an unholy eagerness for battle. Some of them had black chest plates with images of horned creatures and demons. A few wore helmets, but many had their faces painted or lined with tattoos consisting of various patterns and symbols. Almost all had pale hair framing pallid faces.

Suddenly, Friar startled them with a shout, “Go, Gleoi Dea! Ride around their flank, then break towards the forest! Everyone else, move right.”

Gleoi Dea urged her kameli forward. With a high-pitched bleat it took off with surprising speed, despite its awkward pacing gait. Its ungulate hooves pounded the grass as its horns and tusks flashed menacingly.

“Arquero, Sorea, and Lovag, be ready to provide cover,” Friar ordered. “Don’t fire now—that might prompt a charge against us or Gleoi Dea.”

“Are these the Dark Warriors?” Jumeaux asked, in utter disbelief. Everyone was taken aback by their pasty complexions.

“Their hearts give their name,” Friar stated, his eyes tracking Gleoi Dea. Her kameli’s head bobbed forward and backwards as she yanked

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on the reigns. Its relatively thin legs looked gangly and awkward, but there was no doubting the resultant velocity.

“Go!” Gimelli called in a mix of encouragement and worry.

A band of ten Dark Warriors abruptly sprinted towards Gleoi Dea.

“She didn’t go wide enough,” Friar lamented. “Hold here, archers, loose!”

“She won’t make it,” Ritari screamed as they watched helplessly.

A Dark Warrior spear shot out. It was a spectacular throw. A juicy splat and a horrific wail followed as the spear sliced into the kameli’s shoulder, narrowly missing Gleoi Dea’s leg. The beast collapsed and rolled. Gleoi Dea sprang up, somersaulting over the beast’s convulsing body.

“Run!” Friar encouraged, even though she had already started.

The Warrior who brought down the kameli stepped forward with a new spear. Before Friar could give another order, a bolt and two arrows slammed into him. His spear fell fruitlessly a dozen yards in front of his crumpled body. A round of laughter and a few cheers went up from the Dark Warriors as they looked indifferently at their fallen comrade. Several began to shout insults as his collapsed body bled. One approached his corpse, kicking him, “Nice throw! Congratulations, you speared the earth!”

“Yeah, dirt spear, dirt spear!” several chanted.

Gleoi Dea suddenly broadened out her course.

“She must see more of them behind the hill,” Friar stated, sucking in his breath as Gleoi Dea disappeared over the ridge, desperately attempting to steer clear of hidden Dark Warriors.

“Will she make it?” Gimelli asked.

“Yes,” Friar said with more confidence than he felt.

“Come on, you bloody cowards!” Luchar yelled, dismounting. His breath fluttered, fettered with the weight of guilt and sadness that had entrenched itself upon his shoulders from the time lucidity returned to his battered brain screaming Finn was dead. Loss, regret, guilt, sorrow, all of which he saw as abominable signs of weakness, tormented him.

No longer.

## Rise Above the Storm

*If I hadn't been knocked out, Finn would be alive.* The thought was so onerous it took on a physical component.

Now, he would enter his world. The ordinary moments of life: conversations, manners, small talk, these were repugnant. He would show respect to Finn's memory by bludgeoning the enemy, transferring mental pain into their physical agony. The smell of battle felt like coming home.

"That new helmet looks shinny. They'll think you're rookie," Ritari joked.

"Not for much longer," Luchar replied. He hit his helmet several times with his axe, savoring the familiar bell of battle ringing in his ears. However, he was not completely healed from his run-in with the dragon, and his brain protested with a diffuse, aching pain.

Nothing to be done now—no way he was sitting this one out.

"Oh, crap." Sorea sighed as another two platoons materialized on either side of the Dark Warriors already in front of them. Her sore ribs and aching head would make this fight miserable.

"Everyone dismount. Sorea, right, and Lovag, left," Friar ordered. "Watch the flanks, quivers ready. The rest form up a quarter-moon defense. Scelto, get Ritari, all the squires, and myself outfitted with bows. Squires, take the horses to the rear, and then prepare for battle. No one sits this one out."

"Friar," Ritari called wearily as three more rows of Dark Warriors slid over the horizon. Hundreds of savage eyes glared at the Knights. The sheer number of Dark Warriors was enough to pull mercilessly on the spirits of the Panterri. The most frightening thing they carried was their smiles.

All the Knights except Luchar seemed shaken by their absurd behavior. "Ahhhh, now we're talking!" he roared, swaying side to side with pent-up energy. "More of you fanatics and freaks to kill!"

Luchar's words caused a riot of laughter to erupt from the Warriors' lines. Several pointed and whispered before cackling maniacally. They were maddeningly sincere in their disregard for battle and death. The absurdity of it chilled the Knights to the bone.

## Far Forest Scrolls

“Is that funny, dogs!” Luchar cried, shaking with rage. “Wait until I slam this into your skulls.” He finished by brandishing his battle-axe. His anger grew their joviality.

“What are they waiting for?” Ritari asked, given their clear superiority in numbers.

Before Friar Pallium could answer, portals to Ifrean opened on either side of the Dark Warrior lines. The ground shook as more sprinted through. The Knights found themselves staring at a “U” shaped assemblage of warriors blocking off any hope of moving around the army before them.

The savagery in their eyes awoke a seed within Friar, which sprouted into a nightmarish memory of himself as a young squire facing the Dark Warriors. Images and emotions grew rapidly once released from their pitch-black hole: bloody battles, chaos, and death flashed quickly and vividly, culminating with a lump in his throat.

“This isn’t a few squads roaming the countryside as a scare tactic. This is a full battalion,” Friar said numbly. He felt like a drop of sweat in the ocean, insignificant against the massive numbers arrayed against them. Shaking his head, Friar tried to uproot his memories to focus on the moment.

“Sorea, Arquero, and Lovag,” Father Pallium began, “introduce yourselves. Kill shots only. Wounding them does nothing to deter a Dark Warrior’s will to fight.”

With a nod the three Knights began to issue their greeting. Lovag’s chainmail hanging from the back of his helmet chimed lightly with each arrow that left for its mark. Sorea had her crossbow string humming, but at half the rate. The Knights watched as the arrows and bolts found their marks over and over again.

“All arrows to their center!” Friar shouted.

From the ruffle of air as the projectiles left the bows until the moment they squished into their human targets, the Knights watched. In eerie silence the Dark Warriors stared on, almost longingly, as Arquero, Sorea, and Lovag found their marks repeatedly. Soon, the other Knights and squires joined in.

Still no response.

## Rise Above the Storm

The silence sprouted into a deafening, maddening dread as their minds strained to hear a scream or shout come from the warriors. If not from those hit, surely their comrades should yell, cry out?

No sound came, no effort swelled to get out of the way of the raining arrows—motionless except for loathing smiles.

“What is this insanity?” Ritari questioned, putting into words what they were all thinking. They watched as each wave of arrows struck into the center of the facing line and set into motion the unwavering machine of discipline. They calmly picked up, and then moved the bodies to the rear of their ranks. They watched impassively as the lethal shower of arrows rained down on them, those behind peacefully stepping forward as soon as the dead were removed.

“Ritari and Scelto, hold your fire and come here,” Friar said with more desperation than he had hoped. “Bring up the Horn of Kayda.” It was one of a dozen enchanted horns from the time when the Knights were ruled by kings. The call for help signaled a force of Knights was under attack.

Scelto retrieved it from Ritari’s saddlebag.

“Plug your ears,” Ritari stated, taking a long deep breath before blowing out a booming but melodic blast that reverberated down into their bones.

“There’s no one...” Lovag started, before rephrasing. “Is there anyone to come?”

Before Friar could answer, Luchar growled, “We don’t need any stinking help. Just sound the charge and let me kill them all!”

“We have to hold out hope someone will hear,” Friar answered.

The Dark Warriors temporarily stopped passing dead bodies to look at the Knights with a mixture of humor and relief at their call for help. A fresh round of indescribable laughter burned through their ranks, eating at the nerves of the Knights.

“Friar, so help me! Let me at these guys before they drive me crazy,” Luchar said.

“For once,” Sorea said softly, “I agree with Luchar. We’re not getting out of here alive, so we might as well get it on and take as many of them with us as possible.”

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“That is exactly what they want. Keep your cool. There’s always a way to win,” Friar stated, as calmly as he could. His words sounded hollow and insincere in the face of odds so preposterous.

Seeing their skeptical faces he added, “Sometimes, the best you can do is fight with all your heart and not worry about the consequences. Squires, fire at will until they charge, then back up to the supply wagons and draw your swords—they will quickly outflank us.”

The squires took a deep breath and fired as Friar had instructed. The torrent of arrows seemed to do nothing to thin the Dark Warriors’ ranks or determination.

Despite the arrows flying, the Dark Warriors seemed more enthusiastic. Two of them ran out in front of the ranks and made rude and mocking gestures at the Knights. Several actually jumped in front of arrows to make sure they were hit.

At that, even Luchar had a chill run down his spine.

## Scroll 6: Plum Pudding

“It has to be an act?” Arquero ventured questioningly.

“They are plum pudding crazy,” Lovag mumbled.

“Remember, you are Knights, and you will not falter.”

“They want crazy? I can give them crazy,” Luchar said menacingly.

Bellae fired her small bow. The arrow landed next to the cluster of her previous failed attempts, well short of their line.

“It’s okay. Little more oomph!” Friar encouraged.

Bellae reloaded and fired. It was stronger but still looked as if it would fall well short. Astonishingly, one of the laughing Dark Warriors began running towards the arrow as if attempting to catch it. As her arrow fell, he dove.

*Thunk!* It squished into his side, splattering blood. He pushed himself to a kneeling position and gave Bellae a thumbs up before mouthing something. At first it was too soft to hear. Louder and louder he began to chant, “Pairrr-aaaaaa-diiiiice.”

Finally, he screamed, “Paradise!”

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“Paradise!” the other Dark Warriors chanted back. “Paradise! Paradise!”

“They are stark raving mad,” Lovag said, panic oozing from his words.

Tears welled in Bellae’s eyes.

“On second thought, I need you to guard Finn’s body,” Friar said with more alarm than he wanted to show.

The smiling Dark Warrior contorted his face into imbecilic scowls as if putting on some frivolous show for the benefit of the young child. Jumeaux remained silent. The bizarre behavior of the Dark Warriors and their gleeful desire to die made his head spin. Friar led Bellae towards Finn’s body. Upon returning, he whispered quietly, “End this.”

Instantly, three projectiles slammed into the kneeling warrior’s face. Two arrows, from Lovag and Arquero, sliced into the right side of his face. A bolt from Sorea stabbed into his left eye. The three instantaneous thuds erased the absurd expression, replacing it with gushing blood as his unrecognizable head thrashed backwards, leaving a trail of splattered gore as his body fell.

“This is our time to do as much damage as we can,” Friar said.

Each arrow and bolt that found its mark deposited more blood onto the red-stained ground. The blood flowed so freely it became hard to imagine it could ever be washed away. Several times the Dark Warriors moving in to replace the dead slipped on the thick puddles of slimy blood. The absurdity of the Dark Warriors’ behavior continued to eat away equally at the Knights’ confidence and sanity. Battle was one thing, but this was a massacre of the insane.

“Why do they chant, ‘Paradise?’” Lontas asked.

“No idea, but I remember that from when I was a squire,” Friar said.

Jumeaux grabbed his head. The lunacy and horror of the situation cast a hazy net around his brain. Feeling light-headed, he looked longingly to the open land behind them. A shimmering white form waved for him to come. In his mind he could hear the Nishi repeatedly whispering, “Follow me. Follow me to safety.”

For once he was glad to see the specter.

“Follow me,” the Nishi repeated.

## Far Forest Scrolls

“We need to run,” Jumeaux cried as all heads jerked towards him.

Gazing at the psychotic warriors, Jumeaux’s knees felt weak. Looking into the eyes of the Pantteri, they seemed no less hostile. *I’m not supposed to be here. My stupid parents die, and I get sent to shithole Liberum?* “We can’t win,” he muttered as irate looks shot back at him, the ghost’s words still hissing in his ears.

“Don’t look at me like *I’m* the crazy one!” he wailed defensively. “You are as nuts as those lunatics. We *have to* run. We can’t defeat these psychos. They obviously want to die and outnumber us hundreds to one!”

“Come on, Jumeaux. We need to stand together,” Lontas said.

“Give it a rest, super-klutz. You’re so sad, even your imaginary friends make fun of you!” Jumeaux replied.

“Fire!” Friar said, urgently. The twang of bows had already begun as he approached Jumeaux. “There are different versions of victory. Standing and fighting against all odds in defense of friend and family, that is the greatest of triumphs.”

“If by ‘victory’ you mean death or torture...have fun with that because I’m out,” Jumeaux said. His head felt foggy, as if it was spinning and he was floating in an out-of-body experience. *This is madness.*

“If we keep our heart and stand together despite our fear, that is a victory. Perhaps it is the greatest victory one can hope to achieve. It’s always easier to stand with the side enjoying the majority. How history will score the outcome is not significant. Sticking together for the right reason is what matters,” Friar said.

Jumeaux glanced nervously at his sisters. He struggled to rouse the cords of deep brotherly love he was supposed to feel. He mentally reached and tried to pluck them but felt no resonance of connection. Instead, panic washed over him. The idea of standing to die for some sort of honor code or for this so-called family was absurd.

“Stand and fight, or run. If you flee, you are sure to die. If you stay and fight, we have a chance, however small.”

“You’re staying to fight,” Luchar said matter-of-factly.

“*Stay, J,*” Gimelli encouraged her brother telepathically. “*Think of Bellae.*”

Jumeaux nodded.



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The others smiled, convinced his nod affirmed his belief in them. In Jumeaux's heart he knew the reason—his legs felt like jelly and Luchar would club him to death if he tried to run. Doing the right thing for the wrong reason can make one rationalize and then aggressively defend the imperfect reasoning. Animosity towards his sisters soared.

Everyone but Luchar, Bellae, and Jumeaux were now shooting, sending a steady stream of arrows gashing the air. As Friar Pallium predicted, unless the wound was mortal, the Dark Warriors stood their ground and sneered hatred.

Jumeaux ruffled his already unruly hair, his ears started ringing as his mind screamed out a hazy alarm, the panic befuddling his thoughts.

He couldn't help speaking up again, "We can't stand against so many!"

"There's always hope, until there isn't—when we greet our final demise," Friar said stoically, moving to the left flank.

"Jumeaux, if you don't stop sniveling, I will personally filet and deliver you on a platter to those crazy cheese brains," Luchar said as quietly as he had ever spoken. However, the sincerity was clear enough to send a wave of fear through Jumeaux.

Bellae put her hand on Finn. Looking up, she saw Tacet-Vand struggling to keep a flock of Watchers at bay with a blinding burst of light from his wooden crosier when a minotaur exploded from a small grove of trees, heading straight for the wizard.

Running on its three hooves while holding a massive war hammer in its one human hand, the immense creature with the head of a bull dashed for the elderly wizard. The young Elf Kainen quickly put three arrows into the minotaur's left leg, but this did nothing to slow its charge. Tacet-Vand began to back up while struggling to maintain the magic light keeping the Watchers away.

IleZuri sprinted towards the beast, cutting the minotaur's shoulder with the long reach of the blade on the end of his bow. Screeching in pain, the minotaur stood up and faced the warrior. The beast's massive hammer swung with blistering speed. IleZuri arched backwards, ducking just below the colossal thrust as it blurred in an angry whoosh over his head. Trying to stay in between the minotaur and Tacet-Vand,

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IleZuri began spinning his bladed bow in a figure-eight pattern, deflecting the repeated blows by the beast.

Frustrated, the minotaur made several thrusting strikes with the spear tip on the end of his war hammer, each one easily deflected by the whirling reinforced bow of IleZuri.

The minotaur, increasingly enraged, swung his mighty war hammer in ferocious arcs. IleZuri stopped spinning his bladed bow and began dodging the massive blows. The blonde warrior began lunging with the sharp blades on the end of his weapon. Several slashes cut deeply into the beast, but due to his thick skin and colossal muscles, none penetrated deep enough to cause a mortal wound.

Bellowing loudly, the minotaur dropped down on three hooves, lurching toward IleZuri. Twice the blades on the end of his bow cut into the beast but could not stop his momentum. The minotaur's shoulder slammed into IleZuri, knocking his bow away. With a satisfied roar, the minotaur punched IleZuri with its hooved hand, sending the warrior toppling backwards into the wizard.

Tacet-Vand's body flipped over before landing hard, the light on his crosier extinguishing as the minotaur pounced. Arend swooped in from the sky, his brutal talons ripping into the neck and shoulder of the beast. Flapping his wings savagely, Arend managed to stop the minotaur inches from the wizard.

With screams of fury, the Watchers soared towards the battle, their deranged expressions foretelling they were hungry for revenge. Shaken, but up and moving, IleZuri staggered forward as Kainen continued to put arrows into the minotaur, its thick skin rendering them little more than a nuisance to the monstrous creature.

A surge of lightning erupted from the closest Watcher, shocking into Arend. The Eaglian shrieked in pain, releasing the minotaur.

The minotaur lunged for the wizard, "Die, you mute old-fool!"

Just as the mighty war hammer hurtled towards Tacet-Vand, IleZuri jumped into the air. Raising his bow above his head with two hands, he used all his weight to slam the lower blade into the minotaur's spine. The outer tissue squished, nuggets of bone chunked off vertebrae before the blade's sharp edge severed the spinal cord.

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With a howl of pain, the minotaur dropped his weapon, his legs limp.

“Tacet-Vand,” IleZuri called. “The Watchers!”

Instantly the wizard was up, blasting his purifying light, sending a stream of dust, small particles, and screams from the retreating Watchers.

“What did you do?” the minotaur bellowed at his flaccid and unresponsive legs. Rage fueled his still functioning upper body as he clawed his way towards IleZuri.

“I will strangle you with your own intestine!” the beast howled.

With a fearsome squawk, the recovered Eaglian clasped onto the minotaur’s horns with his powerful talons.

“Swing now!” Arend squawked.

IleZuri obliged. Twisting his body, he whipped his bladed bow with all his might. At the same time, the young Eaglian ripped the minotaur’s head upwards. The razor-sharp edge slashed into the minotaur’s exposed neck, which, despite its massive muscles, was flayed open. Bright red blood, detoured from delivering oxygen to the brain, suddenly found itself spurting out in a massive arc of gore. IleZuri closed his eyes and mouth while spinning to avoid the carnage pulsing outwards.

The wide-eyed minotaur scratched and groped forward in a rage-filled surge. Kainen moved with youthful swiftness, his bow shouldered and sword drawn. He sank his blade deep into the back of the beast just before Arend wrenched the horns in a violent jerking motion, a sickening crack, signaling the neck breaking, blistered the air as the minotaur’s head twisted into a nauseating angle.

With a final gurgle and a full-body spasm, the minotaur became flaccid. Blood and drool washed over his fangs and jaw, trickling down his protruding tongue from a head barely holding on to its body via a few frail, sinewy muscles.

Bellae could barely hear the shouts of the Watchers, who were now flying a safe distance from Tacet-Vand’s light. They suddenly stopped shouting and began laughing.

Abruptly two more minotaurs shot towards the Elf, Eaglian,

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warrior, and wizard. Anger welling up, Bellae drew the dagger Friar had given her. “I will defend your body, Finn.” *To the death*, she thought. The idea of death so recently thrust upon her was still awkward and unbalanced as it rattled around in her head.

For once, she truly understood Luchar. The anticipation gnawed ravenously at her courage. She shook her head. “I shall stand and fight.” *When they come, I will stand my ground.*

Just then, a Nishi fluttered up over Finn’s body, its hands grasping and fondling Finn’s corpse.

“Get away from him, you fiend!” Bellae howled.

“Guess what, pet?” the spirit wailed. “My master has changed his mind *again!* Now he wants you alive after spies discovered the Blue Wizard changed his mind *once more!*”

The Nishi’s eyes widened in lunatic vigor as her head bobbed side to side. “Capture you, kill you, capture you, kill you, capture you, kill you...I mean, just make up your mind! Am I right you scabby, stupid squire?”

Bellae, slightly confused, just stared at the Nishi.

“So, stay here and die,” the Nishi said. “Or, come with me, and I promise to get you to the White Wizard alive. Good de...”

The Nishi’s words morphed into a howl as Bellae’s forearm charm slammed into the specter’s body, causing it to disappear.

“I seriously hate those things,” Bellae whispered.

Jumeaux looked longingly at the open space behind them. The shimmering form of another Nishi wavered in the breeze. “I can save you. Come here,” it called. He considered going to the specter before his gaze settled on his younger sister, who was mumbling.

*She mocks me with her fake bravery*, he thought. The seeds of enmity with his family were now blossoming into a fully grown tree of loathing.



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"Bellae," Honey neighed, tied, along with the other horses, to the supply wagon. "*Let me loose!*" she pleaded.

Crann answered for her, "*She can't. If you show fear, the humans will as well. We must help them stay calm.*"

"*Too late for that, Cranny,*" Honey said icily. "*We are fodder, tied up.*"

"See to the horses, Bellae," Friar instructed.

"*I told you to shut it,*" Crann said quietly to Honey.

"*Soon enough, I will,*" Honey said ominously.

"*Hush, please.*"

"*For Bellae, be quiet,*" Crann stated.

"*For her,*" Honey replied.

"*Keep it down out there,*" Grym said angrily. He gasped, seeing for the first time the horde before them. "*I have no problem with you humans being brave, but this seems especially foolish.*"

"*If you leave, Grym, don't come back,*" Bellae challenged. He scanned the fields behind them. Rolling his eyes, he slunk into her pocket. She smiled and gave him a gentle pat.

A great cheer rose up from the Dark Warriors' ranks. Just to the right of the bloodstained zone, a small gap was made to allow one of them to pass through. The man wore a full set of matching black armor accented with a woven pink and yellow cloth tied around his waist. Instead of a helmet he had several purple and white flags standing straight up across his head. His chest plate had sloppily painted symbols and pictures splattered across it. Most were unrecognizable, but a few could be identified as birds, flowers, and rainbows.

As he danced forward, a fresh round of laughter went up from the army. He was swinging a wooden staff with great flair. His wild gesticulations and random pointing seemed to excite his soldiers. Slopped with splotchy gold paint, his staff was adorned with all manner of odd objects, such as eggs, feathers, meat, wooden cups, and other trinkets, which swung wildly from the staff.

"This crap is seriously giving me a headache!" Luchar grumbled in frustration.

"It's their commander, dressing to mock opposing kings and generals with their ornate armor and grand insignia," Friar said solemnly.

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"I don't think they had you in mind," Ritari said, chuckling.

"No, I suppose not." Friar smiled. "When he appears, it means their charge is imminent. Sound the Horn of Kayda one more time. Gleoi Dea, now would be a good time to make an entrance with the Elves."

"Can I shoot him?" Lovag begged.

"No, let him go through his gyrations. It would only make them charge sooner. We can use every second," Friar advised.

"Bring the squire boy to the White Wizard and you will be rewarded!" the Dark Warrior commander screamed. The Knights looked at each questioningly as Friar wheeled around to gaze upon Jumeaux.

*Stop staring at me, old man,* Jumeaux growled in his head.

The commander shouted something garbled. The Knights could only make out the words, "Reward...death of the girl." He then went right back to his odd gesturing.

"Should we make a break for the woods like Gleoi Dea?" Lontas asked, his arms sore and shaking from firing his bow so often.

"They want us to make that mistake so they can cut us down. We still have a chance if the Elves come," Friar said soberly. *Very slim, but still...*

Ritari took the horn and blew as hard as he could. The sound blasted again, but the Dark Warriors ignored it, too busy watching their commander's odd dance. His back was turned to the Knights as he made wild gestures.

Luchar grabbed Lontas' bow and fired awkwardly. The arrow pierced the commander's right thigh.

"Luchar!" Friar chastised.

"I can't take this crap annn-eeee-more!"

The Dark Warrior commander turned and smiled. "Paradise! You give my family Paradise!" He then repeated it in the language of the East.

His soldiers rumbled a deep chant, "Paradise!" Over and over in an ominously low tone they continued, while the commander changed the intensity of his signals.

"Bring him down! Bring him down, now!" Friar cried. Even as the arrows flew and pierced the backs of his legs and arms, he continued the signals. As the second volley of arrows slammed off the back of

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his chest plate, he turned, smiling. Blood was flowing freely from his many wounds. He gave them a nod, as if thanking them. His smile grew broader, revealing bloodstained teeth. He began coughing, and blood washed out his mouth, splashing onto the front of his armor and the ground.

Bellae looked up as something caught her eye. Arend, standing over three dead minotaurs, was gesticulating frantically for her to come to him. *I'm not leaving Finn or family!*

"Fire at their center and prepare for the charge! Stay close—do not get divided. They will quickly outflank us," Friar said as the commander dropped first to his knees and then fell on his face in a lifeless heap.

The Dark Warriors raised their weapons and yelled, "White Wizard, see my bravery! To die! To Paradise!" As a solitary mass, they charged towards the small band of Knights.

Arrows continued to slam into the center of their line. They no longer bothered sending the dead back but merely stepped over them.

"Bellae, leave Finn and stand behind me. Quickly, now, we must stay together. When they move around our flanks, draw up into a tight circle. Never surrender. There are things worse than death. Fight to our collective last breath," Friar instructed.

"But...Finn?" Bellae said, reluctant to leave his body.

"*Bellae? Do not leave me tied up to be slaughtered,*" Honey pleaded.

"Can I free the horses?"

Friar did not answer because at that moment, a blood-curdling scream arose from the Dark Warriors. The center section formed a "V" wedge and made straight for the small line of Knights. Even with the arrows raining down upon the advancing triangle, the dead were instantly replaced. Like a breaker capping on the shore, anyone who fell was instantly replaced to keep the cresting wave intact.

"Yeeeeeees!" Luchar yelled, brandishing his massive battle-axe.

"*Bellae!*" Crann neighed desperately.

Gazing at Friar, Bellae saw his focus was totally on the advancing Dark Warriors.

"*Crann, get to the forest and find Gleoi Dea!*" she said, sprinting back to cut Crann's rope.

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*"I am not leaving without you. Get on,"* he said. Bellae smiled and shook her head as she let Honey loose. *"Stay safe,"* she pleaded. *"Getting the Elves is our only hope."*

*"I will see you again,"* Honey said. Bellae had a tingling pain as she remembered Finn telling her the same thing before the dragon battle.

"Bellae! Back, now!" Friar yelled frantically. Bellae had never heard such alarm in his voice, or in anyone's, before.

The Dark Warriors were closing quickly. The warriors on the sides were already moving around to circle behind them.

With a quick glance towards Crann, she saw the horse cresting the hill towards the Forest of Creber. With a huge burst of speed, Honey was not far behind. The Dark Warriors were uninterested in the riderless horses.

*"Go child, cut the rope,"* Behalen beseeched.

Without a word, Bellae began cutting the rope of Lovag's horse.

"Bellae!" Gimelli yelled.

"Sorea, switch to your talons! Squires, draw swords. Lovag and Arquero, at your preference, switch."

The Dark Warriors were twenty yards and closing. Their huffing breath could now be heard as Bellae freed Musta-Yo, who joined Behalen near their Knights.

Klaufi, the aged horse of Lontas, was next.

"Back to Bellae, form up in front of the supply wagon," Friar said in a calm, resigned voice. With the supply wagon forming the back side, the Knights and squires formed a half circle in front of it. "Bellae, come, now!" Friar commanded.

Bellae could see the Dark Warriors closing in around them out of the corner of her eye. As she cut Klaufi loose, tears formed in her eyes. She would not leave Finn and the horses. A loud yell made her look. One of the Dark Warriors coming around on the side was sprinting ahead of the others and making a run for Bellae. She brandished her dagger towards him.

His eyes were savage with a lust for blood, and he was closing in fast. He wore tattered black clothes with sporadic silver armor. His pale blond hair was flying wildly as he ran. Trying to remember what Friar



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taught her, she placed her feet in a good stance and braced herself for the imminent impact.

The tip of the Dark Warriors' centerline was only a few yards away from the Knights. Arquero and Lovag shot one last time before drawing swords. Luchar roared with anger, but it was swallowed by the loud clangs echoing across the field as the mass of Dark Warriors fell against the frail line of Knights.

Luchar hacked furiously at the enemy, rage empowering his bedrock prowess. The fury coursing his veins was laced with enough restraint to make it lethal. He blocked a sword blow with the top of his axe. He then spun it down, slamming it into the attacker's chest. Before the blood splatter had fallen, his blade arced to his right and sliced through the thin chest armor of another attacker. The heavy axe obliterated the man's ribs and sternum on its way to cleaving his heart and chinking part of the spine. Without hesitation, he dislodged it in time to thrust it like a spear into the face of another, whose nose and mid face shattered and collapsed. The dead were quickly piling up in front of the Knights, the impromptu bulwark slowing down the Dark Warriors' assault.

Bellae trembled at the furious sounds of battle behind her. She took a step back as one of the Warriors closed in. Tears blurred her vision. *I will join you soon, Finn.*

"White Wizard reward me for killing the girl!" the man yelled. "Paradise!"

Twisting her body, she raised her dagger to swing at the attacker. Just as she did, an arrow whizzed just over her left shoulder, plowing into the warrior. It struck him right in the heart. His expression went blank as his knees buckled and skidded forward along the ground before his body collapsed backwards.

A hand grabbed Bellae's cloak and pulled her back towards the Knights. "Come with us," a familiar voice yelled as she stumbled backwards.

"I won't leave Finn!" she yelled, but the hands holding her overwhelmed even her intense will.

"Slide under the wagon!" Ritari yelled. With a fleeting glance towards Finn's body, Bellae obliged. For the first time, she realized it was

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Lontas who was still holding onto her cloak. Once they squeezed under the supply wagon, she looked up to see a swarm of angry Dark Warriors closing in around them. With a yell, Ritari rammed his sword up into the stomach of a Dark Warrior who had tried to leap on top of him. The momentum of his jump and Ritari's strength sent the man flying up over his head and onto the supply wagon. Ritari slashed his sword across the soldier's chest. With his back to the enemy, a stream of the Dark Warriors cut between Luchar and Ritari, effectively cutting their meager forces in two.

Luchar, Lovag, Gimelli, and Jumeaux were on the right. The rest were on the left of the stream of Dark Warriors.

Jumeaux's head was spinning. *This can't be happening*, he thought as spasms of images squeezed through his eyes. Scenes of the chaotic battle flashed surreally in his mind. If the havoc had not surrounded him, he would have run. For the moment, at least, the enemy seemed to be focusing on Luchar.

"Oh, Bellae," Lontas said, finally releasing her cloak.

"Thanks, Lontas," Bellae said weakly as the horde surged all around them. Both of them realized it was just a matter of time before they would die.

"I got you," Arquero said, blocking a sword thrust meant for the two squires, quickly bringing his sword around he severed the neck of the attacker, only to be hit in the face by a war hammer. Bellae screamed as the sickening crunch of his jaw shattering echoed through her ears. Stunned, Arquero stood frozen, for a moment—fragments of teeth and bone snowed down the rivers of blood like miniature icebergs. His tongue flopped down, uncomfortably exposed with no lower jaw. Time seemed to slow as the squires watched his body convulse as blow after blow from the Dark Warriors landed on his ravaged body.

Luchar was now surrounded and swinging his axe wildly, slashing and hacking any Dark Warrior unwise enough to get close. Their heads could be seen popping backwards, doubling over, or being spun around. Suddenly, a large sword sliced into his right shoulder, sliding up and between his overlapping armor. The pain brought him to his knees, and he screamed loudly. The sword was withdrawn and readied for another

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strike. Luchar recoiled and then sprang forward, slamming his helmet into the uncovered face of the Dark Warrior just as he had raised his sword to strike again.

The Dark Warrior's head whipped backwards, blood spurting from his nose and forehead. Luchar's head exploded with pain as ringing echoed through his ears. Lights flashed across his eyes before dizziness swirled in his head. A Dark Warrior slammed a war hammer onto Luchar's new helmet. The lights in front of his eyes flared up in blinding brilliance before the world turned black and he fell hard to the ground.

He came to and howled in frustration—his helmet was again dented onto his head. He struggled to remove it as he cursed. Luchar stopped struggling. He could hear the loud clanging of metal desperately crashing into metal as the overwhelmed Knights battled around him. Time seemed to slow. He could hear Ritari yelling and the loud whoosh of his broadsword as it sliced through the air. Arquero groaned weakly, sounding as if he had a cloth jammed in his mouth. A loud thud was followed by Bellae uttering a weak, "Gimelli!"

Gimelli was screaming now. Jumeaux was sniveling.

Enraged, Luchar reached for his axe with his good arm. Trying to raise it with both hands, he howled—his injured arm made it too heavy.

"Looks as if we found a chubby pig stuffed into some dented armor," a cold voice rang. This time laughter resonated all around him.

*Surrounded and blind*, Luchar realized as his heart pounded with anxiety and anger. *To die like this? Not going to happen.* He forced both of his arms to grab his axe and sprang up.

"This swine has some fight left in him," the voice remarked, laughing.

Screaming, Luchar violently twisted his body to help his damaged arm swing the heavy axe. It whizzed through the air but hit nothing but wind.

"Whoa. Watch out boys," the Dark Warrior said. "This little piggy has spirit."

"He's hungry. Sorry, we have no slop for you!"

Pain seared into Luchar's arm, and he dropped to one knee. His axe fell lifelessly to the ground. Standing, he shook his head as laughter surrounded him.

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Somewhere close he heard a horse neighing loudly and stamping.

*Not gonna die like this!* he thought. Breathing deeply and lowering his head, he charged blindly straight ahead. A surprised Dark Warrior gasped as the air was knocked out of his bewildered body. Ignoring the pain in his right shoulder and head, Luchar began swinging his fists and elbows wildly. He struck the surprised warrior repeatedly. He could feel hands clawing and hitting at his back to separate him from the squealing Dark Warrior. Now he could feel himself being lifted up.

Still swinging wildly, he heard a loud neighing right before a forceful blow slammed into his already distressed head. Once again, the world faded to black. His body went limp and crashed onto the ground.

“Luchar!” Bellae yelled. She had been separated from Lontas and had crawled back under the supply wagon. She pulled back her bow and released. A Dark Warrior fell as the arrow sliced into his neck. Seeing her, a dozen Dark Warriors moved in.

“Is that the brat we need, or the one we kill?” one asked casually.

“Doesn’t he want them both now?”

Before anyone could answer, Honey, Crann, Musta-Yo, Behalen, and the other horses formed a ring around Bellae. They neighed loudly and reared up, lashing out violently with their front hooves.

*“What are you doing here? I saw you run!”* Bellae exclaimed, a small tear of gratitude forming in the corner of her eye.

*“We saw no Elves, so decided to come back and fight,”* Honey neighed.

Bellae was grateful her horses had come back but sad that they would die with her. The warriors around her were brandishing spears.

*“Watch out for the spears,”* Bellae yelled to her friends.

A loud crack of thunder behind them was followed by a darkening of the sky to the north.

After Tacet-Vand made several gestures to IleZuri, the warrior turned to whisper to the young Elf.

“Arend, we have to leave, right now!” Kainen screamed.

Nodding, the tired Eaglian took off and flew in a semi-circle before gently picking up his friend, heading away from the coming tempest. He squawked in rage at the army surrounding the one person he was charged with protecting, Bellae.

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“I know, I know!” Kainen yelled. “I see her too, but we have to get out of here!”

“Time for us to depart as well, Tacet-Vand,” IleZuri yelled. The wizard nodded. A bright light engulfed both of them just before they disappeared.

The remaining Watcher quickly burned the bodies of the dead minotaurs and Watchers before disappearing himself.

Pausing the combat, the Dark Warriors, Knights, and squires saw colossal black storm clouds rolling and lurching with unnatural fury and speed straight for them.

## Scroll 7: Sight for Sore Eyes

A loud horn blasted through the air.

*The Horns of Infula!* Friar thought gratefully.

Bellae grabbed one of the Knights’ spears from the supply wagon behind her. Using all of her diminutive weight, she lunged forward. The tip glided between Crann and Honey, slicing into the mouth of one of the Dark Warriors who had been gazing up at the supernatural clouds. The tip went in deeper than she expected, smashing into the back of his skull. Blood spurted everywhere as he gurgled and fell. The horses took that as an order to attack, instantly rearing up and slamming their hooves into the heads and chests of the distracted Dark Warriors.

Seeing a warrior move towards Crann, Bellae lunged again. Her spear sliced into the man’s stomach. She grunted as it severed his descending aorta before crashing into his spine. Unaware of the laceration, his faithfully beating heart blindly pumped his blood into his abdomen and pelvis.

Growing paler by the second, he keeled over quickly. With her spear and the horses’ hooves, they slowly began to push the Dark Warriors back.

Surrounded by Dark Warriors, Lovag, Gimelli, Lontas, and Jumeaux stood back to back over Luchar’s unconscious body. Lovag’s skin was littered with superficial cuts. Wounds oozing blood crisscrossed all over his body as the slashes started to blur together.

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Friar, Sorea, Scelto, and Ritari had formed a circle around Arquero's lifeless body as the massive and chaotic bank of storm clouds thundering across the sky moved over them.

"Veneficus!" Friar yelled, laughing.

Tears of joy and relief formed in the corners of his eyes. He looked down to see his cloak stained with blood and coated with fragments of tissue, looking like the bits left over from a great feast. He could feel the aches in his body and the throbbing pain from the cuts and lacerations sporadically answering a roll call from around his body.

The Dark Warriors looked confused for a moment. A cry from the back of their line rang out. "The Proliate and Magicians!"

Instead of fear, they seemed exhilarated, once again shouting their bewildering mantra, "Paradise!"

Storlax and Lidenskap rode on either side of Veneficus. The Proliate commanders seemed to be enjoying the unnatural speed Veneficus' magic offered. The horse's feet barely touched the ground as each stride carried them forward five times farther than without the spell.

Veneficus hunched forward, holding his crosier out like a lance. Its crystal glowed blindingly bright while he chanted repeatedly, "Prodigiosis volo omnes!"

"The Blue Wizard is with them!" a Dark Warrior yelled. "Kill him, and the White Wizard will reward your family!"

"Paradise!" the army screeched. Seeming to forget the Knights, the army of Dark Warriors lustily streamed out to meet the charging Proliate and Magicians.

"Desino avta aon-prodigiosis volo!" Veneficus shouted. The horses of the Proliate and Magicians slammed to the ground, no longer uplifted with magic. With a cloud of dust, they managed to keep running with normal strides as the dark storm above them slowly dissipated.

The Dark Warriors closest to the advancing Proliate formed up lines to prepare for the new attackers. Directly behind Veneficus and General Lidenskap were about twenty Magicians. Spread out on the heels of the Magicians were several divisions of Proliators. The ultra-loyal and fierce Sanctus Divisions with their red shields and helmets took the center.



*Figure 2: A large force of Dark Warriors has appeared outside the Forest of Creber, and Supreme Master Magician Veneficus speeds his fellow Magicians and the Proliate Warriors to battle.*

## Far Forest Scrolls

On the flanks were the Ultor Divisions with their silver shields and helmets. All the Proliate had their ferocious merja spears pointing forward.

Laughing and pointing, the Dark Warriors seemed more excited to face the approaching army than they had the Knights.

*"Take that,"* Crann neighed fiercely. He shot his hooves out in a series of repeating strikes. Each combination crumpled the back of a Dark Warrior's head in deeper.

About thirty Dark Warriors remained to cordon off the Knights. Their eyes danced furtively in the direction of the Proliate, seemingly discouraged, as if missing the opportunity to partake in the main event.

The dead lay scattered like leaves all around the Knights. In various places, the bodies were piled so high the contorted corpses looked like bloodied piles of logs.

As they approached the charging Proliate, the first row of Dark Warriors yelled, "See me, White Wizard!" They purposefully ran head-long towards the Magicians and glistening tips of the Proliators' merja spears. The second and third rows followed close behind.

The two forces were only twenty yards away from each other. The small row of magicians all chanted, "Faire incendie." Dazzling beams of hot light flew out of their crosiers, slicing through the Dark Warriors. Some Dark Warriors had holes burned clean through their bodies, the cauterizing light blackening the edges. Some beams took off heads, others arms or legs.

As the Magicians were about to crash into the enemy, they pulled their horses' reins and chanted. The horses levitated, letting the Red Guard ride underneath them to take the front line as the Magicians flew to the rear.

A wall of iron spears closed in on the Dark Warriors. Any gaps caused by the Magician's enchantments were quickly filled in with the Warriors' second row, who also screamed, "Paradise!"

The Proliate lowered their merja spears to heart level of the front line of Dark Warriors running towards them.

The Proliate front line yelled a war cry with their spears mere inches from their targets. The tips ripped into the chests and abdomens of the sporadically armored Dark Warriors. The sickening crunch of bones



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shattering mixed with a wet, fleshy squish that sent blood and bodily fluids flying up like a savage wave. The bodies of the speared warriors were wrenched violently. Some folded like limp leaves as the weight of the rider and horse easily forced the spear clear through their badly gashed bodies.

Others had various parts of their bodies torn or ripped apart. Some had their shoulders blown apart as their bodies spun and flailed wildly before slumping to the ground. A few had their heads whipped back as the relatively weak mid face and orbits of their skulls were obliterated. Almost to a man, the frontline of Dark Warriors were instantly killed.

Most Proliate spears were buried too deeply within the Dark Warriors' dead bodies to be withdrawn, rendering them useless. The sprinting second line of the Dark Warriors took advantage of this, leaping forward to viciously kill the Proliate horses. Some dove underneath the spears and skewered bodies while others wove their way sideways to get access. Slicing wildly at the horses' front legs or underbellies, the second line of the Dark Warriors brought the entire first line of Proliate horses crashing down. Neighing cries of pain spewed out from the dying horses. Bellae gasped and closed her eyes as she felt their searing agony.

The front line of Proliate riders were pitched forward violently, many thrust over the necks of their dying horses. Howls of anguish and pain filled the air as the second line of Dark Warriors mercilessly set upon the fallen Proliate, quickly cutting them down.

The hard charging second line of Proliate quickly closed in on the second line of Dark Warriors, killing their comrades. A sickening thud resonated on the field of battle as their merja spears found their marks. The savage strikes easily slid into the flesh and bones of the Dark Warriors. Several were purposefully hit in the head, whipping their necks backwards as their skulls fragmented, sending chunks of brain spraying. Others had the spear tips slice into their chests or abdomens, exploding flesh and ripping vital organs.

An unusual, high-pitched horn pierced the air. Wordlessly, the Dark Warriors began an orderly retreat to regroup. Those still unscathed began sprinting back behind their lines. Any Dark Warriors too injured to regroup threw themselves wildly at the second line of the Proliate.

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Their suicidal stand had created a mass of dead horses, Proliate, and Dark Warriors, forming an almost impenetrable barrier.

Only half the Dark Warriors guarding the Knights stood their ground, watching the battle like spectators while the rest joined the others regrouping to fight the Proliate. Exhausted, bloodied, and still outnumbered, the beleaguered Knights were content to continue their role as observers during the temporary stalemate.

The flanks of the bloody barricade of dead and dying exploded with activity as the speeding Proliate rounded the corners on both ends of the obstruction. “Re-form lines!” Storlax shouted the order as the Proliate pouring around the ends began to converge, some right where the Dark Warriors surrounded the Knights.

Complete chaos ensued. The Proliate began attacking the Dark Warriors around the Knights and squires, not seeming to know what to make of the ring of horses and Bellae.

“*Get on!*” Crann said desperately.

“*No! Get on me. I’m faster,*” Honey yelled. The two horses collided as a wave of Proliate cavalry descended upon them. Bellae was knocked back on top of Finn and separated from the horses. Pounding hooves and slashing weapons created havoc. She tried to stand up, but a horse’s shoulder slammed into her. She struggled to get back to her horses as the mayhem of the advancing army swarmed over her. She barely escaped being trampled several times. Thinking she heard Crann, she dashed under a slow-moving horse and continued to dodge and weave precariously between the charging Proliators and dying Dark Warriors. The other squires were embroiled in similar confusion. Gimelli, Lontas, and Jumeaux were driven towards Lidenskap.

Seeing the three squires, he gasped, “Children!” *It’s Jumeaux, the one Veneficus spoke of,* he thought, quickly yelling orders. “Move these children to the rear of the line and then to Ragorsaf outpost. This is your *only* priority!”

“Where are the others?” Lidenskap asked, searching for Bellae.

“Not sure—we were separated,” Gimelli gasped.

They felt hands grabbing, yanking, pulling them roughly up and

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onto the horses next to the armored bodies of the Proliate. The squires found themselves lying uncomfortably on their stomachs as their riders turned and rode for the rear. Lidenskap motioned to several other Red Guard to follow them as he rode into the fighting. The three squires were starting to feel motion sick when they heard a familiar voice.

“Squires!” Veneficus shouted frantically. “Are you injured?” he asked sincerely. His eyes scanned their bodies for damage. “Jumeaux, are you injured?”

“No, sir,” Jumeaux stated, awed that such a great man would remember him, or care.

“Wonderful,” he said, relieved. “We were on the way when we heard the Horn of Kayda and came as quickly as possible. Thank you for bringing the squires this far, my Proliate brothers. I will take charge of these youngsters,” Veneficus stated.

The Red Guard looked at each other, deeply concerned about disobeying Lidenskap’s orders, but relented, more terrified of going against the Supreme Master Magician.

Veneficus nodded understandingly. “I, along with the Magical League, will take full responsibility with your commanders,” he said, helping get the children down from the Proliate horses.

As the Proliate reluctantly left, Veneficus leaned towards the children. “Where are the rest of the squires?” He signaled to some of the Magicians lingering behind them to move forward to search for Bellae.

“We were separated,” Gimelli said. “There were so many Dark Warriors. Arquero is dead, and Luchar is badly injured.”

Several Magicians rode up with two extra horses from dead Proliate, and the gangly Klaufi. “Ride these,” a thin, pasty looking Magician said. His deep-set brown eyes looked warm and caring.

“Klaufi!” I can’t believe you made it!” Lontas howled as the squires quickly mounted the horses.

“You know this wretched beast?” a Magician scoffed.

Lontas nodded proudly.

“You are in grave danger here. Go with my companions. I will see you soon,” Veneficus said, riding off to search for Bellae.

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The three squires and Magicians began to ride around the left flank of the flesh, blood, and gore that was the curtain of dead soldiers and horses littering the battlefield.

*"I wonder where Bellae is?"* Gimelli asked Jumeaux internally. She was also worried about Scelto but knew Jumeaux would make fun of her if she mentioned him.

*"I don't know,"* he answered coldly. *Can't she just be happy I'm here and alive?*



Several dozen Dark Warriors broke off from their main lines to attack the Knights and Proliate now battling around their supply wagon and Finn's dead body.

Honey appeared in front of Bellae and yelled, *"Grab my mane!"*

*"So glad to see you!"*

She desperately lunged up and grabbed onto the large horse's mane. With a slight wince the horse shot off, trying to get Bellae away from the battle. A couple of wounded Dark Warriors managed to pull themselves up and brandished spears at the massive horse.

*"Get down. I'll fight off these soldiers. Make for the forest,"* Honey stated while snorting angrily at the warriors in front of her.

*I'll come back for you, Finn,* Bellae thought, obliging her horse and running for the forest. Her route was too close to the back of the Dark Warriors reforming lines, and several broke off in pursuit.

In the chaos of battle, Scelto was separated from Friar, Sorea, and Ritari while they were fighting above Arquero's body. The squire struggled against three Dark Warriors by himself. After picking up a discarded shield, he was holding his own. Despite his youth he had the size and strength of a man. Seeing him fighting, the Red Guard slammed into action to help. They drew their swords and began hacking at the Dark Warriors. As the horses jockeyed around him, Scelto was

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knocked to the ground and about to be trampled when Lidenskap rode up and ordered his Proliate to form up around Scelto.

“Come, boy! Get up if you can,” Lidenskap commanded.

Just then the Dark Warriors’ sickly sounding horn blared out again.

“They have re-formed and are attacking,” Storlax shouted over in the center of the Proliate line. “Re-form into lines, now!”

“You three, take this squire to Ragorsaf, where the other squires are going,” Lidenskap shouted, still unaware they had been diverted by Veneficus. Even after the news of the massacre at the end of the Tournament, the idea, planted by Tallcon himself, of unifying the Knights under Proliate rule still flickered as a possibility. If nothing else, perhaps he could steal a future Knight.

As Scelto headed off to the west with his Proliate escort, Lontas, Jumeaux, and Gimelli followed the Magicians northeast, riding back towards the Way of Trepas.

“There’s Bellae!” Lontas yelled, pulling up on his sickly and lagging horse.

Gimelli looked back to see Bellae being chased by two Dark Warriors towards the Forest of Creber. “Bellae! How in the world did she get way over there? Come on, Lontas! We have to help her,” she shouted desperately.

The Magicians riding with them quickly surrounded the squires’ horses.

“You *will* come with us to safety. Let the Proliate deal with the Dark Warriors and that squire,” the thin Magician said calmly.

“The Proliate are re-forming lines preparing for a counter attack!” Gimelli cried, her voice cracking with desperation. “Do you see anyone going to help my baby sister?”

“We’re not a-a-a-sking. We’re telling. We r-r-r-are going after her,” Lontas said coldly. He felt a surge of adrenaline as the memories of all the times Bellae had come to his aid flooded his mind.

The Magicians raised their crosiers ominously. Gimelli swatted the closest one aside. She was about to say something when Jumeaux cried out, “The Dark Warriors are attacking! Let’s get out of here.”

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The thin dark-eyed magician nodded approvingly. "Wise, very wise, young man."

"Jumeaux! How can you leave your sister?" Gimelli demanded, ignoring the Magician. Tears were now glistening in her eyes as she pointed to Bellae, who was getting close to the edge of the Forest of Creber.

*"Would you come after me?"* he asked her telepathically.

*"You better know the answer to that. I always have your back, Jumeaux."*

*"I guess you mean you 'own my back,' given the daggers you have stabbed into it,"* he replied maliciously.

"You better not believe that. Now, wake up and fight for your sister," she scolded out loud.

"We are going after our sister, now," Gimelli declared, urging her horse forward. The Magicians shined their bright crosiers in front of the three squires as the thin, gaunt Magician moved forward. "You," he yelled, a sinister look flashing behind his cavernous eyes. Stopping, he took a calm, deep breath. "We appreciate your bravery. However, we have our orders from Veneficus himself. We *will* take you to safety. You can ride with us freely or, if you prefer, you can be paralyzed and levitated there."

"Cool!" Jumeaux cried out in excitement. Gimelli shot him a menacing look. Lontas and Gimelli looked at each other in frustration. They had no choice but to ride with the Magicians and bide their time.

Seeing the children's resignation, the Magician nodded. "That's better."

The pack of Magicians and three squires rode off through the flies that had started to flock to the smells of spilled blood and opened flesh wafting about. Scavenger birds circled above, patiently waiting for the armies to prepare their feast by finishing killing each other. Behind them they could hear the shouts of the Proliate and neighing of horses as they formed up for the Dark Warriors charge.

Leaning towards Lontas, Gimelli whispered, "Stay alert and wait for my signal."

He nodded, but a bead of sweat appeared on his forehead as his heart rate surged anxiously. The two rode off behind Jumeaux and the

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Magicians. The hooves of their horses squished, more than galloped, through the blood-soaked ground. The moans of the dying tugged at their hearts as the stench encroached on their nostrils. Gimelli twisted to see Bellae entering the Forest of Creber with Dark Warriors closing in.

From across the battlefield, Friar also looked up to see Bellae devoured by the massive forest. Part of him ached, knowing he would never see her again. *I have taught you all I could in the short time we had. Now, as is each generation's duty, you must learn and live on your own time.*

## Scroll 8: Darkness Descends

*Keep running and use your size to move quickly,* Bellae thought as she crashed into the thick Forest of Creber. Moving deeper, the world quickly became dim, save for rare streaks of light shearing their way through the leafy canopy. She pushed through the lower branches as golden leaves crunched under her feet. Her breathing seemed loud and labored.

Eventually, her eyes adjusted to the dark, allowing her to speed up and put some distance between herself and the attackers. She tried to take slow deep breaths to calm her pounding heart but could feel the weight of their presence pushing down on her back. She had seen enough of them to know she could expect no mercy. She winced as each crunching step seemed a beacon for them to follow.

*Finn, guide me!* she screamed in her mind.

The Dark Warriors shattered through the forest. Despite her effort, they were closing. A little whimper of terror escaped from her dry lips as she pushed forward.

“IIIIIIIIII caaaaaaan SEEEEEEE youuuuuu!” one of the Dark Warriors belted out tunefully. Ominous laughter followed.

A shiver of fear ripped through her. Weakness dripped into her knees, and they buckled. Panting, she slid behind a tree.

*Where are the Elves? Where's Gleoi Dea?* she wondered fearfully.

Looking around she took note of the trees around her. They were different from the arbor breith or birth trees that Finn had described. *These must be the outer ring trees that he talked about.*

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*“What’s going on here?”* Grym interrupted.

Bellae motioned for him to be quiet as an evil laugh erupted from behind her. Their loud stomping would help her move without giving away her position. Every inch of her wanted to curl up and hide, but she knew that would lead to certain death.

*Get up, keep moving.*

Advancing as quickly and carefully as possible, she made her way deeper into the forest, trying to time her steps to flow with theirs.

A dark streak rustled in the trees to her right, causing her to abruptly stop. *What is that?* Her heart raced as the darkness conjured its usual set of otherworldly tricks, placing masks of terror all around her. Simple twigs morphed into claws, branches into swaying foes. Terror gripped her as the black figure shot up between two trees, moving in silhouette against the gloomy upper canopy of the forest. Its back shuddered, and she made out wings.

*Arend!* she thought hopefully. *Or, is it a Watcher?* She shivered in revulsion at their flaking skin and piercing eyes. A part of her wanted to scream, *“If you’re a Watcher, come end this!”*

Finn’s smiling face flashed across her mind. *“My spirit will always be by your side.”* She rubbed her Inion medal, closing her eyes. *I need that to be true.*

Opening her eyes, she peered into the unforgiving forest, spreading out in all directions like a dark, endless ocean of trees and obstacles. Looking up, she could see hints of cheap light, diluted by sheets of leaves and their supporting branches. The Dark Warriors continued to trudge through the forest like clumsy oxen. She could hear but not see them. A sudden loud rustle came from her right. It was the winged creature. The Dark Warriors, hearing it as well, moved towards the sound.

Bellae sighed deeply. *I have to find Gleoi Dea or the Elves,* she thought, rubbing her Inion medallion. *They have to help. I’m Finn’s daughter.*

That thought opened up a deep bed of emotions that percolated up, flooding her with sadness. Death, loss, being alone, tired, hungry, darkness, parched lips, sweaty clothes. Each emotion demanded to be comforted and attended to. The burden pressed down on her soul and undermined her determination.



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Closing her eyes, she leaned back against the tree. The tears came. She did not want them, but they did not ask permission or seem to have any interest in her wishes.

Hiding her face in her sleeve, she began to weep. At first, shaking slightly, but with each moment, the sobbing grew until they shook her into audible whimpers.

“Ah, I hear our little prize. We appreciate the sniveling,” one of the Dark Warriors said, changing direction. “Don’t worry your ugly rat head about crying. After we get to you, you won’t have to suffer much longer. Well, you will, when we torture and slice you up, but after that you’re home free.”

Bellae whipped her head up. Something in the Dark Warrior’s toxic words made her emotions snap from despair to fury. Standing up, she could see them now. Drawing her dagger, she pointed it towards the advancing attackers and yelled, “Come on, bloody swine! How about I gut you?”

As their laughter rang in her ears, she knew the words had no impact. She didn’t care, suddenly understanding Luchar’s anger. *Simple*, he had told her. Combat is simple. *Me against them*.

“What does despair smell like? We just found the stench in the girl’s sniveling!” one of the Dark Warriors howled.

Wiping the tears from her eyes, she faced them. The two warriors lumbered noisily through the brush towards her. Evil gusts of laughter echoed off the trees so that the noise seemed to be coming from all around her.

She began kicking leaves and debris away, clearing a small area for good footing. *There’s always a way to win. You better be right, Friar. Either way, it ends here and now*. Her left foot hit some loose dirt. Kneeling down, she picked up a handful. She rose just as the two came into full view.

“Oh, that’s a cute little dagger,” one of them said, laughing cruelly. He was the larger of the two. He had pale blonde hair that seemed to glow in the darkness of the forest. His face was covered with dirt and blood splatter from the fighting. Only his pale blue eyes were spared the exterior grime—their fiendish glow revealing his malicious heart. He held a mace in his right hand and a large axe in his left.

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The other warrior was short and stocky. He wore chainmail under a muddy gray surcoat, which displayed a skeleton clutching a heart, and carried a large sword. A skull helmet covered his eyes but gave a perfect view of his grimy, filed teeth. His lips curled back in queasy delight. Smears of blood covered his face and hair.

“The big double-double-u will be most happy with us finding the girl,” the tall one said.

“You mean the White Wizard?” the one with the grimy teeth asked.

“Who else in the bloody netherworld would I mean, dimwit?”

“You threw me.”

“A leaf would throw you off, pinhead,” the tall one yelled. “It’s a riddle.”

“What?”

“Clean the pile of wax out of your deaf ears, idiot.”

“Not wax. When I gutted that Proliate Pig, I thought it would be cool to spread his guts and blood on my face.”

“So stupid.”

“No—intimidating it is. But I got some in my ears.”

“Moron. You know what goes through the intestine? Anyway, did you hear the White Wizard speaking through your brain? The new order is take this putrid girl alive. Apparently, a spy in the Citadel informed him the Blue Wizard wants her as well as the boy.”

“We don’t get to kill her anymore?”

“That’s what I just said! However, he did say injured was acceptable...”

Bellae was sizing them up while they continued arguing. She noted the short stocky one with bad teeth would have trouble moving his large sword in the thick forest. *Throw dirt in the eyes of the tall one, then attack grimy tooth one*, she planned. *Make him miss with that massive sword and strike at his neck.*

The taller one was making his way to her left while the stout one was coming straight for her. They began laughing. This time, Bellae held her tongue and waited for them to get closer. Thoughts of Finn steadied her mind.

Five feet away.

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Each step was heavy and loud as it crunched the leaves and twigs. A loud creaking sound and thunderous shaking of leaves and branches shattered the air. The surprise and power of it unsettled Bellae and made her knees buckle. The feeling she had at the cemetery and other times she had seen the winged creature came flooding back. *Arend!*

A dark figure swooped down. The branch he had been perching on curved backwards violently under the force of its takeoff. Looking up, she saw two giant razor-like claws rip into the shorter Dark Warrior. One stabbed into his face before slashing upwards, degloving flesh and ripping the fake skull helmet off to reveal a real one. Each claw had three large talons pointing towards the front with a single claw to the back. The second claw dug into the warrior's right shoulder. Wrenching it up, the Eaglian tore the entire shoulder, chainmail and all, completely off. Bright red arterial blood erupted vigorously while the sapphire venous splashed limply.

With literal blind fury the hemorrhaging warrior began swinging his sword wildly through the air with his one good arm, the weight of the sword temporarily overcome by a burst of adrenaline. Arend tried to spread his wings, but the thick forest limited their movement. He let out a yelp of pain as they scraped across two trees.

After one last desperate slash, the shorter warrior finally succumbed to his injuries and fell, spasming in his death throes. A loud rustling sound drew Bellae's attention. Charging hard at her was the taller warrior. He raised his mace high. When he was three steps away, he leapt forward.

Taking two quick steps back, she raised her dagger to block the mace. With a loud clang, her dagger shot backwards under the force of his strike. Her small body was flung rearward, and she landed hard on her back. Skidding to a stop, she rose immediately. He was over her in a flash, this time swinging his axe. Bellae ducked, and the blade whizzed overhead, biting deeply into a tree.

Muttering, the Dark Warrior pulled, trying to release the embedded axe. Bellae seized the moment and slashed with an overhead strike. Her dagger bit deeply into his arm, bouncing back when it hit bone. His face convulsed in pain. Leaving his axe in the tree, he swung his

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mace. Bellae leaned backwards as the top of it whizzed right in front of her. He swung again. She dodged his blow while backpedaling. Her back abruptly rammed into a tree, violently halting her movement.

“It took longer than I thought, but now I get to have some fun with you. The Wizard didn’t say nothin’ about you being in one piece,” he said, smiling. Even from this distance Bellae could smell the putrid odor swirling from his filthy mouth.

Twisting back, he wound up to swing his mace. Bellae sank down and whirled around, ducking behind the tree. As the mace crashed into the bark, she was up and running, this time not worrying about silence, just distance. Behind her, a loud rustling sound was followed by a gurgling scream of pain. A louder thud sounded as the second Dark Warrior’s body hit the forest floor.

She was not going back to risk an encounter with the creature killing the warriors. She thought it was Arend, but fear had blunted her ability to feel him. *What if I’m wrong?* Instead, she ran, ignoring the biting scrapes of stray branches as they whipped across her body, pulling, scratching.

When her muscles cried out in agony for her to stop, the darkness had come close to complete. Her legs gave out, and she fell, skidding to a stop on the bed of leaves. Tears she had not even known were falling coated her face. Just wanting all of her emotion, fatigue, and loneliness to go away, she closed her eyes.

Her ears strained for noise. *How long have I been running?*

Gently swaying and shifting sounds of the forest, along with the insects it harbored, performed around her in a comforting melody. Exhaustion reared up, and she faded into the refuge of sleep.

## Scroll 9: Rescued Rescue

A hooting owl startled her awake. Groggily lifting her head from the cold, hard ground, wet leaves clung aggressively to her face. Urgent messages fired up across her body. Aches, pains, soreness, and tingling sensations from muscles that had fallen asleep during her deep doze

## Rise Above the Storm

all assaulted her brain. Swinging onto her back, she tried to sit up, her stiff muscles protesting but reluctantly obeying. She shook her arms and legs to try to get the pins and needles out of them and restore full feeling.

A shiver of uneasiness shook through her as panic knocked on her heart. The world was, in essence, no more dangerous than it had been the week before. However, Finn's death, the massacre at the Tournament, and the attack by the Dark Warriors had caused a monumental shift in her outlook on the world. Sometimes such mental frames of reference can be just as powerful as physical injuries, shaking the familiar until we feel unsteady and uncertain. Such uninvited reminders of life's frailty are frequently unwelcome, and universally unsettling.

Looking up to the owl, his large eyes opened and closed lazily as the top of its head bobbed gently up and down, completely relaxed.

*"About time you woke up,"* Grym said, his voice agitated.

*"Give it a rest,"* Borb said in Bellae's defense.

*"Hey guys,"* Bellae croaked, her dry tongue bumping over parched lips. Despite Grym's grumpiness, she was happy to see the two familiar faces sitting to her left.

*"What?"* Grym complained. *"I have a right to gripe. She almost crushed us, we haven't eaten, and that owl up there has been biding his time to devour us."*

*"She's had a bit of a rough time as well,"* Borb replied.

The owl hooted loudly, staring excitedly at the squeaking mice.

*"Quick, get in,"* Bellae said, sitting down and holding open her pocket.

*"What about food?"* Grym demanded as she shoved them in.

Scooting back against the tree, she searched the area around her. The darkness and wide-awake owl made her realize it was the middle of the night. The only faint light was courtesy of that reflected from Verngaurd's many moons.

Her ears perked at each cracking twig, rustling leaf, and animal call. Her eyes buzzed in shades of black as the shadows danced with life. The sounds of the forest seemed magnified and ominous, swimming in the inky night.

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Her eyes scanned the pitch-black woods, mysterious shadows dancing in different gradations of darkness. *Whoever wrote about the stillness of the night was not out in it. They must have been looking out a window,* Bellae thought, bathed in a soup of gloom percolating with life.

*"How long till morning?"* she asked the owl.

No response.

*"Excuse me, owl, how much longer until daylight?"*

He puffed himself up and turned his head away.

*Perhaps he wants my mice before he will talk?* Bellae thought. *"Not going to happen. No more of my friends are dying."*

Loud cracking twigs all around her seized her attention. Shadows of movement whirled everywhere. She tentatively reached out her hand until it seemed to disappear in the soupy darkness. Her heart rate quickened and her chest tightened as fear slithered through her body. Thoughts of Dark Warriors stretching their hands into the darkness and grabbing her fueled her dread.

She placed her hands on top of her head and tried to slow her breaths. The forest seemed to spin, faster and faster. Trees, branches, leaves, and ground blurred into a dizzying backdrop.

Her brain screamed, *There's no way out!* The thick and massive trees whirled closer, forming a prison, as the world started to spin.

*This is a cage.*

*There is no escape.*

Gasping for air, the blurring scenery became solid black.

Sometime later, Grym and Borb rustled her awake.

*"Get up! Get up!"* Borb screamed.

*"Oh, did we have a nice little nap?"* Grym snapped. *"Perfect time for it—nothing really going on or anything. It's not like we are surrounded by hungry beasts."*

*"How long was I out?"*

*"Way longer than would be prudent,"* Grym spouted.

Looking up, Bellae saw the owl still perched above but startled at a loud crashing sound extremely close by. Hooting, the owl flew off in a panic.

She reached for the dagger at her waist, but it was gone. *Oh, no!*

## Rise Above the Storm

*It must have fallen.* Her heart filled with dread. A high-pitched howl from somewhere near pierced the night, inflating her apprehension.

Grym and Borb hustled into her pocket. “*That’s as close as it sounds.*”

A series of incredibly near howls confirmed the creatures’ proximity.

The snapping of twigs and a multitude of footsteps circling all around the forest reminded her of the need to find her dagger. She searched desperately until her fingers tightened around its hilt. Just then, a series of concave black pupils floating ominously in a sea of bright yellow appeared right in front of her. They temporarily disappeared as their heads tilted backwards to bay at the dark tree canopy. Shivers sparked down Bellae’s spine.

When the howling stopped, the terrifying eyes came into view again, and she pressed her back into the tree, wishing she could sink into it and escape.

“*It’s a baby human, not an Elf, so we can eat it!*” a harsh, husky voice vibrated to her left. She turned to see two bright yellow eyes about four feet from hers.

“*I-I’m no baby, and my father is an Elf,*” she stuttered through parched lips.

Her eyes darted around the forest in arcs, catching flashes of yellow eyes and shadows of large animals moving all around her.

“*You understand us?*” a voice rang out a couple feet in front of her.

She let out a little scream of surprise, not realizing one had moved so close. It was a large wolf with ears standing straight up, panting with anticipation. Bellae could feel its ravenous hunger. Unfortunately, it flashed sizable fangs dripping with slaver. Around the jaw area, a good portion of its gray fur was smattered rose—blood memories from previous kills.

Moving closer, its large mouth curled into a relaxed smile. It obviously saw her as no threat. “*You understand us?*” the wolf asked again, impatiently.

“*Yes.*” The tree suddenly felt cold and rough against her back. She squeezed the hilt of the dagger tightly as four more wolves appeared in a ring around her. The one to her left, who had called her a baby, was closest. He was pitch black, except for glowing eyes. His head was down

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with his nose only half an inch off the ground. Even in the darkness, moonlight would occasionally glisten off the saliva dripping methodically, expectantly.

Bellae looked from one to the other. She stopped on the only one that had glowing blue eyes.

*"Beautiful eyes,"* she said. The other wolves chuckled.

*"Did you hear that? You have beautiful eyes!"* one of them growled.

The blue-eyed wolf snarled menacingly, first at the one who had spoken, and then at Bellae. He moved closer until she could hear his harsh, expectant breathing. Her mind raced for a way out. She took a chance. *"I know you cannot kill Elves, and I am the daughter of an Elf,"* she said, full of false courage. Reaching into her cloak, she brought out her Inion medallion.

The blue-eyed wolf paused. "You don't look or smell like an Elf. You lie."

*"Even if you are part Elf, we're too hungry to care, little girl. Plus, the great snows will soon be softly falling in these woods,"* another growled.

A chorus of snarls ripped through the air as they all displayed their fangs. Bellae raised her dagger and slowly stood up despite the cries of sore muscles.

*"She has a little knife—this will be fun,"* the wolf in front snarled. As he did, his whole nose scrunched backwards and wrinkled under his eyes, baring his sharp fangs. His tongue curled in excitement as clear saliva glistened in the pale moonlight.

A small opening in the forest allowed her to glimpse a moon just as wispy clouds slid around its edges, causing its reflected light to shimmer and dance in the mist as if it were bracing a frigid wind. She felt a chill of fear mingling with rising anger. *What do I do?* Thinking of Friar, she answered herself. Moving with surprising quickness, she slashed with her dagger and cut deeply into the first wolf's neck. He howled in pain as blood gushed onto the forest floor. Two of the other wolves sprang towards her in a rage.

Out of nowhere, two large hooves punched into the sides of the lunging wolves. They howled in agony and as they flew past her, slamming into the two remaining pack members. The four enraged and



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tangled wolves slid into a tree to her right. Looking up, she saw a massive horse snorting with fury.

*"HONEY!"* Bellae squealed in pure joy. For the first time in a long while, her body shook with utter happiness. *"Get them!"* she encouraged.

The wolf she had slashed lay writhing in front of her. The blood spurting from the gaping wound in his neck was joined by blood gurgling out of his nose and mouth.

*"Nice kill,"* Honey cheered as she jumped over the writhing wolf and landed hard on two of the entangled wolves. She proceeded to stomp them repeatedly. Over and over her hooves battered into their bodies, sending up a chorus of sickening cracks and crunches, which echoed as their bones fractured. Soon, their lifeless bodies had blood trickling from all barren orifices: eyes, noses, and mouths.

The two remaining wolves skirted away and began circling about six feet away. Honey snorted while rising up on her back hooves, her front legs kicking wildly.

The wolves circled a few times. Howling at the moons in agonal frustration, they left. For several minutes after their departure, Honey paced and sniffed while scanning the woods for any sign of them.

*"Honey, we need to go. They may come back, with friends."*

*"Just relax for a moment,"* Honey said.

*"Where are the others? Where's Gimelli? I need to get to Friar."*

Honey walked over to stand directly in front of her. The mare neighed and seemed to smile. Quickly rearing up, she smashed the dagger from Bellae's hand. Stinging pain rang up her arm from the jarring blow as the dagger fluttered into the woods.

*"Honey!"* Bellae said, hopelessly bewildered.

*"You won't be going anywhere except to the White Wizard,"* Honey said ominously. *"I will take you to a portal and Ifrean."*

Shaking her head, Bellae chuckled.

*"This is funny?"*

All Bellae's previous joy evaporated, leaving a shell of exhaustion and confusion. She leaned back against the tree and shook her head in disbelief. *"You know what? Yeah, it kind of is. You have GOT to be kidding me. Can this get any worse?"*

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*"That's a fool's question,"* Honey snorted in disgust, reveling in Bellae's misery. *"Things can always get worse, much worse. My master would have hated it if those idiots killed you. He wants to savor eliminating you, of course, after he tortures you for information about the crystals you and your putrid kind keep hidden,"* Honey stated coldly. *"Oh, did you think you were the only one who can speak with animals?"*

*"What information? What crystals?"*

Honey neighed, snorting in her face. *"I would advise you not to play the stupid act. It will prolong your agony. He was afraid you would get past the Nishi, so sent me in."*

*"Honey, I honestly have no idea what you're talking about."*

Honey snorted in contempt. *"The White Wizard instructed me to infiltrate your castle, knowing your fondness for animals. I can't believe I had to spend all that time with the old fool, Quengeln, just to get to you. That buffoon can't even control his own urine, much less a horse. He was always wetting himself and blaming us for 'spilling water' on his pants. Then I had to listen to you and your stupid mice string along your banal banter day after day. After all that, here you are telling me you know nothing?"*

The horse paused. *"You better remember the prophecy and the location of the Power Crystals before you meet the White Wizard. Or is it your jerk brother, Jumeaux, who knows? The White Wizard was shrewd to change the order and bring you both in."*

Tears formed in Bellae's eyes as her arms dropped heavily to her sides. *"I don't know anything about the ridiculous prophecy and I couldn't care less about it,"* she added, holding her Inion. Her hand brushed against the kalma-kunnia, and a spark ran through her body, and, briefly, two evil eyes flashed before her.

*"Ah, I guess I can let you in on a little secret. The White Wizard swapped the original kalma-kunnia with that version so he could keep tabs on you,"* Honey said impassively. *"That's how I found you."*

Bellae wrenched it off and threw it deep into the forest.

*"The master won't like you hurling away his toy. I hope he lets me watch your torture. Maybe he'll even let me help. Half the fun is the screaming,"* Honey said icily.

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The surprise of Honey's betrayal did as much damage as the double-cross itself. "No, no, no, no," Bellae said through thickening tears. Wanting to yell and scream in frustration, she raised her head. No new sound came, only her continued sobs. Bellae shook her head in disgust at how wrong she had been about this horse.

*"Who are you?"* she sobbed.

*"I am the one who fooled the famous animal talker, the Chosen One, or at least the sister to the One. I couldn't fool Crann, the slug. I'm the one who will make you walk and beg the whole trip to the portal, and then on to the White Wizard. Maybe a few bruises to soften you up, huh?"* the horse said, rearing up to hit her. Bellae closed her eyes and waited.

A loud neigh pierced the air followed by a booming thud as hoof met flesh. Bellae cringed, her eyes shut so tightly it contorted her face in ghastly anticipation.

Nothing.

She waited longer before cautiously opening her eyes, peering into the gloom.

*"YEAH!"* she screamed louder than she ever had in her life. There, in front of her was Crann. His upright mane stood at attention, and his eyes blazed with rage. A growling neigh rumbled through him. His thick cord-like tail swayed ominously—it would be the one advantage that he had against the much larger Honey.

*"I knew you were an evil jackass,"* Crann neighed. *"I followed you. Thanks for leading me to Bellae, you second-rate donkey!"*

*"Getting to kill you, and take the girl? Fantastic!"* Honey replied.

The two horses stood looking at each other. Both had fire and malice in their eyes. Honey moved first, rearing up and baring her teeth. Both front legs kicked wildly. Crann also reared up and started kicking. Honey moved quickly to her right side and bit down deeply on the back of Crann's neck. With her teeth clamped, she shook her head, tearing and ripping at the flesh of Crann's neck.

Bellae's knees wobbled, stunned at the pain radiating from her beloved horse's neck.

Crann shook his head wildly and tried to buck away. Honey let go only to take several more bites, each sending blood gushing. Crann

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used a break to whip his tail. It smacked loudly against Honey's neck. The blow startled the large mare long enough to allow Crann to turn around and kick both rear legs up. His back right hoof slammed into Honey's chest. The blow startled her, and she briefly put her head down in pain.

Crann circled around and raised his front hooves in hopes of hammering Honey's stunned head. Crann came down on air as Honey quickly raised up before biting down on Crann's already battered neck. Crann neighed in agony at the new gash inflicted. The two horses circled each other like a tornado, both trying to get the upper hand and bite the other's neck. They crashed head to head hard enough to buckle their front knees, and both went down briefly. Honey was the first one up, and she pounded Crann's head with two quick blows before spinning and landing a back kick to his shoulder. In desperation Crann sent his tail limply flying towards Honey. It landed ineffectively as Honey neighed pompously. Bellae screamed and frantically began searching for her dagger.

"Crann will not die!" she shrieked. Frustration ripped at her, wondering why she hadn't looked for her dagger earlier. Honey was talking to Crann in a quiet voice, and she knew she had to hurry. Finally, she saw a faint glint of moonlight on metal a few feet away and quietly picked up her dagger. Morning was just starting to manifest itself as the predawn light whirled together with the still-controlling darkness.

A loud rattling noise from the canopy above made Bellae jump, and she dropped her recently found prize. A black form dropped down from the sky and landed right on Honey. Two gigantic talons ripped into Honey's neck and back. The mare whinnied in pain, and her whole body convulsed in agony. Large wings spread out and blocked out the small amount of light that had been filtering through the canopy above.

Honey reared up high and bared her teeth. She chomped desperately several times before starting to weaken. A feeble whinny gurgled out. The creature's face slammed into Honey's muzzle, and its razor-sharp beak ripped off the entire front half of the horse's face.

Like a torrential rain, blood roared out of the horse's destroyed face, forcibly splattering on the dry fall leaves. Honey collapsed with a

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resounding thud. Nothing left of her life but the flow of sterile blood to be fed back to the earth.

Bellae turned from the horror to grab her dagger.

“You will not kill Crann!” she screamed. Her hand closed around the hilt in a death grip. It would not fall from her hand again. She swiveled to see the giant creature with its two large talons dug deep into the bloodied back of Honey. The creature raised its head and let out a primordial screech. With several intense flaps of its wings, it lifted the limp horse up and swung it out of the way, spraying blood ubiquitously over all the nearby trees. Honey’s body flopped to a heavy landing and then was completely still. A rigid silence settled on the forest.

Crann looked up at the creature with dazed eyes. Bellae rushed to stand between the creature and Crann.

“Don’t you recognize me, Bellae?”

“Arend?”

“Of course. Sorry I couldn’t get to you sooner. Several groups of Dark Warriors made it into the forest looking for you,” the Eaglian said. “After I took care of them, I was disoriented and couldn’t find you until you screamed.”

His white-feathered head was stained cardinal with blood. Bellae flinched at the blood and strands of flesh dripping freely from his terrifying orange-yellow beak. Human-like hands rose up to pick at rows of teeth, which came into view as he opened his fearsome beak.

As Bellae looked closer, she saw his muscular shoulders, arms, and abdomen were like a human’s. Waist down, he was covered in thick brown feathers. His legs dove backwards before doubling back underneath, as if his knees were backwards. They ended in two mammoth claws.

Crann neighed weakly, and Bellae felt his pain.

“*Oh, Crann. I’m so sorry,*” she said thickly, her throat choking with emotion at his bloodied body.

“*I told you that horse was evil,*” Crann said feebly.

“*Rub it in. I deserve it. Although, you didn’t use your tail enough in the fight.*”

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*“Always a critic,”* Crann neighed. His brain whirled in fatigue and pain. His eyelids fluttered before closing as his body crumpled to the ground.

*“Crann!”* Bellae cried in desperation, quickly putting her head to his chest. His heart was beating. She moved her cheek to his mouth. Warm air was flowing regularly.

*“Oh, Crann, I love you. I shall never ride another horse again.”*

“Are you okay?” Arend asked, looking over Bellae with concern.

“Yes,” she replied in Ainmhi Caint.

“You just talk with me, Bellae,” he said. “I don’t understand when you use your gift.”

“Of course, I’m sorry.”

“I never knew someone could get into as much trouble as you. My dad always said girls are trouble—I guess he was right.” At this, he started truly laughing. Suddenly, the laughter stopped, and a series of high-pitched noises reverberated out of him, “Yee-weeent-weeent-weeeent... yee-weeeent-yee-weeeent.”

Seeming embarrassed at the noise, he stopped laughing and looked down.

“My dad says that sound is primitive and comes from here,” he said, pointing at his chest. “Our syrinx is a place where regular birds make their noises, but of course, we Eaglians are part human and have vocal cords as well and...” he paused, and for the first time, Bellae saw him for what he was, a boy.

He moved his two arms as he talked, and his large talons shuffled nervously as he continued. “Dad says we use should use our vocal cords—we are not simple birds.”

He stopped abruptly. This time he cocked his head from side to side and twisted his head around.

“What is it?” Bellae asked, peering into the brightening forest.