

THE DASH CREATOR

THE FINAL BOOK IN THE EYE OF ZUL SAGA



KEN BYARS

The Dash Creator

The Final Book in the Eye of Zul Saga

Published by Ken Byars
Copyright 2010 Ken Byars

Books in The Eye of Zul Series

The Eye of Zul

Temporal Destiny

The Purifier

Castrophonius

The Spark – The Search for Arcaninity

The Dash Creator

Prologue

6 blades, 3 balanced pairs, created to interact and act together:

1 to link them all and control them – The Eye of Zul

1 to control time – The Adamantine Blade (Temporal Destiny)

1 created from the heart of their world – The Blade of Molten Fire (The Purifier)

1 from the cold frigid ice of the north – The Castrophonius

1 to control life – The Spark

1 to control death – The Dash Creator

How does one reassemble a sword when they have no idea how many segments there are, or where they are? How do they find each blade? What is the connection between the blades? How do they fit together? Why do they go together?

Tatiana, a 16 year old scullery maid, and play toy, whose destiny is to find the blades, and reassemble a sword she has never heard of, is calling for her attention. Forbidden to handle anything bigger than a paring knife, how is she going to wield a sword? Where does she find the courage to step out and fulfill her destiny? Just what is that destiny? Accompanied by four unlikely travelers all brought together by a sequence of events that none could have predicted must find one that is called The Chosen One and help them find each blade while fighting the attempts of the goddess Dorganna to prevent her completing the sword.

Hornswoggles Gideon Blackheart known as Horny by his friends is a Dwarf. Trained in all matters concerning the shadows and a master with blades that is capable of slipping from sight at the flick of a wrist. A thief by trade, and assassin by choice, who has seen more than he cares to remember is much too old to care, but still young enough to know better and enjoy it.

A Human healer, Varook Sakarov is a historian, cook and administrator. An adept Majik User and an expert healer who is timid, out of his element, loyal and fiercely protective. Clearly on his way to becoming his master's replacement but with a lot left to learn. His emotions are put to the test as he cares for this band of misfits.

A Giantess Ranger, Adanac Neriad, master markswoman, deadly swords-woman, loyal follower, body guard and lover. Her tracking abilities are second to no one, her ability to move unseen or unheard mind chilling. Her constant companion a large saber-cat at first then a cobalt wolf is always at her side.

A Forest Elf, Commander Snooklepig McFiggins is the Diplomatic Emissary of the House of Glacerton, Commander of his Lord's personal guard, shape shifting Druid. He is an adept fighter as a dire bear, stealthy tracker as a shadow cat, and someone that flies with wild abandonment as a majestic eagle.

Will they fit together? Can they help guide Tatiana to her ultimate goal? Will she willingly take up her quest? Will she fulfill her destiny? Can she reassemble the sword?

Each linked to one, all created for each other. One blade dependent on another all needed to complete the Eye of Zul. Can The Chosen One pass the test? Can she combine the blades? Control them. Use them? Or will they consume her, her fate to die alone, cold in an unmarked grave?

Chapter 1

Tatiana, Varook Sakarov, Adanac Neriad, Horny and Commander McFiggins had found the Blade of Arcanity and were still amazed at how it had melded with the existing blades. A few of the Gnomes, with greed in their hearts, had freed one of the most deadly demons to have walked in the Underworld. They had met the challenge head on and fought a fierce battle on a small strip of sand at the edge of the Gnomish territory. Horny's masterful blade work had ultimately killed the demon as he fought to keep Tatiana alive.

Kaidell Snowdance's warning when they had first met was fulfilled. Horny died fulfilling his promise leaving behind a heart broken group of grieving friends.

The group now smaller by one, travelled to the Elvish nation in search of the last blade, hearts heavy with their loss where they discovered that Horny's empire was vast. His dying wish, honoured by Tatiana, was to adopt her as his sole heir.

The blade of Li Lung filled Tatiana's mind with an urgency as the Eye of Zul needed to be balance once again. They once again set out on an epic journey through unfamiliar territory, across lands filled with dangers. Tatiana fought Dorganna's suggestion that she was not worthy to wield the blade while her friends fought to keep her alive.

Tatiana struggling with the need to save her friend is whisked away to face another challenge while Adanac lay dying at her. Anorac, the first Chosen one lays the final challenge of the Blade Li Lung before her. Can she restore life, create life or give life as easily as she can take it?



Tatiana stood with her hands on her hips, frustrated that the answers were not coming. The tree of life stood before her in a glade that she didn't recognize.

The image of Anorac, the first sword wielder, studied Tatiana, "You will find the blade where you least expect it. It signifies life; it represents the spark that creates life. If you are worthy to use it you will have the power over life and death. Do not take that responsibility lightly. There is a cost for the use of its majik, one that you will need to discover. You must complete the test of Li Lung before you can meld the blades. You have taken life can you give it, create it, or return it? That is your test. Prove you are worthy to wield control over death and life."

"Wait," said Tatiana desperately. "Why does the Sword talk to me? Am I going crazy?"

Anorac smiled before answering her. "The sword is imbued with the life blood of six different dragons, their majik as well as the majik of each race. It has the ability to communicate with the Chosen One because only it can teach you how to use it properly. What it did for me will be different than what it will help you unlock. Use the knowledge wisely and it will never fail you."

“How can I create life?” demanded Tatiana staring at the tree. “Everything the sword has taught me is that it has to be joined to the other blades. Without them the sword is not complete. Am I supposed to use this blade alone, un-joined with the others?”

Tatiana reached for the blade again. As her hand touched the pommel her mind filled with images of the creation of life; images from the creation of the world, to the mysteries of creating a baby to the growth of a mighty oak, all linked together. As suddenly as the beauty of life filled her mind, their lives flashed past her. She gasped as she witnessed their joys and sorrows until finally they lay dead, reclaimed by the world around them. The only thing common was the world in which they lived in.

She released the pommel and stepped back as images continued to sweep through her mind. She caught glimpses of familiar scenes but they were pushed away as strange ones replaced them.

“Stop,” she screamed sobbing as she fell to her knees. “I can’t take this anymore. Why are you doing this to me?”

If you do not understand the significance of life and death how can you take it or create it?

Tatiana continued to sob as her emotions churned. “I don’t understand. What do you want from me? Enough of this either come and face me Cimion or stop interfering.”

What is life?

“What do you mean?” she said through her sobbing.

What is life? was repeated with more urgency.

“St ... st ... stop being so mys ... mysterious, the question you ask is not that simple,” she said now getting angry.

The Sword’s voice remained silent.

Tatiana hesitated and made several attempts before she stopped stuttering and could control her thoughts. “Life is that spark that which gives us a reason to live. It is the love between two people. It is the blood running through my veins.”

Is that all? What about trees, plants, the world around you.

Tatiana looked confused at the blade. “I guess they are alive.”

Life is more than you warm blooded creatures. The responsibility of life includes all life. If you cannot understand that how will you control it?

“I don’t know. I never thought of plants, trees and the earth being alive. Do they bleed? Can they communicate with each other? Can they think?”

In some cases yes, in others no, but they contribute to the life cycle of others. Can you live without water?

“No.”

Yet water is not a sentient being but all forms of life need it to survive, plants, animals, people. What about air?

“This discussion would be better suited with Varook, not with me.”

Maybe or maybe not. You are the one that must find the answers. What is the penalty for taking a life?

“Penalty?” she asked.

Yes penalty. There is a cost for everything, some of it so inconsequential that we never even notice it.

“I have never thought of it that way. Someone must mourn their loss of life, but who mourns the loss of plant life, trees, birds or animals?”

Their own kind, Druids mourn the senseless loss of trees. Their love only harvests what is needed, never taking more than can be used at one time. Animals and birds mourn the loss of their own. Wolves howl to express their losses. Some animals will not leave the side of their dead for days.

“I think I am beginning to understand,” said Tatiana.

We will see. Only once you completely understand the meaning of life will you fully control the blade of life.

Tatiana gasped as the blade floated free from the base of the tree. She drew her incomplete sword and watched, spell bound as the blade fused with the other two forming a balanced sword. She drew the other half of the Eye of Zul and stood mesmerized by the colours that danced around the fused sword.

The worlds around her flashed and she found herself standing over Adanac her body cold, her life force gone.

“No,” she cried out her mind searching the blade for any clue that would help her to recall her Adanac.

Varook, said the voice in her head.

“Yes Varook can help her,” she said frantically looking around for him.

She is beyond his help. Varook.

“Just once I wish you would stop being so damn cryptic,” she said in frustration. “I am not a learned person. I need clear instructions, something that makes it easier to find my way.”

Adanac’s spirit is still here, waiting on you. It is tied to you, like a golden thread. Remember Kim Odo’s Dragon, Varook. Remember what Cimion and Adanac have told you about death and crossing over.

Tatiana struggled to separate her emotions as the fear of having lost Adanac forever kept her mind in a confused state. *How did we get out of the Underworlde?*

Tatiana played the scene over and over in her mind before she realized that there had to be an invisible thread or string that Cimion followed as they ran for the portal. She could see something shiny reflect off of his fingers as they ran across the bleak landscape.

Her mind shifted as she pulled another scene deep from the recesses of her mind. She could see, as clear as day, Varook laying on the ground, almost dead, and Horny stopping her from using the sword's majik to restore his life. He was yelling that she was going to kill him if she used the Sword's majik as it wasn't balanced.

Tatiana drew her completed sword reveling in the power that surged through her filling her with desire. She dipped the blade and allowed the tip to rest on Adanac's chest.

How simple it would be just to run her through. Finish all this worry. No more burdens, no more worries said a hollow voice in her mind.

"Who is there?" she cried whirling away from Adanac. She was met by a callous laugh that rocked off the walls. "You are mine, you can't fool me. I will have that sword yet."

"Dorganna? Never, this sword is going to bring you down, stop you."

"We have just started our dance," she said. "I am just warming up. Nothing you can do or say will stop me. You are mine, just like your dead friend there."

"Adanac," gasped Tatiana. She whirled and set the tip of the sword against Adanac's chest and envisioned the thin thread that tied her soul to the empty shell. Slowly she willed the thread to return blocking out Dorganna as her calls attacked her innermost being.

"Adanac, it is not your time, return to me, to us. McFiggins needs you, I need you," Tatiana cried her voice filled with emotion and turmoil.

Dorganna howled and railed against her. Her words cutting deeply like a cat of nine tails. Tatiana flinched as her soul suffered the brunt of each attack ripping deeply, leaving behind invisible wounds.



"Who is calling me," said Adanac confused as she staggered through the bleak territory. Ahead lay a lake as black as a moonless night its surface as calm and flat as sheer ice. A boat sat alongside a wooden dock that had seen better days. A tall figure in a dark hooded cloak stood waiting in the rotting planks. No emotion showing on his face as a lantern swayed gently in a breeze that that only the hooded figure could feel.

"Adanac Neriad do you have coin for your passage?" asked a cold icy voice.

“What voyage?” she asked lost and still very confused.

“Your voyage to Valkerie of course, did you not die? Is this not the expected result of that death?” replied the figure a laugh building in his body.

“Why am I going to Valkerie?”

“Because my dear, you are dead,” he replied his laughter growing louder as a shocked look covered her face.

“Dead? That is not possible.”

“Ah but it is, we have been waiting for you,” said the old hag approaching. “You and your meddlesome friend Tatiana sent us here. We cannot cross over and I am hoping neither can you so we have something to play with.”

Adanac’s figure began to glow as a slender thread tied around her waist lit up. She felt herself being tugged backwards. At first she resisted, but it grew stronger until she felt herself gliding through the air.

“No,” screamed the old hag. “I won’t be cheated again. Stop her, she must not escape.”

Adanac ran following the thread as it insistently led her on an unknown path. Every time she fought its tug her mind filled with confusion and loss. When she stepped out allowing it to guide her she felt peace. As she ran the dead were quickly left behind until she was alone once again.

Adanac shuddered, resolute in staying ahead of her enemies with her feet pounding as fast as her heart. One after another hideous beasts charged towards her only to fall short and be left behind. She looked back over her shoulder and smiled as the light became brighter and her journey towards the light picked up more speed.

Her memories were returning, her desire to live now restored.

She gasped, as she thundered through the light.



Tatiana concentrated on pulling the thin golden thread that kept Adanac’s soul grounded in reality. Her mind reached into the sword and created a shield around them both thwarting most of Dorganna’s attacks. The closer Tatiana sensed Adanac’s soul was to returning to her body the more intense the attacks were becoming. A bright flash filled the cave as a loud voice boomed bouncing off the walls.

“You will stop right now,” said a member of the Council.

Dorganna screamed. “Why should I? We are going to meet in combat anyway.”

“Because the council has spoken. Unless you wish to take us all on you will stop immediately. There is a place and a time designated for your claim on this realm. You will not interfere with it in advance.”

“And who is going to stop me? You are weak and impotent. You are no match for me,” she screamed renewing her attack on Tatiana.

Tatiana groaned and shuddered as she fought to retain her grip on Adanac’s thread, clutching it with both hands. It had slipped from her hands twice as she suffered the brunt of Dorganna’s attacks.

Dorganna shrieked as a bolt of white light streaked towards her flaring on impact and pushing her back, but her shield held. She turned to face her attackers when she was encased in bright white light that burned her eyes and scorched her perfect skin. Screaming in pain she released her hold on Tatiana and with a loud clap of thunder retreated out of the mountain.

The mountain shook as Adanac drew a deep breath gasping. Weakly she looked up at Tatiana and asked. “How did you do that?”

“It was the sword. It was the test of the final blade. Please don’t make me do that again,” Tatiana said triumphantly.

Cimion appeared next to them and helping them stand said “We must leave the mountain. I am afraid that Dorganna’s parting scream may have caused the rocks to become unstable.”

Tatiana pulled away and moved towards the room where Varook and McFiggins were encased in their prison. Cimion reached out and pulled her back into his sphere of protection. “They are safe, others have rescued them. We will meet up with them shortly.” The room glowed and in a flash disappeared, both women losing consciousness.

Chapter 2

“Adanac, Tatiana, you are both safe and sound,” gasped Varook as he ran across the room. “We thought you were lost.”

“Almost,” gasped Adanac. “Need to rest.”

“What happened?” asked McFiggins as he gently picked up Adanac and held her close. He moved across the room, laying her down on a soft bed and knelt anxiously beside her waiting for a response.

“Underworlde, old hag, Dorganna. No coin,” mumbled Adanac before passing out.

McFiggins looked to Cimion confused, waiting on an answer that wasn't coming.

Varook tended to Tatiana and gasped in shock when he got a full look at her. “She has been beaten mentally, her soul is bleeding. Who did this? They will pay for this?” He held her close settling onto another bed with her in his arms. “Did she complete the sword?” he asked. “If not she is not going back in there alone.”

Cimion nodded, cringing as the full impact of what happened to Tatiana settled in. Looking upwards he shook his head before stepping forward. “Dorganna has violated the rules of engagement,” he said carefully gently moving Varook away from Tatiana. His hands began to glow as he lowered his head seemingly lost in a trance as his outstretched hands travelled the length of her body, barely a hairs width between them. Tatiana gasped and coughed, her body twitching if she suffered a massive seizure.

Varook tried to break Cimion's grip on Tatiana but could not move him. He reached for the Eye of Zul but was stopped when another hand clamped on his and pulled him back. “Are you sure you want to use that sword against a god? What do you think you would accomplish even if you could hang on to it long enough to use it?”

“Let go,” Varook snapped struggling against McFiggins' grip. “He is hurting Tatiana. I must stop him before he kills her.”

McFiggins shook his head and forcibly turned him to watch what was going on. “Cast your spell, look at her life lines, and tell me what you see.”

Varook spoke the ancient words and gasped at what was revealed. “Her life lines are a mess. Some are tied in knots, some that are cut should be joined, while other's look like they are missing.”

“What is Cimion doing?”

“His energy is untangling the mess Dorganna left behind. He is attempting to pull everything back to normal. Why is she reacting the way she is if he is genuinely helping her?”

“Look closer, do you see the black star? Dorganna has left her mark and it is fighting everything that Cimion is attempting to do. Unless they can remove the malicious growth I fear she may not make it.”

Another beam of light joined Cimion’s followed by another. The room was flooded with healing beams of light. After several intense moments Tatiana stopped twitching, her breathing settled and became steady as black tendrils were sucked into the healing beams and up through the ceiling disappearing from their sight.



“Varook, why are you staring at me? Have I done something wrong?” demanded Tatiana weakly. “How long have I been out?”

“Your beautiful red hair has turned snow white,” said Varook

“What do you mean?” she demanded as she pulled her hair in front of her face. Pulling the covers back she looked and started laughing so hard tears rolled down her cheeks.

“What’s wrong,” asked Adanac.

“Your red head with the fiery temper is no longer,” she said smiling.

Varook turned red again and Tatiana just smiled at him. “I wonder if that was the cost of using the sword to restore a life or a result of the battle with Dorganna.”

“Does it matter?” asked Varook brusquely. “It still has a cost that could become dangerous. When were you fighting Dorganna?” demanded Varook.

“When I retrieved Adanac’s soul from the Underworlde,” she replied simply.

“You did what?” demanded McFiggins. “Alright ladies time to fess up. You were supposed to retrieve the last blade and fuse it with the rest of the blades. What actually happened?”

Varook shoved mugs of hot tea into everyone’s hands and listened intently as Adanac and Tatiana recounted what had happened.

“That must be why the gods violated their own rules and healed you,” said Varook suddenly ashamed of his thoughts and intentions. McFiggins rested his hand on Varook’s shoulders and shook his head with an understanding smile.

“What do we do now?” asked McFiggins.

“Now we have to search through everything we have to find the place of the last battle. But be warned, Dorganna is approaching a state of insanity. It took several gods to drive her away from Tatiana. She is getting stronger and more desperate. Any of us could be her next target,” said Adanac. “And I for one don’t want to go through that again. Once was enough for me. Next time I might not be so lucky.”



“The last battle was at the Ladies Keep. I don’t think she would be that brazen to try and use that place again,” said Tatiana.

“Would it not make sense to open her portal in an area she already controls?” asked McFiggins.

Varook nodded as he studied the map. “The Gnomish kingdom is too isolated,” he said. “There are pockets of her supporters but none as large as our green friends and it is the largest continent in the world. Once she opened the portal would it not make sense to release them where they would be hardest to track?”

Groaning Tatiana looked at him saying. “Do you mean to say we are going back to face those damn Trolls? I thought we were free of them.”

“Not yet I’m afraid,” said Varook. “We must go to the center of their old domain; one that is jointly held by the Orcs and Trolls.”

McFiggins’ head snapped around gasping. “You mean we have to travel through the ancient forest to get there don’t you?”

“I am not sure. If I can prepare myself to face the dark majik protecting that tome it may hold the answers we need,” said Varook.

“No,” said Tatiana. “I am not going to take the chance and lose you as well. Calling a soul back once was hard enough I am not sure I can do it again.”

“We have no choice, unless you want to march into Alandea and demand access to their archives.”

Tatiana sighed. “Do it,” she said testily. “I don’t like it, I am against it, but we don’t have much choice do we?”

“What if we ask the sword?” said Adanac quietly resting on her bed.

“What was that?” asked McFiggins.

“Stand in front of a portal and ask the sword to point the way,” she said. “It has pointed us in the direction we needed all along, why not trust it now?”

“Would that alert Dorganna we are coming?” asked Adanac. “I am not so sure that stepping into her lair with her having time to prepare is such a good idea. I don’t think the four of us are up for a fight against hundreds if not thousands of her minions.”

“I need to check the book before we decide what to do. We have to make the time so I can prepare myself to withstand the black majik swirling around it,” said Varook firmly.

A bright light drew their attention to the other side of the room. Cimion and two others stepped into the room. Cimion held a glowing bag in one hand and his staff in another. Opening the bag he looked at Varook saying. “The book in question put it in here. You will not read it, or attempt to read it.”

“Why not?” demanded Varook. “I am starting to understand Horny’s paranoia with you people. I am tired of being manipulated by unseen hands.”

“The book,” repeated Cimion. “Please don’t make me take it by force.”

“Give him the damn book Varook,” said Tatiana exasperated. She looked at Cimion and said in anger. “I am tired of being your pawns in this little game of power. It is time to explain just what is going on, or we quit.”

“You can’t quit,” said Cimion.

“Have you forgotten who has the sword? If Dorganna is afraid of what that sword can do. It stands to reason that you would be as well. Why haven’t any of the gods taken up the call of the sword? Why is it a mortal? Or is that the problem? You can control mortals and stop them from realizing the sword can make them immortal but you gods already know what the sword is capable of. It would give any of you more power than anyone person should wield. It would make you not only immortal but unbeatable,” said Tatiana. “Dorganna has found a way around the rules that govern the use of the sword. She has found a way to take the Sword of Adamantine and turn it for her own use and that scares you. I met Anorac, I am not stupid.”

Cimion stared at her and repeated, “The book.” He held the bag open.

“What is so important about that book?” demanded Varook. “What are you trying to hide from us?”

Tatiana moved between Varook and Cimion and drew her sword. With a deft twist of her wrists the sword separated into two blades. “Answer our questions or I will separate these blades and litter them all over the continent.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” said one of Cimion’s companions. “With everything you have been through.”

“Don’t test me,” she said. “Remember I have made it through all the tests to stand before you. I have endured the changes, suffered the losses. What has it cost you, a few sleepless nights?”

Cimion’s companion, Dreamstealer, raised his hand and Tatiana crossed the blades and advanced on him. He cried out in pain as his power was absorbed by the sword. Cimion pushed him away breaking the contact. Facing Tatiana he said “Please put the sword back in the scabbard. I will tell you what I can. Before we start I must insist the book be placed inside this bag before it is too late.”

“Start with the book. If I am satisfied you are not lying to me we will surrender the book,” said Tatiana.

“Me, lie?” exclaimed Cimion. “It is not in my make up to lie.”

“Horny once told me that the truth is only the truth to the person that tells it and another that has the same opinion.”

“Point taken. The book is the secret behind Dorganna’s power, it is a road map of a journey deep into the influences of dark majik. If read it would release several very powerful demons to run free on this world. It took us centuries to track them down and imprison them. We couldn’t destroy them. We don’t know how they were created. Some believe they are Dorganna’s offspring. If you were to see her in her real form you would run in terror. The power in that book will consume you,” continued Cimion. “You would become her most powerful minion. With your intimate knowledge of Tatiana she would not have a chance to stand against her.”

Varook stepped forward and dropped the book into the open bag which was quickly closed and secured inside Cimion’s cloak. “Let us sit. We could be here a while,” he said waving to the benches around the table.

Chapter 3

“At one time we were all powerful majik-users within our own races. As we studied we discovered the secrets of this world and chose to ascend to immortality rather than die,” said Cimion. “Through the centuries we became gods as primitive clans fought, struggled for supremacy. We recognized that if something didn’t change the world would fall into complete chaos and eventually destroy itself. We gathered and created a council of elders among the immortals, always attempting to maintain a balance between good and evil. Then Dorganna upset the balance we had tried so hard to maintain. We finally worked out a compromise which she continually tested and tried to break. Dragons were created to fill the need as watchers over the world. But Dorganna found a way to influence them until we had wars between them as well. She sat back and gloated over the way she had messed up our cherished balance”

“The first punishment was to encase her in light for a few centuries. When she was released she licked her wounds and behaved according to our principals, all the while plotting behind our backs. The second time was more subtle but eventually she over played her hand and was encased in light for a millennium. The light was especially hard on her this time, her chosen realm being darkness was banished from her presence.

“We finally decided that to maintain the balance we would create a sword that had the best of everything we stood for. But her influence enticed a group of greedy power hungry humans into her sphere of influence and the Great War was fought. She suffered major damage and would have slunk off to nurse her wounds except she became trapped. This time she was encased in light for thousands of years.

“We thought she had learned her lesson, the sword was disassembled and the blades were hidden where none of us could find them. When Dorganna struck this time she used others to do her dirty work. She had learned the art of manipulation and has become its master. The sword sensed the imbalance and called for The Chosen to arise once again. Several tried to answer but they all failed until you Tatiana. No one was further from the image that Dorganna thought the sword bearer should be. But she found your Achilles heel and almost succeeded.”

“My brother, Redman,” said Tatiana.

“At an early age she prodded, pushed you, and drove you until that fateful day when the building collapsed separating the two of you. She groomed Redman, fed his fears, convincing him he was her champion, her sword bearer. At first she used gifts, then sex, until she finally had him trapped, unable to run, unable to escape. Little did he know the fate that would be waiting him. She promised him you, as a plaything, but that wouldn’t have lasted. Dorganna hates you more than anything else in her world. She would have tossed Redman aside to crush you, only he didn’t see it.

“Dorganna is unstable. She must be stopped for good this time. We can’t do it. She has become

too powerful and if she forces a showdown between the immortals we are afraid that a number of us will cross over and join her, and then all will be lost. That was until you re-assembled the sword, the blessed sword. There is something in the combination of majik, runes and dragons blood that she is afraid of. Something we have yet to figure out. Only you can wield it. If one of us was to pick it up and you were still alive it would kill us. Once you are dead there will be a small window of opportunity for anyone to pick it up and use it before the blades separate and disappear once again, possibly forever.

“If she can’t have the sword, no one will. If any of her followers pick up the sword she is doomed. If she picks up the sword we are all doomed. We can help you get to the location of her stronghold, help you enter and face your mortal enemies. But you will need to stand and face her on your own. She will try to trick you with every trick she knows but you must remember, she will face you alone not willing to accept that one of her minions would pick up the sword and defeat her.”

“What can we expect?” asked McFiggins.

“We?” said Cimion.

“Yes us,” said Adanac. “She is not walking into that hornets’ nest alone. She would never make it as far as Dorganna.”

Before Cimion could respond McFiggins stood up and looked down at the immortal seated on the bench. “I promised a Dwarf, a friend that I would protect her until this was done. I am not going back on that promise. He was, is, the best man I ever knew and if he trusted me enough to make that request, let’s just say I will die fulfilling it.”

Varook and Adanac stood next to McFiggins nodding.

Cimion shook his head saying, “No, only Tatiana can enter the portal area. If you three enter it will open the flood gates and her demons will pour into this world like a waterfall during spring run-off. We can’t chance that. The devastation would be unbelievable and I am not sure you would be able to stop them.”

“She is not going alone. She can tell us when we have to stop; she has every other time before this. What makes this time different?” asked Varook.

“This time she isn’t facing the challenges of the swords. This time she is facing the deranged mind of a fanatic and the rules can change at any time. If you enter the portal area Dorganna will have one more weapon to use against Tatiana, and use it she will.”

“Where is her portal?” asked McFiggins resolutely not backing down.

Cimion shrugged his shoulders in defeat and pointed to a large mountain just outside of the Ancient Forest. “If her demons are released the first thing they will do is devour the forest. It will be a battle like they have never faced before. One they will be doomed to lose.”

“Then let’s take the battle to her. We know what can trigger the portals, what if the forest was

to advance on her forces and distract them while we sneak in with Tatiana,” asked Varook.

“What are you suggesting?” asked Cimion suddenly interested.

“What if we could convince the Ancient Ones that it would be in their best interest to help us?” said Varook. “All we need to do is find a way into the ancient city without setting off alarms. We won’t be able to convince them we come in peace if they think we are invaders.”

Cimion sat for a long time lost in thought occasionally mumbling . “it might just work ... No, one of us can’t go with them ... Dorganna will be expecting that ... It is settled then.”

He turned and faced the four of them a weak smile on his face. “We will open a portal to the Ancient City in the Trees for you. It will be up to you to convince the Ancient Ones and the guardian Elves that you are not a threat.”

“No,” countered Tatiana as a shock registered on everyone’s face she continued. “I am tired of being manipulated; only provided half-truths. More of Horny has rubbed off on me than I had thought. You will teach Varook how to use the portal system and he will open a portal for us. You will make sure he has the knowledge to use the complete system. I trust him with my life; he has not only earned it but has my eternal love. You have proven that your techniques are not much better than Dorganna’s, even if you believe the motive justifies the means.”

Cimion tried to sputter his protest but Tatiana cut him off. “My way or we slip away into oblivion and take the sword with us and let you deal with your problem. After all you created the problem, why should we solve it for you?”

“I will discuss this with my colleagues,” he said getting up to leave.

“There is no discussion. Harm my friends in any way and Dorganna will be the least of your worries. Teach him what he needs to know to use the portal system at will or wait until I die and start over. This sword is equally as dangerous to you as it her, otherwise you would have taken it from me a long time ago and completed it yourself.”



“My head hurts,” said Varook rubbing his temples.

“What did he do to you,” demanded Tatiana.

“He taught me everything they know about portals in less than ten minutes by direct infusion into my mind. It is not the best way to learn but it does ensure that it is complete. Now I just need to figure out how to retrieve it. If I had learned it the traditional way I would have learned the retrieval process and the mistakes would guarantee that I would best understand what not to do. Before we use the portal system I should try it in safe locations. I am not sure how my body is going to react to the repeated use of them.”

“What if we step through the portal back to where Osgoode is and then return here?” asked McFiggins. “We could check on our mounts and then return here. Do you know which ones are active and which one’s aren’t?”

“They taught me how to read the symbols, they alone will indicate which ones are working and which ones are dead. If we had to we could force a dead one but we would be trapped there until we could work out a way to leave it using conventional methods,” said Varook.

“Conventional methods?” asked Tatiana.

“On foot, by mount or by boat,” replied McFiggins smiling.

“When do we leave?” asked Tatiana.

“Tomorrow,” said Varook. “I must rest, the style of teaching drained a lot of energy and I don’t want to attempt this without being at full strength. How much time do we have left?”

“Four or five days, maybe a week. Dorganna is getting stronger each day we have to wait,” replied Tatiana worry and pain etched on her face.

“Gather your gear; we are going to see Osgoode now. If it works we will jump to the Ancient City where you can use your majik to convince the Ancient ones to help. I can rest then,” said Varook. Before Tatiana could protest he held up his hand and continued. “We can’t wait. You heard Cimion. She is growing stronger each day. We need their help to make this work and if they are too afraid we may fail before we start.”

Varook stood before the portal mechanism and started setting the markers for Osgoode’s place. The portal lit up and he pushed Tatiana and the other two into the portal before stepping through behind them.

The portal pulled at their bodies, their stomachs threatened to leave their contents spewed across the cosmos. They groaned in pain as they tumbled one on top of each other. As Varook materialized he knocked McFiggins to the floor who landed on Adanac and as her arms flew out to protect her while falling pinned Tatiana to the floor. They all groaned in unison as stomachs began to heave covering everything under them.

Osgoode covered his nose as he fought to keep his lunch down. He pointed down the hallway and while breathing through his mouth said to them. “The wash tubs are the third door on the right. The tubs are big enough for all four of you. Make sure you wear your clothes in and clean them off. We can worry about drying them once they are clean.”

Groaning and moaning they struggled to their feet and shuffled down the hallway. Osgoode shook his head and muttered to himself, “Amateurs. They are going to have to learn how to use the portals or the next time they step through one they could be dead.”



“Drink this,” said Osgoode pushing a bubbling drink into each of their hands. “Drink it all. It will help settle your stomachs. Next time you use a portal drink it first and you won’t have to worry about feeling sick when you exit the portal. You made it there and back but did you find what

you were looking for?"

"Yes and much more," said Varook groaning as he burped. "A lot more."

They quickly recapped the highlights of their excursion leaving out the information about the swords abilities.

"You did what?" demanded Osgoode. "Horny must be dancing up a jig right now. You bested a god, put him in his place? I don't believe it."

"Believe it," said Varook. "I can now take us anywhere we want to go without or without the current portal system. I would not recommend the method of learning they used though. It is intense, painful and a few times I thought I was going mad."

"When do you leave again?" asked Osgoode a serious note in his voice. "There have been a number of inquiries about the four of you being made at every Inn between here and the coast. It will only be a matter of time before they stumble on this place."

"Not if I have anything to do with it," said Tatiana. "Cimion," she called out. When he didn't answer she put her hand on the pommel of her sword and called again with more force.

The light shimmered and Cimion stepped through a portal causing Osgoode to gasp and fall onto his knees. "Get up Osgoode. I appreciate the homage but I am not a god, just immortal," said Cimion helping him to his feet.

"Your secret is good with me," said Osgoode still awe struck that Tatiana could just call him to her.

"Dorganna's minions are getting too close to this place. Is there anything you and your people can do to discourage their activity? Maybe plant a few false rumours in the other direction? Improve the protective spells here? This was Horny's home and I don't want them running amuck over it and possibility finding it by mistake. Our mounts will be staying here until we are done with the witch and then we will be gone as well," said Tatiana.

"I think there are a few enhancements we can make. Subtle changes that will confuse them, but if Dorganna comes calling she will see right through them. You will have to keep her busy someplace else," he replied.

"I can guarantee you if we succeed with our plans she will have more than enough to keep her occupied," said McFiggins.

Cimion nodded and whispered something they couldn't hear. "That should help to start," he said. "I have placed a whisper in the wind that suggests you have moved North towards the Ogres stronghold in search of an ancient text. The text will give you access to the portal that leads directly into Dorganna's stronghold. She knows of the portal but has never been able to find it." A sly smile slipped across his face.

"Oh you are good," said Osgoode. "Are you sure you are not part Thief?"

Tatiana looked at him confused.

“Cimion is the god of Bards, Thieves, Assassins and some Rangers,” explained Adanac. “While he has established some lofty requirements for his followers he has always encouraged the embellishment of the truth, half-truths and not quite lies. This is an example of a not quite lie being put to work with enough credibility to sound true.”

“Ohhh,” said Tatiana. “Horny was right, never trust a god.”

They all laughed as Cimion and Osgoode moved to make subtle changes in the defence spells protecting the place.

Chapter 4

“It is settled then,” said McFiggins. “I will step through the portal first, then Tatiana with her sword still in its scabbard, then Adanac followed by Varook. I will step to the right, Tatiana to the left, Adanac to the right and Varook can stay in the middle.”

“I still don’t understand why my sword has to be in its scabbard?” said Tatiana.

“We don’t know if Dorganna will be alerted every time you draw the sword, or if it will trap you in the world beyond ours in between the portals. Until we understand better where we go when we use the portals it will be safer.”

Osgoode handed out cups of his bubbling brew and motioned for them to drink it. Varook waited until the portal was fully open before he drank his and then motioned everyone to step through. He checked his cloak for the last time ensuring he had extra pouches of the dry powder used to make it and then stepped through.

The air around him turned cold as he was sucked into a long spiraling tunnel. Ghost like shapes whirled past him as he struggled to identify them. Several were huge beasts that he had never seen before, others he recognized and he shivered in fear as they were gone as quickly as they appeared. His stomach clenched as Osgoode’s brew began to work. He sighed in relief as a light began to take shape at the end of the tunnel and his forward motion began to slow. Varook could feel his body beginning to take its normal shape as particles moved back into place. He could now understand some of the fear that Cimion must have felt when they discovered how to use them.

Varook stumbled dropping to one knee as he materialized outside of the portal. He gasped when he looked up to see a wall of shields and pikes slowly advancing. He quickly checked left and right to make sure that his companions were all right before standing tall to address the advancing wall.

“I am Varook, messenger of Cimion the protector of all things good, god of the Bards and Rangers. Why have you greeted us in this fashion?”

The wall stopped and the sound of metal boot heels slamming into the floor almost deafened them. With the precision of a well-honed machine the shields folded back in the center of the wall and tall Elf stepped forward. She wore plate armour that was dull yellow in colour, highlighted with cream shades of white with long slender lines that accented her features. The areas not covered with plate revealed a fine mesh that moved with her as she did. With her hand on her hip next to a long dagger she stood and watched them through slits in her helm. Varook could see two long slender blades sticking out along her sides and their pommels rising just above her shoulders.

“Who are you that you dare enter the forbidden area of the Elven Ancient City of Bellinni?” she asked.

"I am the Chosen One," said Tatiana stepping forward. "I have come to speak with Ancient Ones. We apologize for such an intrusion but Dorganna has left us no choice. The time has come for all peoples to declare whose side they are on. There will be no room for neutrality."

The lone figure turned to face Tatiana. "Prove you are who you say you are, or die here before you can leave this room."

In one fluid motion Tatiana drew the Eye of Zul and held it before the Elf whose movements were faster than the blink of an eye as both her swords appeared in her hands. Tatiana deftly separated the blades and held the balanced swords in her hands. "I would consider your next move very carefully," said Tatiana. "It could be your last." Tatiana stared the Elven woman down and a slow smile crept across her face as the twin swords were slowly returned to her back. She bent down on one knee as she removed her helm. Long flowing silvery hair cascaded down across her shoulders. Every time she moved her long thin ears would pop in and out of her hair as if playing hide and seek.

"I am known as Montrosa, guardian of this city. Forgive us for our caution. There has been a lot of traffic attempting to move through our city and it has become a constant battle to keep the streets clear of unwanted visitors. You are welcome for as long as you wish to stay."

"Thank you, but we must talk with the Ancient Ones immediately. Every day we wait Dorganna becomes stronger. Soon you will be over run and unable to stop them," said Tatiana.

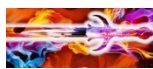
"We will send a runner with your request," said Montrosa. "Until that time please come, refresh yourselves. Let us tend to your needs."

"May I have access to your library," asked Varook. "There may be information there that will help us in our quest to defeat Dorganna?"

Montrosa looked at him suspiciously before saying. "I will forward your request to my superior." She motioned for them to follow her as she stepped through the opening once more.

"Something isn't right," whispered McFiggins. "I am not sure what it is, I just can't put my finger on it. Be ready for anything."

Varook stumbled apologizing as he fell to his knees deftly slipping some tracking sand into the groove between the stones. McFiggins helped him to his feet and supported him while he brushed the dirt from his robes. Gasping painfully he stepped forward carefully studying their escort.



The wall of plate mail, shields and pikes closed around them as they moved along the corridor effectively blocking their view. Varook subtly dropped grains of sand on the stone floor as he staggered along. He became amused as their escort moved to accommodate his movements moving in and out like drunken sailors, never breaking the wall.

Something is definitely wrong. They are functioning as if they were one. I wonder if it is an

illusion? Varook cast a subtle spell and a bright light almost blinded them as they quickly covered their ears as a ringing sound replaced the thumping of plate boots. Before them stood the lone female Elf and two escorts, the rest had disappeared.

“How did you know?” gasped Montrosa drawing her swords. “No one has seen through that illusion.

The Eye of Zul appeared in Tatiana’s hand as she deftly separated them. “Who do you serve?” she demanded.

“No one except the Ancient Ones,” she said warily as she moved lithely around the group her other two companions moving to flank them. McFiggins shifted into a bear and arrows appeared drawn in Adanac’s bow just as quickly. Varook cast a spell and the two escorts hopped around the floor as small rabbits. “Nice parlour trick,” she said savagely launching her attack.

Tatiana concentrated on her blades and felt time slow until it stopped completely. She slipped by the attacking elf removing her swords from her hands before McFiggins wrapped her in a bear hug. Returning time to normal Montrosa gasped in shock as a huge dire bear forced her to the ground unarmed. Her breath whooshed out of her chest as she struggled to knock him off. Strong hands forced her arms behind her back as leather strips secured her forearms. Varook deftly smacked each of the rabbits with his staff, grimacing when he felt bones break. As the escorts materialized they began to groan in pain. Adanac quickly secured their arms, deftly kicking their weapons away as Varook cast healing spells on them.

“Shall we try again?” asked Tatiana squatting next to the woman. “Who do you serve?”

“I already told you, the Ancient Ones. We are the last of their ancient guard. We protected their secrets allowing them to live their lives as they wished. It was a beneficial agreement for both of us as our expected lifespan were similar.”

“Then why attack us? We do not want to attack them,” demanded Adanac.

“You appear using an ancient portal that has lain dormant for centuries. An Elvish Druid, a Giantess Ranger, a Human Majik caster and a Human Warrior. Your arrival was foretold in the ancient texts as the beginning of the end of everything we held dear. Signs have been appearing announcing your arrival, the Orcs are getting bolder. They have enlisted Kobolds in an attempt to steal the ancient texts. They boldly scurry through our streets knowing we cannot stop them. The Ancient Ones are dying slowly, one at a time. They have found a way to kill them. They no longer use fire but disease and pestilence. It takes longer but it is more efficient. Those that die are hacked to pieces and used to fire their huge smoke belching furnaces.”

“So it has begun,” said Varook. “Dorganna has slipped over the edge and is preparing for war. I pray we are not too late. Where is your library? Take us there now. We must begin the search through your ancient tomes for the secret entrance into her realm.” Varook cut the cords binding her arms and handed her back her blades.

“Why would you do that? I could kill you before you could blink,” she asked confused.

“Because we need your help and help that is not coerced is better than that which is forced. You will need to bring me some of this diseased wood as well. Maybe we can figure out how to slow it down if not stop it all together.”

Montrosa sheathed her swords and stood with Adanac’s help. She looked at her companions and Varook nodded. Carefully she cut their bonds and helped them to their feet.

“They will have a headache for a few hours which I do apologise for. It couldn’t be avoided,” explained Varook embarrassment on his face.

Montrosa quickly led them down several corridors and was surprised when Adanac’s bow sang out and they heard a strangled cry in the distance. She smiled as Adanac retrieved her arrows from the dead bodies of Kobolds kicking them off to the side once she made sure they were dead. “A friend of mine had a very strong distaste for these things. At first I thought it was because he was filled with hatred. I learned differently and can now understand why,” she said.

Montrosa paused in front of a room and held her arm up for them to be quiet. Silently she removed her blades before stepping into a room screaming a battle cry. Adanac and McFiggins followed behind her motioning for Varook and Tatiana to stay behind. McFiggins roar could be heard as screams of pain were followed by the sickening crunch of bones breaking as they bounced off walls. The battle was over before they could move to check on their friends. Stepping inside they found dozens of dead Kobolds, their blood filling the air with a sickening stench. McFiggins was standing over something larger than a Kobold, his foot firmly pressed against its mouth.

“A Wyrmpriest,” gasped Varook quickly looking for its staff. Kicking it away from the struggling creature Varook approached being careful to avoid its tail. “Commander we don’t have time for this. Kill it, we need to move on.”

McFiggins looked at Varook with shock on his face. Before he could say anything Montrosa slipped a blade behind her boot and removed the head from its shoulders. She quickly searched the body cursing as she removed several items and wrapped them in a torn piece of cloth. “They are getting closer. We must hurry. I am afraid they have found a way around the last line of defense.”

“Not yet,” said Varook. “Everyone step back. Commander kick that staff next to the body.” He moved his hands in a now familiar pattern as everyone stepped back pulling Montrosa with them. Varook released his spell and a large fiery orange spell burst from his fingers. The Wyrmpriest was engulfed in flames along with several of the Kobolds that lay around it. A few screamed as the fire consumed them leaving nothing but ash behind. “If you must leave one of those wretched creatures behind remove its eyes and tongue. They have powerful Necromancers that can reanimate the bodies and view the last thing they saw.”

They moved with more caution now. Montrosa stopped before a shimmering portion of the wall and moved her hands quickly across its surface murmuring in an ancient language. She

pressed her palm against the middle of the door and it swung open motioning them to step through quickly. The seven entered the room shocked at the damage that lay before them. As the door slammed shut and the majik took hold once again a loud piercing scream could be heard from behind them.

“Something was not happy with our handiwork,” said Varook. “How do you keep the majik of the door from being discovered?”

“It is an ancient spell written in such a way that they can’t repeat the words. Many have died trying. This is why we invoked the spell. They all but destroyed this area in their search for of the library. I am afraid they may soon find a way around the barrier and then all will be lost,” said Montrosa her shoulders shrugging in defeat.

“How many tomes are left in the library?” asked Varook.

“I am told there were 10,000’s. That it was the most complete library in the world. Tomes have crumbled due to age, been stolen by the greedy, forgotten by most, revered by only a few.”

“How many are left?” asked Varook gently.

“A few hundred no more.”

Varook looked at McFiggins for a moment a pained look in his eyes.

“If we succeed we will look after them,” said McFiggins.

“I was thinking of something more permanent,” said Varook. “I have my demon sack with me, as well as Horny’s. We could most likely ...” A crash on the wall behind them caused them to jump.

“Into the library, at the very back where the last of the tomes are kept is a shielded room. There is a portal there but I don’t know how to open it,” said Montrosa. She handed Varook a medallion saying. “The last one through must have this medallion in their hand. It will trigger a majikal barrier that won’t stop them but it will slow them down for a couple of hours. We will buy you whatever time we can. Find the Ancient Ones, convince them to help you.” She turned and cast a spell and her wall of steel materialized again forming a barrier across the narrowest part of the room. She never looked back as she started calling out orders, casting spells and writing glyphs on the floor.

Varook ushered the group into the larger room that was now empty. Shelves had been destroyed, tomes ripped to pieces. His eyes filling with tears he paused gasping, “Why? All this knowledge gone forever.”

McFiggins pushed him towards a small opening at the end of the room. Varook refused to budge his attention suddenly drawn to one of the walls. He raced over to it and ripped a large frame from the wall. Struggling with he called out, “Help me with this.” Adanac rushed to his side and grasped the frame ready to throw it away when Varook yelled at her. “Don’t it is a map of the complete portal system. We need it.” Adanac tucked the frame under one arm and

tossed Varook over her shoulder and charged for the small doorway her long legs leaping over broken furniture and mounds of debris. Breathing heavily she entered the room behind McFiggins and Tatiana as Varook pushed his hands out behind them.

A subtle humming filled the room, a shimmering filled the doorway as the opening closed and a solid wall replaced it. All around them stacked haphazardly were tomes of various sizes, the last of the Ancient City's library.



“That’s the last of them.” Said Tatiana as she tied the demon sack closed. “I hope you know what you are doing.”

“So do I,” mumbled Varook. Turning his attention to the large frame he drew a dagger and began to pry open the back of the frame when Tatiana roughly pushed him aside.

“Why are you trying to die? Do you not like my company anymore?” she demanded.

Varook tried to find a suitable answer but couldn’t. Tatiana carefully ran her nimble fingers along the edges of the frame, carefully inspecting the back. She mumbled to herself as she slipped pieces of metal from the wood swiftly pulling her fingers away as a wire sliced along the back of the wooden support. “You would have lost your fingers, possibly an eye if you had kept prying away like you were. There is also a majikal barrier that I can’t penetrate just under the wooden back,” she said stepping away from the frame.

Varook stepped forward and extended his hands resting them just above the wooden back plate. Slowly the outline of a strange object began to take shape as he concentrated on the majik.

“Great where do we find the key for that,” exclaimed Adanac.

Varook opened his eyes and smiled. “Right here,” he said holding out the medallion. Carefully he set it on the outline and gently pushed. A loud clicked filled them with fear as they froze in place. The sides of the frame popped free and floated away with the back. A thin parchment appeared pressed against the glass. Carefully Varook slipped the edge of his wafer cutter under the edge and lifted the document free. Gently he set it down on the table top and studied the symbols as the map was revealed.

“Interesting,” said Adanac. “The map you see there is not the map that is on the glass. No wonder it has remained undisturbed. They didn’t know what it was.”

Varook rummaged through his demon sack before finally pulling a tome free. Attached to it was a soft leather bag that clinked as it moved. He withdrew several bottles of ink and set them out in a specific order in front of him. Selecting a few nibs he carefully trimmed the points before he started transcribing the map onto the pages.

“Varook I don’t think we have time for that right now,” said McFiggins looking at the wall where the door had been earlier. The wall began to change colours so subtly that they had initially missed it. The once cream coloured wall was now pink and slowly changing to red. First it was only the size of a gold coin but it was beginning to rapidly grow.

Varook slipped everything back into the leather pouch and carefully rolled the parchment up in a soft leather skin. He frantically searched the floor. “I need a tube long enough to hold this. We can’t fold it. If it becomes damaged it will change the map.” Debris began flying everywhere as they searched the small room but found nothing.

McFiggins pulled out his demon sack and removed his map tube. “Is this big enough?” he demanded.

Varook nodded as McFiggins removed his maps and shoved them inside his sack. Varook carefully slipped the rolled leather into the tube and sealed it before adding it his demon sack. Grasping his staff in one hand, and the medallion Cimion had given him in the other he summoned a portal and motioned for them to step through it momentarily stopping them to allow for a gap between travellers. He stepped through the portal praying they would reach the other side before whatever was assaulting the wall could step into the room. If the portal collapsed with him inside he would be trapped, unable to get out or escape.



“Faster,” screamed Dorganna. “They must not escape.” She swatted at several Wyrmpriests and never flinched as their bodies crumpled sickeningly against the wall.

The wall turned from white to pink, to a deep red before turning black. Dorganna leveled her staff at it and a bolt of dark majik burst from its tip shattering the wall and driving pieces of rock into the room like thousands of tiny missiles. The Wyrmpriests scattered like mice as she charged into the room screaming curses.

The portal in front of her blinked as she threw the closest Wyrmpriests into it screaming. “Find them, don’t come back until you do.” The first two disappeared into the portal the third one missed the opening and lay crumpled on the floor. The fourth one was severed in half, his scream cut off as the portal closed around him.

Dorganna’s minions scattered as her rage struck out indiscriminately at those around her. Her crazed eyes settled on what was left of the frame that held the map. As she reached for it a piece of the ceiling dropped from its place shattering what was left of it into tiny pieces. Dorganna exploded like a volcano. Body parts flew from the room as her rage reached its peak. The remains of the room blew apart falling to the ground below her crushing more of her slaves.

Those closest to her tried slinking away into the shadows but she found them as her rage

threatened to consume her. She floated across the stone floor a bloody wake of broken bodies behind her.

Chapter 5

Adanac, Tatiana and McFiggins all watched the portal praying the Varook had made it. He popped through with a loud crack followed by hundreds of tiny blood covered shards. Landing face first on the earthen floor his breath was punched from him as he landed unprepared for the impact. They rushed to his aid as two Wyrmpriests slammed into him, cut to shreds by the missiles, followed closely by the severed body of one more. The portal popped and closed as Varook lying groaning on the floor.

Tatiana severed the heads of the two Wyrmpriests and then kicked the body of the third one aside. She cradled Varook's head in her lap carefully wiping the blood from his face with a dry cloth. As he fought for his breath he tried to sit up, only to be held in place by Tatiana. "I swear if you don't get yourself killed you are going to die trying," she said with a stern look on her face.

Varook finally wrestled free of her grip and sat up gasping at the scene in front of him. "We have to burn those bodies," he said struggling to stand.

McFiggins laid a hand on his arm and shook his head pointing up and behind them. "Fire would not be a smart thing to cast right now."

Varook gulped and nodded. He grasped Cimion's medallion and cast a spell. A portal opened and they gagged as a blast of hot sulphuric air blew through the portal. "Throw the bodies into the portal. Make it quick I don't know how long I can keep it open."

Brushing off their questions they moved quickly to do as he asked. The area around them suddenly getting larger. As the last one was tossed through Varook released the portal and slumped to his knees. Struggling to stand, he gripped McFiggins arm and pulled himself upright.

"Esteemed Ancient Ones," he said reverently turning to face them. "Please accept my humblest apologies for opening that portal. We needed to dispose of the Wyrmpriests bodies before Dorganna could weave her majik and follow us. Where they have gone will ensure that doesn't happen."

"Who are you that you command the ancient majik of the immortals?" rumbled a deep voice.

"I am but a humble servant of The Chosen One," replied Varook. "Who has been blessed with the sacred knowledge of your ancestors so that she may succeed where others have failed."

Rumblings were heard from several sources as leaves rustled and a few angry thumps were felt travelling through the earth.

"What do you want from us? Why have you come here, to our ancient grove?"

"They have come to finish what has already started. Turn them away," rumbled another voice.

"We will hear what they have to say before we decide what we will do." Large branches swept

down and deftly plucked them from the ground. They were moved high up into the upper bows where they watched in astonishment as the surface of the tree changed shape allowing them to rest comfortably while they moved across the lush green landscape.

“What is that over there?” asked Tatiana pointing to their left.

“Our dying brethren,” was the simple reply. “What do we call you little one?”

“I am Tatiana, the Chosen One. My friends are Varook the majik-user whom you have already met. Commander McFiggins a Forest Elf Druid and Adanac a Giantess Ranger. How do we refer to you?” she asked politely.

The tree thought long and hard and rhymed off a long name before pausing. “We know from experience you cannot say out names. Refer to me as the Mighty Oak. Why are you called the Chosen One?”

“It is a very long story,” said Tatiana.

“We like long stories, they make our time here more interesting,” said the Mighty Oak. “The best stories take decades to share.”

“We would love to share it all with you, but time is something we have very little of,” said McFiggins. “Dorganna is on the march again. Only this time she is challenging the immortals, and everyone in our world for the right to rule here. The only thing that can stop her is the sword that Tatiana has reassembled. “

“It has happened again,” said the Oak sighing, his leaves trembling in the stillness of the air. “Can you stop her?”

“We think so but we will need your help.”

“That may be a problem. The last time we helped she wiped out half of our forest in retribution. My people will not be eager to help you.”

“Are they prepared to disappear forever?” asked Varook.

“Everything has a cycle and ours is drawing to a close. We are losing more and more each day with no way to stop them,” he said as large droplets of sap rolled down the trunk of the tree.

“What if we were to try and find a way to stop her attacks?” asked Varook carefully.

“We have tried everything,” he said sorrow filling his voice. “And nothing works.”

“Have you tried medicine? She is using a disease to kill you. It takes time to work. What if I could get the best minds on this world working on a solution?” asked Varook.

“How could you do that?”

“I need a sample from one of the dead trees, more than one if they have died from different causes. I would extract it with the most reverence. The man I would take it to will move the skies and the earth to find a cure. I will take it to him before we face Dorganna.”

“Why would you do that for us?”

“Because all life is sacred and you are the symbol of life that is not only ancient but there is still a lot you can teach the rest of us.”

The Mighty Oak suddenly changed directions and in a few hours came to a sudden stop. “If you go quickly, before the sun goes down you can find what you need. They come out at night with their axes and saws and brutalize our fallen brethren. They know we can’t come to their aid for fear of becoming infected ourselves. We hear those not quite dead cry out in pain as the last of their life sap is drained from them.”

He set Varook on the ground and pointed the way. Varook stood for a moment and said, “I need one other to come with me in case they attack. I cannot retrieve the samples and fight at the same time.”

“I will go with you,” said Adanac. “My bow can kill anything that moves long before it gets close.”

Silently they moved off into the growing twilight moving as quickly as they dared. The ground shook as leaves rustled loudly announcing their approach. An ancient tree, toppled on its side pointed to the blight on its trunk. “Take it, while it is fresh. I am beyond pain. If it will help my people I will gladly endure the pain.”

Varook slipped his wafer blade from its holder and spread a large oilskin on the ground. With tear filled eyes he carved a large piece of the infection from the trunk of the tree. It shuddered as its leaves rustled but it did not cry out. They moved quickly to a different tree, already gone, and removed sections from it as well. Adanac’s bow singing as arrows leapt from it towards unseen target cries of anguish and pain filling the early night sky.

“I have enough,” said Varook. “We need to find a safe place to open a portal. We can’t go back to the Mighty Oak for fear it might affect him. I wish I knew where he had been taking us. It would make it easier to return there.”

“Take the sample to Bandi,” said Adanac. “I will tell them to go ahead and return to keep watch until your return.”

“Portals don’t work that way,” said Varook. “Once I open it I control it. I can leave it open or close it at will. If we can find a safe place for it I can go and return using the same one. But I need to be quick at the other end. I have been gone for so long I have no idea what reception I will get upon my return. I don’t even know if my Master is still alive.”

A large leafy branch dropped to the ground next to them. “I am infected, I cannot return to my people. I am still too strong for those maggots to harm. Make this portal thing in my branches. I will protect it,” rumbled the large tree.

Varook and Adanac stepped onto the branch and hung on as they were lifted high up into the sky. Their guardian moved away from the other dying trees but still maintained a gap between him and the healthy ones.

“Go before they realize what you are doing,” he said shaping a large bowl at the back of his trunk away from prying eyes.

Varook grasped the medallion and cast the appropriate spell motioning for Adanac to step through, he quickly followed her.



“Your friend has returned to his city,” said the Mighty Oak.

Tatiana gasped and tried to climb down the trunk but the branches formed a barrier. “I must help him, he might be walking into a trap,” she said.

“No little one, you will stay with me. He is safe. The big one you call Adanac went with him. His shimmering door is being protected by guardians. They will not find it.”

Tatiana curled up into a tight ball at the base of the crook. “Everyone is leaving me, why? What have I done?” she moaned.

McFiggins gripped her shoulders and shook her gently at first before applying pressure to her shoulders causing her pain.

She yelped in pain and pushed him away demanding, “Why did you do that? Are you trying to take the sword from me? Well you can’t have it.” She scrambled as far away from McFiggins as she could get.

“Cimion helps us,” whispered McFiggins. “Dorganna is attacking her mind and I can’t stop her.”

McFiggins smiled as calm spread over Tatiana and she slipped into a light sleep.

Tatiana called a voice.

Who is there?

It is I, your friend.

Who is there? She demanded.

Don't you want peace? Don't you want all of this to be over? Come to me and we can settle this, just you and I. Join me and we can become invincible. Shed these cumbersome pests that keep holding you back. Come to me and let me teach you the true power of the sword. I will teach you what they keep hidden from you. I will teach you why they are afraid of it, afraid of you. The sword is just a tool, you are the real weapon.

Tatiana struggled against the pull. Her mind reeled after each attack recovering slowly as the syrupy voice enticed her, pulled at her and tempted her.

I am waiting. We can become one; think of what you would gain. Think of what we could do together. Nothing would stand in our way.

Dorganna came into her mind now. A sumptuous woman, dressed in regal clothing, Tatiana by her side dressed in a flowing robe that highlighted her femininity but portraying the grace of a hardened warrior.

Tatiana reveled in the praise, the adoration as people bowed before them. The crowd gasped and parted. Before them stood an interloper and beside him a tall woman. They advanced in step weapons drawn.

I told ye I would not let ye down. That I would fight for ye even in death said the shorter figure drawing a pair of dark swords. The woman next to him hefted two large battleaxes as she prepared for a fight. Dorganna flicked her hand and hundreds of her minions charged the two figures burying them in a mountain of flesh as her cackle roaring across open ground. Bodies began flying in every direction as bits and pieces splattered the ground.

That was a great warm up, when does the real fighting begin.

Tatiana gasped as she recognised the figure before her. *Horny, Lokitrek? But you are dead?*

Aye lass but this gutter snake is trying to beat you in your mind and I won't allow it. Leave her be or join me here forever. Horny's battle cry reverberated through the air silencing Dorganna's spell. Both he and Lokitrek charged her before she could recover their blades biting deeply into her lush body before she screamed and disappeared in a red flash.

We are not finished. I will have that sword.

Tatiana groaned and cried out. She began to shake uncontrollably. McFiggins rushed to her side and carefully wrapped his arms around her. "Cimion we could really use your help here," he called out looking up. *Varook don't be too long or we may lose this battle before we even start.*



"Master what has happened to the city," cried Varook once he realized where he was.

Master Bandilor stood before him, his age very evident as he leaned heavily on his staff.

"Varook is that you? Where did you come from?"

Varook tried to rush to his side but Adanac held him back placing a finger to her lips shaking her head. Leaning over she whispered very low in his ear, "That is a clever illusion. Either he has gone into hiding or he is dead."

"No," gasped Varook "he can't be I would have felt it."

"Where would he be if it is an illusion?" asked Adanac.

"The only place he was ever truly safe," said Varook pointing to a tall needle like tower. "The only way in there is by invitation. If he is not there then I fear he is either dead or gone."

“Go check the tower, if you can. I will guard the portal. Be quick about it or we may not get back,” said Adanac.

Varook nodded and slipped along the edge of the square trying to remain in the shadows. *I really need that dust Horny used to use. That’s what I get for not taking the time to learn the secret behind his disappearing acts.* Varook stepped into a dark alley and searched for the symbols that few knew existed and even fewer knew how to access. Mumbling in a language long thought dead he prepared himself for what might lay in waiting.

The room was in shambles. Broken pieces of pottery were mixed with glass pieces. Tomes were ripped in half and tossed where they lay. Scrolls were opened, some burned some still glowing. Blood was splattered in several places but he could find no bodies. The hint of majik still lingered but it was his master’s majikal signature that was strongest.

One of the scrolls began to unroll. Varook stared in disbelief and then dove for cover behind a pillar as a bolt of white majik slammed into the wall behind him. He quickly recited a counter spell he had been forced to learn the first time he had visited the tower. “Do not forget that spell,” warned his master. “One day it will save your life.”

The scroll shimmered and a replica of his master rose from its depths. “Varook, I knew you would return. If you are seeing this it means Dorganna has found a way to access my tower. The mess that lies around is a testament to that. She could not destroy this scroll and I have left it as a guidepost for you. Seek me where this all ended the last time. I will be safe there. I have been quietly moving the library and school there over several months and only the most trusted were asked to join us.

“You can contact me using the portal spell included here. It will only last for a short time and will not handle a living body. Use it wisely. This scroll and all traces of it will disappear one quarter of the turning of the hourglass once it is cast. If that wretched witch has left anything useful then take it. I give it to you freely. Do not waste time searching the city. It is filled with her minions now. Good luck my friend and may Cimion be with you.”

Master if you only knew how things have changed. Varook frantically searched for parchment and ink. He quickly scribbled out what he had found, what he had suspected and a possible means to combat it. He warned them of the compromised portal in the Ancient City of the Elves. When he was done he wrapped it all in a skin with the corrupted samples and cast the portal spell contained in the scroll. A small portal shimmered and wavered slightly before growing strong enough to stay open. He heard a voice gasp at the other end as someone said. “Fetch the Master now. We don’t have much time.”

Varook listened smiling as steps raced out of the room and a female voice began calling for their Master as memories of him doing the same thing flooded back. They were cut short when his master spoke, huffing and puffing for his breath. “Varook?”

“Yes Master. I don’t have much time. I am tossing through a package with a note that explains everything. It is not a living entity in the sense that it is flesh and blood. The Ancient Ones are dying at an enormous rate because of this. I pray you can find a way to stop it or they will cease

to exist. Yes we have succeeded. No we have not faced her directly yet but that time is coming soon.”

A loud pop on the level below him drew his attention. “Master I have to go. I have company and if I don’t leave I could get trapped here.” Varook closed the portal and searched for the familiar symbols. Stepping into the portal he heard a scream of pain as the scroll exploded behind him rocking the tower to its very foundations.

Varook moved as quickly as he dared pausing several times to allow patrols to move away. Adanac pulled him to one side as her bow sang out and several loud cries were heard. “Time to go,” she said not trying to hide her voice. “They know we are here.” She directed Varook’s attention to the tall thin needle as the walls began to buckle and it imploded.

Varook gripped his staff in one hand and raced to their portal using powerful blasts to clear the way. He paused long enough for Adanac to step through and quickly followed her sending one final blast towards those charging the portal. He heard screams of pain and anger and then nothing as he dropped into the bowl in the tree desperately closing the portal.

Varook struggled to his feet saying, “It is done my Master has the samples. He is at The Lady’s Keep. The city of Voslokov is in the hands of Dorganna. If I understood him right they just made it out alive. Fortunately they had the opportunity to prepare and not everything was lost. If anyone can find a solution he can. The problem is they know we were there, they just don’t know why.”

“We have to rejoin the others,” said Adanac as the tree gently set them on the ground.

“Go in peace. Thank you for what you have done,” it said rustling its leaves reverently. “Go before they realize you are here.”

Adanac and Varook moved as quickly as they dared in the darkening woods. The canopy began to spread and moonlight lit their way. They stopped, out of breath as a branch opened to receive them and lift them into the protective bowl.

Varook looked around the bowl, suddenly aware that something was not right. McFiggins held Tatiana as she shook uncontrollably. He shouted in shock and raced to her side almost slipping from the bowl and over the side.

“What happened?” he demanded prying her from McFiggins arms.

“I don’t know, she started acting funny and I had to induce pain in her shoulders to get her to speak to me. She accused me of trying to take the sword from her, then her eyes rolled back into her head and she started shaking. She mumbled something about Horny and Lokitrek before losing consciousness.”

“Cimion, you had better show yourself and show yourself now. If she dies I will use that sword to hunt you down, Dorganna will be the least of your worries,” screamed Varook into the night sky.

The air shimmered and a very weary looking Cimion stepped through to their world. "What is it this time?" he demanded.

"You manipulate her into going after the sword blade by blade, and you never once think to teach her how to protect her mind from that witch?" he screamed.

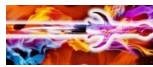
"The sword is supposed to teach her that," he said holding his hands up and moving towards his portal.

"Use that portal and you had better start running," warned Varook his hand resting on the pommel of the Eye of Zul.

Cimion gasped saying, "How? You shouldn't be able to do that."

"We are soul mates, something you and your cronies never considered," he said. "I may not have full control of the blades but I can wield it. Now teach her how to keep that damn witch out of her mind before I do something that I might not regret."

Cimion watched Varook carefully as he rested his palms on Tatiana's temples. Closing his eyes he began to sway.



"Tatiana," he called. "Tatiana." He gently probed her mind and almost missed the life thread that was buried deep within her memories of Horny.

"And what do ye think ye are up to?" demanded a familiar voice.

Cimion turned to see Horny and Lokitrek covered in blood standing guard over Tatiana.

"Something I should have done a long time ago," he said. "I am going to show her how to shield her mind from Dorganna's attacks."

"A little late aren't ye?" said Horny sarcastically. "I hate majik-users, especially gods and demi-gods. Ye hurt her in any way and I will find ye."

"Just what I need, to be hunted in real life and death," groaned Cimion. Gently Cimion picked at Tatiana's mind until he found where she had retreated. "Come with me Tatiana, let me show you how to shield not only Dorganna but us as well from your mind." Step by step he taught her how to build a wall, to reinforce it, to keep it changing so nothing could break through it. "If you want to make it stronger do this with the sword in your hand. It is one of the things you would have learned if you had had enough time to explore each blade." It was the last thing she heard as she slammed the wall closed pushing him from her mind.

Horny and Lokitrek faded from her mind, safely hidden in her memories. She opened her eyes smiling when she realised that Varook was holding her. Her smile quickly turned to anger as she recognised Cimion. "Be grateful I still need your help or you would be dead where you stand," she said. "Imagine not teaching me how to shield myself from Dorganna because it also kept

you out. From now on we do things my way. If I need or want your help I will demand it.”

“Did you get the samples?” she asked Varook.

“Yes and my Master has them. Unfortunately the city of Voslokov has fallen into Dorganna’s hands. It appears to have been that way for quite some time,” said Varook looking menacingly at Cimion who just shrugged his shoulders.

“Go before we forget that you are on our side. Immortal or not, that blade will hurt you,” said Varook. Cimion bowed slightly and stepped through his portal which winked out with a pop leaving them in the darkness.



“Thank you little ones,” said the Mighty Oak. “What is it you need us to do?”

“Dorganna’s stronghold is surrounded by swamps, foul smelling rivers with controlled accesses. We need to flood it with fresh water, to push it out into the sea where the immortals can cleanse it. Hopefully you can redirect enough water to wash her minions out sea as well. There are a number of predators whose only role in life is to feed that would make short work of them.”

“We can do that, but it will take time to set up. There are a number of dams that will need to come down, and rivers redirected. When does it need to be completed?”

“No more than a week, sooner if possible. Regardless of the outcome of this battle my master has assured me that as soon as they find a cure they will begin to administer it.”

“We will do what we can, many will still not have settled on the question, never mind discussing helping before the battle is over.”

Tatiana stood and looked deeply into the Ancient Ones eyes. “I know you will do what you can. Every little bit helps. The object is to keep Dorganna and her minions busy while we slip in to her stronghold, hopefully unseen. Fresh water pouring into her stronghold, even a little will send her into a rage and we have learned when she is in a rage she is single minded.”

The Ancient One bowed before her and left them. They were deep in the forest, high above anything that could threaten them from the ground. Guardians placed around them to warn of any intrusions.

Chapter 6

Varook looked up from his work and smiled when Tatiana stepped into the room. He was surrounded by Tomes of different sized, shapes, colours and languages. "Careful," he said. "It has taken me three days to sort this mess out."

Tatiana frowned at him. "This is where you have been hiding."

"I haven't been hiding, you knew where I was," he said not looking up.

"Varook," she said stamping her foot before storming from the room.

"What, what did I do now?"

McFiggins chuckled as he stepped into the room rubbing his arm. "You don't get it, do you?"

"Get what. I still have a lot of work left to do before we leave. I think I have found a way into the stronghold. The question is, is it guarded?"

"Varook," said McFiggins gently. "Put the tomes down, stand up and go find your wife."

"Why is she sick?"

McFiggins shook his head. "There are some things you can't be told. Things you need to learn. Tatiana needs you more than anything right now. Her fears are running rampant and time is running out. Yes the work you are doing in here is valuable and will help out in the long run. They won't mean a damn if she dies due to her fears. She is a strong woman, stronger than all of us, but there are cracks showing. She needs the glue that keeps everything together. She needs you and to know you care enough to put everything aside for her."

"But she already knows that," he protested.

"Do you remember how you reacted when Horny told you what the Wyrmpriest could do with his tail?"

Varook nodded.

"You didn't believe him until he severed the tail and used it to cut down the three inch thick trees. When we met them again your initial reaction was to kill them outright. Why was that?"

"Because I knew how dangerous they were."

"What happened to the compassionate healer we all know and love?"

Varook sat for long time thinking. "I have been so busy trying to find the safest way into the stronghold that I have forgotten everything else. I have missed Tatiana's needs. How could I be so blind?" He struggled to stand and felt McFiggins hand on his shoulder.

"Finish the entry you are working on. Tell me which tomes I can bind together and I will

package them back up for the demon sack. You can't need all of these."

Varook mumbled his appreciation and said. "All the tomes that are stacked together can be bound together. These two here plus my own tomes can stay here." Varook entered the information he had found into his own tome and finished off the map he had been working on.

McFiggins had bound two piles and left to find more cord to bind the rest when Tatiana returned. Varook moved to her and wrapped his arms around her. They both began speaking at the same time causing them to laugh. "You first," she said.

"I have been so wrapped up in these tomes I have been neglecting you. I am so sorry that I haven't thought about you and needs," he said pulling her into a bear hug. She rested her head on his chest and softly began to weep.

"I am so afraid,"

"Afraid of what?" demanded Varook. "You are the strongest woman I know. You have stood up to things that would have left many of us quaking in our boots. You have faced down enemies that I shudder at meeting."

"I am afraid that I am not good enough. That Dorganna will be too powerful and defeat me turning you, Adanac and McFiggins against the world. I am afraid of what we will create if we succeed. Will this sword take over and turn me into another Dorganna, only this time stronger and nastier?"

"I can't tell you how you will react when you face Dorganna. What I can tell you is we will persevere. We will succeed and the world will be a better place for it. Then we can honour our commitments and find a quiet place to raise a family and enjoy our friends."

"How do you know all this?" she asked still sobbing.

"I have inside knowledge," he said wisely. "I know who carries the sword and what she would do to stop Dorganna. Dorganna has no idea what she has woke up."



"The water has been diverted," said the Mighty Oak. "It has already started to flood through the outer swamps pushing Dorganna's minions ahead of it. The clouds of acrid stench are rolling ahead of it choking everything in its path. We will start moving boulders towards the dug in groups and either push them back or bury them. A strange Dwarf was seen moving among our dying friends applying a salve to their sores. There have been reports that some have stood up again and are sinking their roots deep into the forest floor. They are regaining their colour, sprouting new leaves. Others have been moving among our friends pouting large amounts of a syrupy solution into the ground around our roots. The reports of strength are coming in from all around us."

“Master Bandilor has come to the rescue once again,” said McFiggins.

The clunking of staves was heard coming down the wooden hallway towards them. Quickly moving into a defensive they prepared for battle. Tailor stepped into view first followed by Master Bandilor and the man Horny called Sparky. “I understand you are going to host a party. When we didn’t get our invitation we decided to crash it,” said Taylor smiling as Tatiana wrapped her arms around him threatening to squeeze him to death.

“I may be a majik-user but I still need to breathe,” he gasped smiling.

Tatiana released him wiping away her tears. Varook approached an old grizzled Dwarf and dropped to one knee before him. “Master I hope I have lived up to your expectations?”

The Dwarf pulled Varook to his feet and wrapped him in a bear hug. “I should be kneeling before you,” he said. “You have done more than any of us could ever hope for and surpassed me in so many ways.” Pride filled his eyes as he held Varook.

“Tatiana, Adanac, Commander may I present to you Master Bandilor, my Master and mentor.”

McFiggins nodded saying, “Good to see you again Sir. I see the years have been kind to you.”

“They have,” he replied. “Tatiana this esteemed gentleman with us is Kaidell Snowdance, the one Horny referred to as Sparky. We have come to lend our support in this battle. It is time we stood together again and do more than just bloody Dorganna’s nose. What are your plans?”

Varook began to lay out their battle plan. Everyone listened carefully only interrupting whenever a question needed to be asked for clarification.

“How can we help?” asked Bandilor.

“By creating enough confusion and chaos up here that Dorganna will be forced to oversee her defences. Just don’t get yourselves killed in the process,” said Varook.

“If we die, we die,” said Snowdance. “Our time is almost over anyway. It is time for a younger generation to take over.”

“There is one change to this plan,” said Tatiana. Everyone turned to look at her not sure how to proceed. “When I face Dorganna it will be alone. If the three of you are anywhere near us she will use them as a distraction to try and split my attention. If needed I will stop time and leave you behind, please don’t make me do that. Having lost my red hair I don’t relish the thought of losing what little I have left. Tell Cimion and his allies they will need to protect me from Dorganna’s traitors. I am sure they will make themselves known during the fight.”

The Mighty Oak’s leave rustled as he said. “It is time. Her forces are pouring out of the scars in the ground frantic to stop the water. If you don’t go now you will not get another chance.”



I am glad we didn't have time to eat. Varook groaned as he closed his mouth and had to breathe through his nose.

McFiggins gripped his shoulder to remind him to stay quiet.

Tatiana moved as quickly as she dared staying to the shadows. The hard rock surface slick with slime and mold gave off a decaying odour that threatened to overwhelm them. Even through the thick soles of her boots she could feel the skin on her feet attempt to pull away from the bottom of her foot. Light flickered ahead illuminating the tunnel briefly before it disappeared again plunging them into darkness. She paused at the opening and briefly studied the scene unfolding before them. Hundreds of Kobolds were being driven by Orcs out of the tunnels towards the surface. Orders were being screamed at them as the cowards were slammed against the wall as they tried to escape, their life's blood making the already slick floor slipperier.

Tatiana held her hand up causing them all to freeze. A large Orc was moving towards the tunnel they were in followed by a two Trolls.

"I tells you dere is no wayz to gets to da surface dis way," said the Orc.

"We needz see ourselves," said a Troll pushing him hard. The Orc stumbled and screamed in pain as they heard bones break. Tatiana peeked around the corner and saw the Orc with a Troll on top of him impaled by a long slender stalactite. The ground shook again and more rock spears dropped from the ceiling killing anyone in their path.

"You move up surface stop dem throwing dem boulders. Gonna killz us all fores we get up dere," screamed the Troll returning to driving the Kobolds and now the Orcs towards the surface.

Sighing in relief they waited for a break in the flow before moving to another small narrow tunnel. A cry was heard as Varook slipped into the darkness. His heart began racing as it climbed into his throat. He whirled buried deep in the shadows and drew his dagger watching a smaller Orc scurry across the floor towards them. He felt a large shoulder move him out of the way as a soft thock whispered by him and an arrow buried itself deep in the Orc's throat. A hand clamped around his arm and pulled him down the tunnel away from the opening as more Kobolds began flowing into the room.

The first one to the fallen Orc quickly pulled its weapons from its belt and struggled with the chest piece when it was slammed to the floor and it was ripped from his hands. A scream in protest filled the air as Kobolds began fighting over the dead Orc's armour and weapons. Suddenly it all went quiet as a thick guttural voice cut through the commotion. Howls of pain could be heard, then silence.

Varook shuddered not sure what could have commanded the response they heard. He knew he didn't want to meet one. Hands pulled him to the front and he groaned in pain as he squeezed past Tatiana. Slowly they moved deeper into the mountain. The air became hotter as the

humidity level increased and larger and larger creatures were found roaming the tunnels. Most they could avoid but several had to be dealt with quickly until a trail of bodies littered the floor behind them.

Varook suddenly stopped forcing them all to crowd close together almost pushing them out into the light. A long slender rock bridge crossed a dark expanse to a single pedestal in the center of the blackness. On the pedestal appeared to be an orb floating in the center of the platform with no apparent support.

“That is the entrance into Dorganna’s stronghold,” said Varook. “If the information was correct it will open into a small room off of what she is using as her throne room. I believe it was a private room for the Dwarven King of the time. The portal room lays beyond the throne room down a long narrow passageway. There is a wider exit out of the portal room that they have cut into the rock allowing her minions to move freely.”

“This is where we part company,” said Tatiana. “From here I must go alone.”

“No,” gasped Varook. “Let us at least go with you into the narrow hallway to protect your back.”

“No my love, I have to do this on my own,” said Tatiana holding him close.

“But you don’t understand,” insisted Varook. “Once the portal is closed and Dorganna is defeated the whole mountain will implode. They have carved so much out of it that only her majik is keeping it together. Sword or no sword you will be crushed lost forever. I would rather die with you than live without you.”

“Is this true?” asked Tatiana looking at first McFiggins then Adanac.

“Apparently so, the diagrams we have seen show there is very little supporting rock left,” said McFiggins.

“No, how am I to face this witch if I know you are in danger whether I succeed or not,” she cried out.

“You were never meant to face Dorganna alone,” said Cimion his image floating above the dark abyss. “Anorac faced Dorganna with the four of us and his wife Kayoree by his side. Why have you been insisting that you face her alone?”

“Because of the trials for each blade, I stood and faced my attackers alone.”

“The first blade the four of us were with you,” said McFiggins. “Same with the second one.”

“The third blade Lokitrek watched your back while you faced the challenge,” said Varook.

“The fourth blade we once again stood by your side,” said Adanac. “And the fifth one Cimion and I were there with you.”

“The last blade Adanac stood with you,” said Cimion. “Each blade has required a team to help you, only you had to face the challenge while they stood guard protecting you from any outside

influences. This next battle is not a test. This next battle is for your lives. Do you remember what Snowdance said to you on the boat?"

Tatiana looked at him with a puzzled look on her face. Cimion continued. "Alone you will fail, together you are unbeatable. It would take all of you to see this through to the end. Go, do your best, fight like everything depends on it. Support each other, help each other. Use the bond you have created, a bond that can't be broken and defeat her once and for all."

Cimion's image flickered and before disappearing he said "Go, now, your time is running out Dorganna knows you are here....."

Varook stepped out onto the bridge and then stopped. He was visibly shaking as he looked down. No prodding or cajoling could get him to move. He closed his eyes and tried to will himself to calm down but his shaking only got worse.

Come on you big oaf, get a move on, ye are holding things up.

"Horny?" gasped Varook.

Aye, get yer britches in gear and cross over onto that rock before the witch finds ye, then it won't matter.

"I can't," said Varook. He gasped as he felt a hand grasp his tunic and begin to drag him across the bridge. He floundered, his arms flying out to maintain his balance as he wove precariously across the bridge. He dropped to his knees in front of the orb breathing heavily, sweat running down his face in rivers.

McFiggins, Adanac and Tatiana quickly followed surprised at what they had just seen. "Varook are you alright?" asked Tatiana concern in her voice.

"Yes," he answered weakly.

"What just happened?" asked Adanac.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. I'm not sure I believe it." Varook stood before the orb and said. "Gather around the outside and grasp hands. Do not let release your grip until I tell you to."

They quickly linked hands and Varook motioned for them to put their hands on the orb. "At the same time. One ... two ... three ... now." The platform shimmered as darkness rushed in. They found themselves standing in a darkened room, the only light they could see was the gentle throbbing that was escaping from the orb. Muffled voices were heard as guttural orders were given with an occasional shrill laugh off in the distance that pierced their souls like a frozen knife.



Varook released the hands he was holding and quietly moved to the wall. Running his hand along the wall he followed it to a heavy wooden door where he waited for the others to gather. Adanac had her bow strung and her battle quiver uncovered. McFiggins had just shifted into the dire bear form as Tatiana started to draw her sword. Varook covered her hand and pushed it back down. "Not yet," he whispered. "Dorganna will know where we are the moment you invoke its powers. Let us try and gain the portal room first. Use Horny's dark iron blades they can be just as deadly."

Tatiana drew Horny's blades and nodded. Staff in hand Varook slowly opened the door and smiled when he saw two guards facing away from them. He held his hand up indicating what he saw and then opened the door again. McFiggins had the first pinned to the floor struggling to breathe with a crushed neck as Adanac deftly dropped the other.

They ran across the room into the narrow tunnel that led between the throne room and the portal jumping over the debris that littered the floor.

"Is that?" asked Tatiana as she stared at the remains of a Dwarf.

"Don't think about," hissed Adanac. "Keep moving before she figures out we are here."

A cry of alarm was heard from behind them as the bodies of the dead guards were discovered. Heavily shod feet could be heard following them down the tunnel. McFiggins stopped and urged them to hurry along. "I will stop whoever is trying to follow us and join you as soon as I can."

Adanac looked at him saying, "I plan on growing old with you, don't you make me come and get you in the Underworld."

McFiggins smiled weakly and nodded shifting into his cat form and disappearing from sight.

Adanac turned and urged Tatiana and Varook down the tunnel in front of her. Varook charged into the portal room and released a huge fireball that he had been building as they ran. It raced towards the portal searing creatures that were exiting the portal. Howling they stumbled in confusion as the force of the majik drove them back through the portal. Tatiana quickly sheathed her dark iron swords and drew the Eye of Zul from its scabbard. With a twist she separated the blades as Dorganna's minions scattered as fire and ice danced across the blades. Tatiana attacked the portal. As her blades bit deeply into the majik she could hear Adanac's bow humming as screams filled the room. Piece by piece the portal came apart as creatures scrambled to move out of the opening which became smaller and smaller.

Dorganna's howls of rage silenced the confusion that had been filling the air. Her minions scrambled in fear as the goddess of confusion and evil swept into the room slamming everything in her way against the wall. Bones crunched with a sickening sound as blood splattered everything around them. The room filled with the gut churning smell of death, intermixed with the involuntary emptying of the bowels and the stench of sulfur. The floor now slick with untold body fluids made standing precarious.

Dorganna leveled her staff towards Varook & Adanac as she chanted. Tatiana stepped between them and crossed her blades, a determined look in her eyes as she slowly advanced. Dorganna's spell bounced harmlessly around the shield created by the crossed swords and cooked the blood from the walls. She howled in rage and swung her staff like a club catching Tatiana by surprise as Varook stepped forward deflecting it with his staff, the impact jarring him and forcing him to his knees.

McFiggins burst into the room his shoulders bloody, his claws covered in green flesh. He charged towards Dorganna catching her by surprise; his sudden appearance momentarily distracting her from Tatiana. She managed to raise a shield to deflect the swords attack but not to avoid McFiggins swipe. She screamed in pain as his claws raked the side sending her back towards the wall. She quickly recovered and shot McFiggins a withering look that caused him to flinch. Varook's spell slammed into her preventing her from finishing her attack allowing McFiggins time to slip in behind Tatiana.

Tatiana spun her swords as she advanced. The spinning blades knocking Dorganna's attacks harmlessly away. She screamed in outrage and renewed her attacks. The spells becoming more and more vicious as she pressed her attack attempting to push them back. Her minions, answering her call, began pouring into the room forcing them closer together. McFiggins swiped at several sending them crashing into the ones behind. Varook switched from fire ball to ice shards as he froze them in place allowing McFiggins and Adanac to make quick work of them.

"We can't take Dorganna and this crowd on at the same time. We need to find a way to isolate her," hissed Varook his majik reserves depleting quicker than he expected.

"Move towards the tunnel," said Tatiana. "We can regroup in the other room."

Slowly they backed into the tunnel, McFiggins going first to make sure the way was clear, then Varook who had switched to healing spells trying to patch up their minor wounds, then Adanac whose bow still sung as she towered over Tatiana and finally Tatiana who maintained her shield to keep Dorganna at bay.

"Varook can you block this tunnel?" asked Adanac.

"Not without bringing the whole place down on us," he said. "Maybe we can find something to block it with."

Stepping into the room they sighed in relief that it was still empty. McFiggins pushed the heavy throne across the floor and in front of the tunnel opening. "That will give us a little reprieve. Maybe we can come up with another plan of attack."

"We can't stay here to long," said Varook. "There are too many entrances that we could never cover. There is another room with controlled access deeper into the mountain. I would expect Dorganna to go there."

"What is it?" asked Tatiana.

"It is where her power should be the strongest, but it will be the easiest place to control access

to. It is her temple,” said Varook.

The other three groaned. “Is there anywhere else we can face her?” asked Tatiana.

“Not that will eliminate her minions. There are still too many of them left for us to stand against,” said Varook. “We still don’t know if she has another portal. She knows we are here now so it won’t matter if you use the blades now. Ask the sword if there are other portals?”

Tatiana tried to concentrate on the swords and portals but kept getting buffeted as majik flew through the air slamming into her. “I can’t tell, Dorganna is interrupting the flow of majik too much.”

Do you trust us?’

Trust who?

Us, your sword.

Yes, I think.

Open your mind, let us in.

Tatiana opened her mind up to the sword. Each blade revealed to her why they were created, the power they wielded, the affect they would have if used properly. Tatiana smiled as a plan began to formulate in her mind. She gasped as everything fell into place.

“Varook, is it true you can handle the sword?” asked Tatiana.

“When you were unconscious and threatened by Cimion I placed my hand on the pommel and the sword spoke to me. Not the way it speaks to you but yes I believe I could pick them up.”

Tatiana began to disassemble the sword laying four of the six blades on the floor in front of him. “Reassemble the sword,” she said.

“But,” he started to say.

“Don’t speak just do as I ask.”

Varook handed his staff to Adanac and carefully reached for a blade. He felt a sharp tingling sensation in his arm but not the pain from picking up the first blade so many months ago. Breathing a sigh of relief he moved the blade towards its mate and smiled in relief as it snapped in place.

“Now the other one,” encouraged Tatiana.

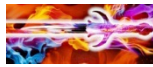
He reached for the Purifier and cringed as the majik from it surged into his body. Moving it close to the Blade of Castrophonius a wave of relief washed over him as it melded together to form one.

“What about....?” He asked.

Tatiana hushed him before he could ask the question. "Use the majik in the sword wisely and remember that I love you with all my heart. I will return." In the blink of an eye Tatiana was gone leaving the three of them with their jaws hanging open.

"Where did she go?" demanded Varook.

Before anyone could form an answer the room began to fill with Dorganna's minions. They came, wave after wave and the group retreated into the next room when the bodies became too thick to work around. Adanac had run out of arrows and fought with her swords. Her forearms bleeding from the near misses mixing with her sweat as it ran down her body. McFiggins was beginning to show signs of slowing down as his massive paws moved slower missing more and more of the attacks causing his fur to turn red from deep cuts. Varook's arms had begun to drop as he struggled to keep his arms up his majik long depleted and in danger of draining the swords as well.



Tatiana stepped back into the room where her friends were fighting. She gasped as she witnessed their struggle to continue fighting against Dorganna's minions. Stopping time she retrieved her blades from Varook's hands and began casting a spell. The air around them began to shimmer then popped as the four of them disappeared from the cave only to reappear on the mountain side looking down at a mountain that had started to implode. Restarting time she quickly caught Varook before he could fall on his face while calling out to the others that they were safe.

"Wh ... where are we?" gasped Varook not trusting his eyes as the mountain continued to fold in on itself.

"We are safe. Dorganna is no longer a problem. In fact the immortals will no longer meddle in our lives," she said.

"What did you do?" gasped McFiggins wincing as he felt a surge of healing power flow through his body. For the first time they noticed that Tatiana was glowing and the healing glow was flowing from her.

"Are you an ... an ... immortal?" asked Varook.

"No my love," she said. "I could never leave you. I have learned why the Eye of Zul is so feared and why it has become to represent absolute power."

Slowly their strength returned to their bodies, their wounds closed and they could move without being in pain. "Dorganna's minions are being hunted down by a combined group of Humans, Elves, Dwarves, Giants and our friend Bullchipper's forces. I have been assured they will not leave any of them alive. When they are done here they are going to teach a number of Trolls a lesson in territory grabbing and greed."

"We need to help them," gasped Varook trying to stand.

“No my son,” said a familiar voice behind them.

Varook whirled to find Master Bandilor standing at the edge of the clearing. “Your work is done. It is time for you to carry on the tradition of our school.”

“Master, I am not ready. You are more suited for that role than I am.”

“Varook my time to cross over has come. I have old friends that are waiting for me. We fought a good fight and won. It is time for a younger force to step forward and continue the fight. That generation is yours. The Lady of the Keep has everything you need to re-establish the school but you will need to find another location. It appears the old one has crumbled, there is nothing left,” he said smiling.

“No Master, do not leave,” cried Varook but the figure before them shimmered and finally began walking out towards a ship that waited patiently for him. He pressed a coin into the hand of the sailor and stepped proudly up the gang plank, his step a little lighter, his youthfulness returning. Others joined him on the deck and they all waved to the small group. Tatiana gasped as she recognized Anorac and a lady who could only be Kayoree.

McFiggins and Adanac could only stand and watch in amazement as the massive ship slipped from its dock and disappeared into the distance.

“Who were the couple with Bandi?” asked McFiggins.

“Anorac and Kayoree,” said Tatiana. “They were responsible for the crafting of the sword. If their spirits are finally leaving it means the world has returned to a balanced world and they are no longer needed.”

“How do you know who they are?” asked Varook.

“I met him when I was given the final challenge of the sword. Varook can you take us back to Osgoode’s? I really need to soak in a hot bath and enjoy some cuddle time. I am so tired of fighting I hope that I never have to fight again. Maybe it’s time to learn how to play my father’s flute,” said Tatiana.

Groaning Varook stood and began to chant, the air in front of them shimmered before solidifying showing the portal room in Osgoode’s compound. They stepped through smiling at the lack of gut wrenching spinning.

Chapter 7

“Where did you go when you disappeared?” asked Varook when all of them had finally settled in the steaming water.

Tatiana shifted not sure how much to reveal. The secrets of the swords had to remain hidden or man would begin hunting them all over again. “I had a discussion with Cimion and the Immortals and we reached a solution for the problem at hand.”

“And that was?” asked Varook pushing for an answer.

“Some questions are not best not asked,” she said.

“You owe us that much,” said Adanac. “After everything we have been through together that is not a suitable answer.”

“I travelled back in time and discussed our problem with Cimion and the Immortals. I then stepped forward in time with Dorganna and the Immortals were waiting for us. She is so far into the future there is no way she will ever come back. They have used their combined powers to imprison her not here on our world but in a place where time remains constant. Where she relives the same day over and over never being aware of what is happening.”

“How will they keep her location a secret? If one of her minions survives the hunt she can be rescued,” said Varook. “And then we will need to go through this all over again.”

“Nope that will never happen,” said Tatiana. “Only I know where she is and before I returned to this time I went back to a time before she was imprisoned. She is so far into the future that immortal or not she will wither away to nothing before she figures out how to return.”

“I hope you are right,” said Varook. “But of course we will be long gone and it will be someone else’s problem.”

“Osgoode told me he had your list ready,” said Adanac stretching and enjoying the heat from the water and the foot massage she was getting from McFiggins. “I think I will keep you around a little longer,” she said staring at McFiggins. “No one can give a foot massage like you do.”

“You should see what I can do with the rest of your body?” he said with an impish smile.

“Maybe later,” she said smiling.

Osgood knocked discreetly on the door and waited for an invitation to enter.

“Osgoode don’t be so formal,” said Tatiana laughing. “You are part of the family now.”

Smiling he held out a long piece of paper for her to read. Tatiana rubbed her eyes saying, “How many zero’s is that?”

“A lot,” answered Varook. “There is more gold listed there than most dragons have in their

treasuries.”

“I am not going to tie myself to a money making venture that requires my constant attention. I want to live my life, enjoy it, have children, study the growth of trees,” said Tatiana. “Osgoode, would you be willing to continue what you are doing and provide us with a monthly sum? You would have free reign to make all the decisions you wanted to, except to have me removed.”

“I would be honoured to carry on for you,” he said bowing. “I think I have found something else you were looking for. A mountain valley well off the beaten path that is easily defended and hard to access. The main valley is ten leagues long and a league and a half at its widest point. There is a mountain stream that feeds a small lake that has ice cold water. There are several smaller valleys that lead off around the edges of small ridges that would allow for expansion. I am told there are a number of rare plants that are only found in the meadows there. Horny won the rights to the land when a customer defaulted on a payment for a big job. He could never bring himself to part with it; he claimed it reminded him of his homeland too much.”

“Where is this valley?” asked Tatiana her interest suddenly piqued. She forgot she was in the pool soaking and stood to give Osgoode a big kiss.

The old man turned red and whirled away from her. “Ma’am must I remind you that you have no clothes on?”

“Oops sorry,” she said settling back into the water. “How do we move into the valley without drawing a lot of attention?”

McFiggins coughed. “May I suggest that we claim that land using Horny’s coin. Varook can open his new school there, you can study music, I can grow old with Adanac and maybe between the four of us we can create some little ones to fill our days.”

“And it would be an awesome place to release Horny’s Ram, maybe find her a mate. I think when he hung on to the valley he knew that is where his final resting place would be,” said Adanac.

“What a perfect way to honour an awesome man, a friend and a father,” said Tatiana tears rolling down her cheeks. Varook pulled her close and held her as she wept. He wasn’t surprised to see the rest of them were also weeping, Osgoode included.

“I will draw up the necessary papers and have the lands transferred into your names. Commander when you have a chance I will need to include the coin when the papers are delivered to the monarch in that area. He wants the lands and keeps trying to find a way to spirit them away from us. This will stop him for good.”

McFiggins nodded and tried to say something but couldn’t find the words.



“I am sorry to see you leave,” said Osgoode. “Your animals have been getting antsy and need to be on the road again. I have drawn a map with directions on how to find the valley. Present this to the woodsman whose hut is just outside of the entrance. I have sent word and he will be expecting you. Order whatever you need for supplies. The woodsman knows how to bill it to us so there is no paper trail. When you are ready we can spread the word about Varook’s school. “

Osgoode kicked at the ground not sure how to continue. Tatiana slipped from Sohnia’s back and raced to him wrapping her arms around him and planted a big kiss on his forehead. “Horny was lucky to have had a friend like you. When we are ready to lay his ashes to rest we will send for you. Varook can open a portal so you won’t have to travel as long.”

“Thank you. In our line of work we don’t usually get a chance to say goodbye,” he said wiping tears from his face.

The group moved out at a good pace enjoying the early morning air. It was late spring, the buds had opened on the trees, the sweet aroma of spring flowers filled the air as this year’s young ran freely among them. The road wound through valley after valley as they witnessed the balance of nature being restored. Orcs trolls and Kobolds had been pushed back to their original boundaries. Watch towers were re-established and Sentry Keeps manned once again. They met groups of refugees either returning to their homesteads or onto new territory. Everyone was polite, greeting each other with optimism as they passed on the road.

Inns were starting to reopen and space was limited. They preferred to move as unknown travellers and when recognized by fighters who had returned to their normal lives they tried to disappear into the darkness. Sometimes they succeeded, but many times they were forced to stay while the people heaped their praise and thanks on them.

Bards were making their rounds signing songs of their conquests, spreading rumours and lies about their accomplishments. In one inn a bard began a song about Sir Hornswoggles Gideaon Blackheart, never once mentioning he was known by the name of Horny by his friends. Varook could take no more and he forced himself to the front of the crowd. Patrons yelled at him to sit down and let the man sing, but he would have none of it. Grabbing the bard’s lute he slammed it into the floor shattering it into a thousand pieces. “I will not let you slander him anymore. Be gone before I slice you into a dozen little pieces,” he screamed.

“Wot I sings is da truth,” said the Bard.

“The truth according to whom, some stupid Kobold?” sneered Varook. “You wouldn’t know the truth if it reared its ugly head and bit you.”

“Da truth, I waz dere,” he said standing to the cheers of the crowd.

“What part did you witness? Did you witness him fighting the pirates, or the undead? Oh maybe it was the battle with the Ogres or the Kobolds. No I know where it was, it was in the caves with the gargoyles. You must have been one of the undead that bowed when he carried his love out from the challenge for the sword in the Lost City of the Dwarves, dead, or when he

stood up to Dorganna and called her a worthless witch. No wait, I remember now you were with the Wyrmpriest when he cut his tail off, or was it when he faced the Troll in the land of the giants. I know you weren't on the beach when he single handily killed a level six demon. Now tell me where you were again? My memory is a little fuzzy."

"I waz dere, don't remember seeing you dere," he sneered.

"Varook," warned Tatiana.

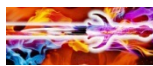
"Let him be, he needs to do this," said McFiggins.

"I was the man he carried across a rope bridge threatening to leave in the center. I was the one that patched him up after every fight. I was the one that held him when he died. If you open your mouth to sing about him again I will break every bone in your body," he said very quietly. "The man was my friend he deserves better than the likes of you destroying his memory for a few coins." Varook slammed his staff into the ground and the images of the final battle played out before everyone there. They gasped and pushed at each other trying to get away from the images. The images disappeared with Varook casting the spell to consume his body in flame, driving Varook to his knees in exhaustion.

Varook spun on his heel as the crowd parted scrambling to get out of his way.

"If you are the healer that means ..." said someone in the crowd.

Varook never stopped, Tatiana hooked her arm around his and whispered, "Thank you, he would have been proud of you for what you just did." Adanac and McFiggins fell in behind them as they away from the large fire the crowd just stood in disbelief staring at them until the disappeared. Before dawn they were long gone not wanting to face the questions they knew people wanted to ask.



Three long months after they left Osgoode they rode up at dusk to the woodcutters hut. A tall muscular man was sitting on the porch, his pipe in one hand and a steaming mug of mead in the other. "Nice evening for a ride. I have been expecting you. Had some trouble on the road did you?"

"Nothing we couldn't handle," said McFiggins. "We just hope it doesn't follow us here though."

"Can't say it will. Place is hard to find even when you know where it is, harder when you have no idea where you are going."

The woodsman stood and walked around the back of his hut. "You can stable your animals here," he said pointing to a large paddock. "They will be safe outside for the night. Nothing comes near this place anymore. There is room inside if you wish or there is a lean-to adjoining the paddock. No bugs this time of year and the stars will be out soon. Might enjoy being out here with nature. Tomorrow I will take you and show you the valleys. I have a trusted crew that

are standing by to start building you a place for the winter. It can get mighty cold here once the snow flies.”

Varook groaned at the thought of the cold.

“Looks like we will have to put some meat on those bones,” said the woodsman chuckling as he left them to unpack.

Summer turned to fall, their meat locker was filled to capacity, fish had been smoked and vegetables harvested. The leaves had started to change as Varook stood before the initial building of his school. His first students had started trickling in eager to learn and ready to face the rigors of becoming healers.

At dinner in the great hall, as the students began filing in Varook’s attention was drawn to the door. Adanac and Tatiana came strolling in arm in arm glowing. Varook smiled as they walked across the room the students moving out of their way. “What has got you two so happy?” he asked.

“Wait for McFiggins,” said Adanac. “Where is the big lug anyway?”

“He was inspecting the heavy stone wall they were building across the entrance of the valley. Something about Horny would insist it was built properly and he wanted to make sure they were following the plans and not trying to cut corners. He should be along shortly.”

Varook waited for everyone to take their seats before standing. The chatter in the hall had risen to a crescendo and quickly quietened when they saw him standing. “Thank you,” he said. “Tomorrow there will be no classes, we will be remembering a very solemn day and laying a compatriot and friend to rest. We will also be releasing a treasured animal into the mountains that surround our valley. You are all invited to join us. We will gather as the sun rises above the mountains at the base of the stone stair cut into the mountain just west of us. Tomorrow will be a day of reflection and private study. This is the one day of the year that I will open up books in my personal library for study and review. Ah Commander, I was just informing the students about our plans for tomorrow.”

“I will be there, rain shine, sleet or snow,” he said solemnly. His change in attitude radiated through the room and soon everyone was quiet.

“Is there anything wrong?” asked Varook.

“Yes the workmen have cut corners in order to increase their purses. I fired the lot of them and the woodsman is trying to locate others that can finish the wall before the snow flies. We don’t need unwanted guests again this winter.”

McFiggins looked at Adanac with shock on his face. “Why are you glowing?”

“Varook, Snooklepig we have something to tell you,” said the ladies excitedly.

“Varook run for the hills, we are in trouble,” said McFiggins standing.

“No you big fool,” said Adanac. “How would you like to add father to your long list of achievements?”

“I am not becoming a cleric,” sputtered McFiggins.

Varook laughed, tears were running down his cheeks. “You mean?” he asked miming holding a baby. “When? How?”

Tatiana scowled at him.

“Well of course I know how, but when did you find out?”

“We didn’t want to say anything until we were sure. But we have missed two months in a row. Sorry but we haven’t had the opportunity to converse with our physician to confirm it,” said Tatiana.

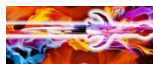
The students erupted in cheers of applause as the news spread through the great hall.

“You mean we, I me are going to be fathers?” stammered McFiggins. Adanac nodded. “I didn’t think it was possible between our races?”

“It wasn’t,” said Tatiana. “I made Cimion and his friends make a few changes as part of the conditions of dealing with Dorganna. Then nature just took its course.”

“What else did you do?” demanded Varook.

“Nothing, nothing you need to worry about,” she said with an impish smile.



At dawn they were dressed in their finest. McFiggins had spent most of the night working on his uniform surprised that it hung so loosely on him. Varook had found his formal gown packed deep within his demon sack and had carefully repaired the frayed edges. Tatiana was dressed in her leather armour, the Eye of Zul across her back, Horny’s dark iron blades on her hips, Sohnia standing beside her in her battle armour. Osgoode had arrived earlier that morning dressed in well-oiled leather armour, his swords crossed across his back, his daggers hanging from his belt. Several of the students had volunteered to groom Horny’s ram but Adanac had graciously declined.

As they gathered at the base of the stairs Adanac arrived with the Ram, Horny’s scarf tied around her neck and his urn hanging from one side and his bow on the other. Thorolf joined them her fur glistening in the early morning light. Adanac had oiled her armour and bow to a high sheen.

Silently they climbed the stairs to a small plateau. A large square had been cut in the side of the mountain, a small shelf inside with some of Horny’s weapons already there. A bench stood under a small tree with five slats along its back. Carefully carved into the slat was

Hornswoggles Gideon "Horny" Blackheart
Friend, compatriot, mentor and father
Dearly missed, but never forgotten.

Tatiana removed the package with Horny's ashes carefully unwrapping it. Dipping her hand inside she grasped a handful and held her palm up above her head. A soft gentle breeze began to blow across the valley removing all the dust from her hand. Varook, Adanac and McFiggins followed suit tears rolling down their cheeks. Tatiana offered the package to Osgoode. Surprised at the honour he did the same thing, huge tears rolling down his cheeks.

Tatiana carefully rolled the rest of the ashes back up and placed the package inside the cut hole. Adanac retrieved the bow and placed it inside with the other weapons as Varook and McFiggins removed the tack from Horny's ram one last time. They placed it inside the small crypt. Osgoode stepped forward and gently laid several medals on top of the package saying, "He was damn proud of these even if he didn't want people to know about them. He was more than an honourable thief, he was a hero of the people and my brother."

The Dwarven masons picked up a large stone to fill the opening Adanac felt the ram nudge her. In her mouth was the brush that Horny had used so many times to groom her. She bleated and pushed Adanac towards the opening again. Adanac nodded and gently took the brush from her mouth and placed it inside the small crypt.

The Dwarven stonemasons slipped the cover in place and hammered in the pins that secured it. The five of them tried to speak but could only place their hand on the cover as they continued to weep. Adanac approached the ram and spoke very softly. "His dying wish was for you to enjoy his mountains. For as long as you live these mountains will be your home. You are free. Go run along the crags, enjoy a place he loved so much." She gently pushed the Ram away encouraging her to climb the rough surface.

Slowly the ram climbed bleating her loss, the broken heart she felt buried in her chest finally finding a release. She stood, a majestic creature outlined by the morning sun bleating her sorrow into the mountains. Thorolf picked up on her anguish and began to howl, her howl cutting them all to the core as she too expressed her loss.

Slowly the students made their way back down the stairs. One by one everyone left the plateau except for Tatiana who sat on the bench well into the early evening. As the sun set she looked up and watched as Horny's Ram bounded from crag to crag. She smiled and then gasped when she realized that there was someone on her back. "It can't be." The pair stopped and the figure waved to her before disappearing from sight.

Thank you lass, I can finally rest in peace, said Horny's voice as clearly as if he was standing next to her. Tatiana started weeping again. She welcomed Varook's strong arms around her as he led her down the stairs and into the lodge where he tucked her into bed.

Chapter 8

“Get out,” said the midwife forcing Varook from the room. “I don’t care if you the Master of the School. She is my patient, not yours. Until she has the baby you are nothing but a spectator.” She swatted him on the back and shoved him out the door which she promptly closed.

“I see you had no better luck than I did,” said McFiggins. “Can you imagine everything we have been through and the midwife saying we couldn’t handle watching childbirth? Is that woman daft?”

Adanac screamed calling McFiggins everything under the sun, threatening what she would do to him if she could get her hands on him. He cringed as the verbal assault continued. Varook smiled weakly until Tatiana picked up where Adanac had left off causing Varook’s colour to drain from his face.

Both fathers looked at each other and gulped as the mothers of their children screamed louder and louder. Then everything went quiet and both men thought the worst until a slap was heard followed by loud cries that soon turned into mewing. They both paced the floor nervously as sweat poured down their backs soaking the cloaks.

The door to their respective wives birthing chambers opened and they were ushered in. Varook stood at the door and watched in amazement as Tatiana held not one but two squirming bundles. “Come and meet our children,” said Tatiana. “Varook this is our first born,” she said handing him a baby girl, “and our second born,” handing him a boy.

“They need names dad,” said the mid-wife trying to hide her smirk.

Varook just stood staring down at his children tears running down his cheeks soaking his robe even more. He stepped from the room and met McFiggins who held two bundles as well. “A girl then a boy,” said Varook.

“A boy, then a girl,” said McFiggins tears running down his cheeks. Both fathers looked at each other and without saying a word marched down the stairs and out the door, the mid-wives screaming at them to get back inside with the babies.

“Open the door,” called Varook to one of the students who scurried to do as she was told. Together they moved as quickly as they dared across the open yard and climbed the stone stairs where breathing heavily they paused in front of the marker stone. Turning to face the ridge they said together. “Horny we would like you meet our children.”

Varook looked at his daughter saying, “I would like to present to you Kayoree our first born and Anorac Hornswoggles.”

McFiggins nodded his approval and when Varook sat down on the bench he stepped forward. “Horny I would like to present our children as well. This is Jonathan Hornswoggles McFiggins our first born, and this is Katrina Jord McFiggins. I promise you they will grow up learning about

an honest thief who was more than a friend he was my brother.”

Both men gasped as Horny's Ram landed in front of them with her little ones running around. Two ghostly figures paused to observe the scene before them their smiles of love filling the ones below with warmth and happiness.

The children began to fuss and the fathers looked at each other not sure what to do. Horny's rams children bleated then ran to her where they latched onto a nipple and began to suckle. Laughing they stood and carefully made their way back into the lodge and up the stairs. The mid-wives started into them but they each shot them a glare that shut them up and caused them to step back.

“I think Horny approves,” said Varook returning them to Tatiana.



The years that followed were not kind. Winters that kept them lodge bound because the snow was too deep to travel. Several times the Orcs tried to take the valley only to be pushed back time after time. Kings tried to take the valley on false pretenses only to be rebuffed. The school of healing fell on hard times as fewer and fewer students enrolled to study so far away from the big cities.

The funds promised by Osgoode continued to arrive monthly as promised, even though he was long gone. Over the years Varook had to see to the burial of first the Commander who slipped while out hunting and plunged to his death. They cremated his body and laid him to rest on the same date as Horny's memorial. Adanac followed him, but not for decades later. A coughing sickness gripped her and they had waited too long to tell Varook what was wrong, she died in his arms.

Their children grew strong and through time they left to seek their fortunes only to return disillusioned with the way the world was changing. Soon four generations of both families lived in the valley, each claiming one of the smaller valleys as home.

Then tragedy struck. The majik of the sword claimed its final price. Tatiana died in Varook's arms as she slept. He wept for days lost without her and wanting nothing more than to join her. His days had no purpose, he lost his will to live but his body refused to let go.

Every year he would dress in his finest and climb the stairs on the anniversary of everyone's death and sit on the bench lovingly running his hands across the back slats feeling the names carved into them. He wept at their loss, he wept for himself now all alone

One morning in early spring during his 80th year he rose earlier than usual calling for scribes. Justina his granddaughter ran into his rooms wanting to know what was wrong. “I must write it all down, before it is too late,” he said.

“Write what down grandfather?”

“Our story,” he said. “No one believes what has happened. If we preserve it then people will know. I can’t leave this world without telling everyone about my friends, the love of my life, and the greatest adventures any one man could undertake.”

“Are you up for it Grandfather?” she asked carefully.

“Yes send in the scribes, I need to share it before it is lost forever.”

Over the next several months he worked at a brutal pace and the scribes struggled to keep up with him. While he napped, recovering from the ordeal of reliving the traumatic events they worked feverishly to make sure they had recorded it properly. Finally it was finished, their life’s work, their life’s purpose.

Chapter 9

"Tatiana," Varook said pausing and staring out into the mountains that lay before him, lost in thought as a pained look crossed his brow. Hesitating, he slowly came back to the present as a gentle hand touched his arm.

"Grandfather, are you ok?"

"Yes my child just lost in my memories. Where were we? We need to finish this before my time comes to an end."

Justina looked at the scribe and nodded her head. Quickly, in a clear concise voice, enunciating each word carefully he repeated what had been said.

"Ah yes" said Varook. "Tatiana had done something with The Eye of Zul and refused to tell Cimion where it was. During the battle with Dorganna she had realised the implications of this weapon if mankind, or a god, ever got hold of it. Little did Cimion realise that her majik had changed, it had grown and the power that surged through her had an impact on the sword. Dorganna's body, torn asunder by the sword, lay scattered throughout a location that only Tatiana was aware of. During the fight she had been pulled out of our world, we never did find out where."

"Justina, in the years to come share this with your children and their children, do not let our sacrifice be forgotten," he said one afternoon more tired than usual. "There will be no reference to the location of sword in these works. If mankind is meant to find them and use them the sword will call for one who can reassemble it."

"Yes grandfather. Where is it now?" she asked.

"Some place safe," he said a sly look on his face.

Varook paused, and shifted, his granddaughter gasping at the sight of his frail body. Gone was the vibrant energetic man she had grown accustomed too. He spent more and more time these days dictating his memories over shorter and shorter periods of time; always getting impatient when the scribes could not keep up. At his feet lay a relative of Thorolf, Adanac's companion, who refused to leave his side. He was tightly wrapped in a heavy blanket to ward off the early morning chill as he sat in his rocking chair looking out over their precious valley.

The rest of their story was well known to all the inhabitants of the keep. At least the real story was, the fabricated one had taken on a life of its own and over time had forced them to retreat from regular world. Being famous, especially for all the wrong reasons brought its own problems.

"That is enough for now," said Varook. "Please return once I have had my mid-day meal." He turned from the scribe and looked at the rich valley floor before him, lost in his memories once again. This time a tear could be seen rolling down his cheek along his beard to collect in a small

damp spot on the blanket. At one time they had tried to comfort him, to wipe away his tears but his anger had put an end to that. He was old, feeble in body but his mind was still alive and full of knowledge; enough knowledge to make him dangerous if pushed too hard or far.

A discrete cough behind, and the smell of freshly baked corn bread and stew mixed with sweet honey mead was enough to break through and pull him back to reality. Slowly he rose, leaning heavily on his staff, and made his way back inside to the table. Settling into a chair by the hearth, now burning year round, he prepared to eat the food placed before him. Reaching inside his cloak, his hands shaking, he retrieved a small pouch. Struggling he managed to open it and removed a small pinch of the powder. Sprinkling it over the mead, stew and corn bread his raspy voice could be heard casting a short spell. Patiently he waited as the colours changed before starting the meal, satisfied that no one had tried to poison him.

Varook's days all blended into each other now. He had trouble sleeping for long periods of time and he was never quite sure what day it was until that day arrived. He always knew, somehow, when the day was at hand. He would rise early in the morning, dress in his finest robe, oil his staff and make his way, unaided and alone, across the courtyard, out of the keep and up a steep winding path that ended on a plateau with one lone tree planted on it. A bench had been carved out of stone by a Master Stonemason, a Dwarf of course, and set so that one could appreciate the view of not only the valley but the tree and the monument that lay beneath it.

*Here lies the remains of a group of adventurers.
Their ashes intermixed so that the bond they shared in life
would continue in death.
May their sacrifice never be forgotten,
may their lives always be cherished,
May they travel through death as they did in life
On one final journey together.*

He would sit on that cold stone bench from sun up to sun down, lost in thought, lost in his memories. As the sun was setting he would stand, stretch, mumble something and begin the long dangerous trek back to the keep. His staff, friends, and family shuddered every year when he made the trek refusing their help and not allowing them to join him.

Justine shuddered, in two days the anniversary of that day would be upon them. She worried that he would not be able to make the climb this year that he would fall and break something. *This year I am going with him* she thought. *Majik User or not, he is not going to make that climb alone.*

Varook stirred from the nap that he had slipped into once his meal was finished. "Granddaughter" he said. "Fetch the scribes, but help me back to my place on the balcony first."

Justina stood there in shock, her mouth open in disbelief. He had asked for help. He never asked for help. "Grandfather, are you ok? Is something wrong? Shall I fetch the healers?" she

said rushing to his side.

"These old bones are getting weary, and there is so much left to tell." he said as he allowed her to help him shuffle to his chair.

Settling into his chair she gently covered him in the heavy blanket before calling out for the scribes. Quickly the three of them entered and took their places. Experience had taught them that it was better to have three scribing what was said, and then compare their work afterwards. At times he spoke rapidly or extremely low, and they didn't want to miss one word.

"We have everything there is to say about the final battle and the sword recorded. There are but a few things left that I would like record before we are done. Pay attention I won't be repeating this."

"After the battle we had one final journey to make before her role was completed, one she could not make alone. She had to honour Horny's last request. Osgoode had found us a valley we could retire in, one that provided us with privacy, a place to study and a place to raise our children in peace. It took us three months of hard travelling to reach this valley, Horny's Royal Yeti Ram in tow. She was exhausted; the battle with Dorganna had drained her of her strength. The trip here didn't help, her reputation preceding her she was forced to face many more obstacles. Fools and idiots flocked to her, seeking the legendary sword. Time after time she was forced to use the skills she had so painstakingly learned at Horny's side. She left a trail of bodies behind her that a blind man could have followed. Each battle took its toll, until she found herself becoming violently sick after each fight.

"One day led to the next until we reached ground that we began to recognise. The Trolls had been pushed back, a treaty signed with the Ogres, the land was no longer threatened. We had stumbled on the entrance to this valley late one evening just as the sun was going down. The woodsman greeted us as we rode into sight. We ushered our cats into the paddock and settled in for a well deserved rest, for the first time in months we felt safe.

"The next morning the plateau was located and plans to lay Horny's remains to rest were made. To this day the offspring of his beloved Ram can be found high above it along the sheer face of the mountain.

"The rest is already recorded. Tomorrow I must make the trip to the plateau. I need my rest. Everyone out."

"Grandfather you are wrong, it is two days away, not tomorrow." said Justina.

"Check your calendar, missy" he said. "It is tomorrow. Now get out."

The scribes gathered their equipment and hastily departed, Varook's anger was legendary and they did not want a repeat of the last time they were too slow heading his direction. Justina shrugged her shoulders in defeat and left right behind them.

Varook struggled to rise and slowly made his way to the bed. Half rolling, half falling he settled into it smiling as Thorolf's grandson gently seized the blankets in his teeth and pulled

them over his master. Gently he hopped up on the bed and snuggled in close, his body heat providing extra comfort for Varook.

Sometime before dawn Varook rose and struggled into his best robe. He carefully brushed his thinning hair, and then cleaned and braided his beard. Picking up his staff he lovingly applied a fresh coat of oil, working it into the wood until it glistened. Getting to his feet he approached one of his bookshelves and carefully selected a tiny tome, carefully hidden amongst his collection, before settling into his rocking chair.

Pulling out his spectacles he opened the book to the last page. Dipping a stylus in a bottle of ink he carefully scribed "Today is the day that I join my beloved. Today on our anniversary we will once again be together." The words that followed were illegible as his hand fell away from the page, the book slipped down his lap as he drew his last breath. Trogon whined and pawed at his leg, but got no response. He began barking, at first to get his master's attention, but nothing happened. Settling onto his haunches he lifted his head towards the plateau and began a long sorrowful howl. He knew his master would not be coming back, that his time had finally come.

The noise from the howl brought Justina running into his room. Crying out she started to weep as the scene before settled into her mind. Gasping in shock she looked out into the valley as the sun crested the mountain. The scene she had witnessed a thousand times before was different. Where the plateau should have been she saw a huge ship docked at the edge of a large ocean, as if waiting for someone. Before her stood a Night Elf, a Giantess, a Human, a Dwarf and a Valkerie flanked by a huge Battle Cat, a sabre cat and a Cobalt Wolf. They stood facing a lone figure that was climbing the hill dressed in a robe carrying a staff that glistened. The Human, which she could now tell was a woman broke from the group and ran to the robbed figure throwing her arms around him, embracing him as you would a long lost love. The others quickly joining her, they gathered around him, welcoming him expressing their joy in seeing him. As a group they turned and looked at Justina and waved before boarding the ship.

As the ship moved off into the distance Justina noticed the small tome in her Grandfathers lap. Carefully she removed the quill from his hand set it on the small table next to him before picking up the book. The last few words were hard to read but she managed to struggle through. As the tears poured down her cheeks onto the page she hugged the book to her chest and waved goodbye to the ship that was receding into the distance. Trogon's howl reaching a new pitch filled the keep with the news, the master was gone. She absently reached down and scratched his ear before burying her face in his fur as the tears poured freely from her eyes.



Varook's body was cremated, like his friends before him. Justina smiled as she mixed the ashes in with the others. "Grandfather, we were both right. Today is the anniversary of all their

deaths, but yours was the anniversary of Grandmothers death. At least now you are together forever."

Settling back on the bench she opened the tome and began to read, marvelling at the poetic words that flowed from the pages, grateful for one last look into a remarkable ordinary man's life.

The End

All my stories have a life of their own. This one is the shortest in the series and draws the saga to an end. I have tried several times to add more content to it but the words just weren't there. This series was a labour of love. It is a story that has given me immense pleasure to write, and share with each of you. I hope you enjoyed it.

I hope you have enjoyed reading this series as much as I have writing it. It has been a labour of love that has spanned 5 years, one that had to be shared.



Ken Byars is the author of several published e-books which include: *Dragon Slayers*, *Loq'rims Gambit*, and the complete Eye of Zul Saga - *Eye of Zul – Book 1*, *Temporal Destiny – Book 2*, *The Purifier – Book 3*, *Castrophonius – Book 4*, *The Spark – Book 5* and this one *The Dash Creator* – the final book of the saga

Ken's far-ranging imagination takes readers to fantasy worlds where *majik* abounds and heroes and heroines are not necessarily the people you might expect. Reflecting his real-world values, Ken's fantasy tales speak of lands where honour and compassion matter and grief hurts as much as it does in real life.

A writer dedicated to the constant improvement of his craft, Ken has completed several writing courses at the local community college, as well as online. He is a member of the Ottawa Independent Writers and an active contributor to a science fiction and fantasy writers' critique group. Ken has participated for the last four years in the annual National Novel Writing Month competition that takes place every November. He has each time completed the prodigious challenge of writing 50,000 words in 30 days.

Join Ken as he explores the worlds and lives of characters that come alive on his pages.

All his works are available from his website <http://kenbyars.com/ebooks-for-download/>

If you find any blatant errors please email the author at [ken\(dot\)byars@kenbyars\(dot\)com](mailto:ken(dot)byars@kenbyars(dot)com)