

# Tales of Dómain

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# FOLKLORE

## Prologue

The Land and Time of Dómain

Vulga, The Bringer of Darkness

The Explorer and The Oracle

## Part I

Tolrog the Giant of Fogmór

## Part II

The Witch Hunter

A Dreadful Warrior

## Part III

The Adventures of Sara Turgan

King of Septus

The Crow

The Travelling Boy

## Part IV

The Red Door

The Talisman  
Cursed



# Tales of Dómain

# Prologue

## *The Land and Time of Dómain*

There are many similarities between our world and the world of Dómain, and there are also many, many differences which you may find quite peculiar. This is, in fact, a true story about a strange and unbelievable world though many call it *fantasy*. Who is anyone to say what is and what is not? In fact, our worlds are connected in more ways than imagined. There are many dimensions, but this one is like the sun surrounded by planets; the pillar of all other tales. If the world in which this tale is told falls, all other worlds (dimensions) would fall, too. Every world has its tales and where best to begin than at the very beginning?

There were seven countries or realms of the land of Dómain. They were called Septus, Telús, Gredius, Tyminus, Túll, Bardor, and

Armeneth. They were surrounded by three vast oceans, The Northern Sea, Caíarth Sea and Negrós Sea (also known as the Sea of the Lost Souls for there were many stories of ships that had set sail but never to return), but it was unknown what lies beyond, as people had been too fearful to venture out too far even though they had great ships with amazing strength.

Armeneth and Túll are at the furthest south of their world as far as they know (or as far as they'll go). Túll is the only realm to which Armeneth is connected by land. The Caíarth Sea is North of Armeneth and bends round to the east. Many have sailed on Caíarth Sea, but to continue sailing east was thought to be foolish for you would be heading into the unknown, with the land of Dómain behind you. On the South side of Armeneth there is more ocean and titanic walls of ice. Then to the west of Armeneth is Túll, mighty in size, with land so flat, perfect for farming.

Túll is almost completely surrounded by rivers and seas, save the borders of Armeneth

and Telús. Telús is located just north-east of Túll, but does not connect to Armeneth as they are departed by the Caírth Sea. The entire Northern lands of Túll are surrounded by the greatest river of all Dómain, the River Mór, which separates Túll from Tyminus. The River Mór is so mighty that it splits the lands of Dómain in half, flowing both north and south pouring from the scattered mountains south of Tyminus.

Tyminus is riddled with many rivers and lakes, small and large as it is engulfed by both great rivers acting as borders, separated from all other realms. The River Mór flows up the northern part of Tyminus into the Great Northern Sea, making its way from the Rotherhelm Mountains on the east side of Tyminus, and the Hidden Lake separates the Rotherhelm Mountains from the High Mountains and acts as a border into Telús. There is a south part to the River Mór that flows down, ending at the south-west of Tyminus and west of Túll. The second greatest river which was given the name, Saol, also

flows to the north of Tyminus and also comes down the on the west, ending slightly higher than the Mór. The River Saol separates Tyminus from the land of Septus.

Septus is not the mightiest in size but the mightiest in mountains, and fortresses scatter round the land making it almost impenetrable from foreign attackers.

East of Tyminus, on the other side of the River Mór, Telús is located under the thin, stretched land of Gredius. East of Telús and south of Gredius is also located the realm of Bardor. Bardor is the smallest, but not the least. It is mostly a quiet and peaceful land, but south of Bardor is the Caíirth Sea which is a dangerous sea to venture as the dark and foul beasts and sea monsters are thought to dwell there. There have been many tales of sea monsters which was why no ship ventured too far from Dómain and out into the ocean. Few have tried but were never heard from again.

The north of the world of Dómain, above Gredius, are large icecaps mightier than those

at the further south. It was thought to be the homeland of all magic folk. No mortal man has ever ventured out there so little is known of the icy-cold land which had been named Fuar.

There are four seasons. Every 1<sup>st</sup> of Earrach is a new year. There are twelve months in a year, quite like our own: Earrach, Ganru, Anru, Hin, Jin, Agust, Septún, Untober, Novo, Sumral, Fóvar, and finally Gevru. This calendar was introduced at the Gathering of the seven kings of the seven realms of Dómain. There are four main months for when the seasons change; Earrach is known to be regrowth of flowers and green on trees, Sumral is when the sun shines its brightest and sweetest, Fóvar is the dying of plants and green of trees, and Gevru is darkness with little sun and much ice and snow blankets the earth.

Year 1 is known as the time the Seven Kings of the realms first met, peacefully, at the Great Hall of the Gathering located at the

centre of the land of Dómain, at Telús. Each realm was named after the kings. Not much is known of the time before the first year as not much was recorded, but some say that the world was created by a mighty king thousands of years ago. It is said that the king came from the stars and created life on Dómain. Other folklore says that it was no king, but a queen that gave birth to life. There have been many different beliefs and faiths that have developed over the years but the most popular in Dómain is the same faith that the Seven Kings had had, and that is the religion of Anima, meaning all life is a gift and all is equal. The Seven Kings acted as messiahs to Anima. But through the belief of Anima comes the belief in the Guardians of Anima. There is the Oracle (who guides), the Dreamcatcher (who knows all dreams and one's worthiness), the Whisperer (who knows all truth and secrets), the Bookkeeper (who knows all tales), the Clockmaker (who knows all time and knows of gateways through to other sides or dimensions), the Beyond (Grim

Reaper, or Death), and the Unknown (which speaks for itself), they call Anima, who is thought to be a great and powerful being, without *being*, and it is said to have created creation itself.

The life expectancy was round 100 years old under natural circumstances. But natural circumstances come rare in the land of Dómain so the average life expectancy would tend fall down to between 30 and 50.



## *Vulga, the Bringer of Darkness*

### 1

For many years Vulgaron had become a dark and dangerous place but it wasn't always an evil land full of dwelling beasts and foul warriors. It wasn't till the year 194, Gevru, that that all changed. The king of Armeneth (as Vulgaron was once called), Vestius Sienn bedded with an unknown woman which was most certainly not the queen and she gave birth to a child (which the queen could not do) named Vulga. But when Vestius refused to care for the child and deny ever meeting the strange woman. This woman grew sour with anger and what Vestius did not know was that she was a witch with the ability to conjure the foulest tricks. She swore revenge and vowed to put a curse on the land of Armeneth with the help from ancient demons to which she had prayed. Her prayers were answered by one demon in particular. Its name was Kah'Li, (demons are genderless, so

Kah'Li must be referred to as *it* rather than he or she) and it made endless promises and showed her all her wildest dreams. Kah'Li was an evil trickster. In return the demon had asked for the ownership of her son, Vulga, and she accepted as she was blinded by the darkness in her mind.

Demons had to be *invited* in order to take a soul so they had to be quite the liars; although, the woman's curse was still granted. With the help from Kah'Li, it was a powerful curse – one mightier than all curses before.

Vulga would grow to become Kah'Li's puppet; a tool of destruction, and Vulga would believe they are his thoughts, his wishes. The world could not move on with the presence of Vulga and his darkness. No change in technology, medicine, weapons. The world slowed down (all existence slowed down, all dimensions and space for everything is connected). Thousands of years would pass in the blink of an eye, but progress would be trapped in the dark ages.

The sky darkened over Armeneth, and war raged the lands for many years. Dark beasts and creatures came from the hells beneath and swallowed the kingdom. Vestius and his last valiant knights managed to fight till the end and when Vestius found his path had crossed with the powerful witch once again he drove his sword into her cold heart, but it didn't put an end to the great curse for Vulga still lived and he belonged to Kah'Li. He was old enough to fend for himself; living in hiding and eating whatever he could find. The great demon would visit him in his dreams and feed him with hatred.

Vulga was dark in magic like his mother was (maybe even greater), and he swore to take vengeance against all those who opposed; those who killed his mother.

Once Vulga became of age and thought of hatred in his youth, he set out for the slaughter. He gained many followers; some out of fear, and others who were just as dark

on the inside as the next foul creature. It wasn't long till Vulga found his way to the king and queen of Armeneth. Vulga was cruel in his slaying of them both. He made Vestius – his biological father – watch as the life of the queen was taken quite gruesomely and too horrible to tell in tales. The realm of Armeneth would then be renamed as Vulgaron under new rule.

There was more to the curse bestowed by Vulga's mother. She was quite ironic in the making of the curse. She wanted to prove that there was no one *pure* left in the world, and she was willing to bet her child's life on it. *The life of Vulga was unending, unless he was slain by a great warrior who was pure of heart and soul, and never to have killed for glory, and never to have bedded a woman* (unlike his father, Vestius) so legend tells.

### 3

Since then, the fear of magic grew throughout the land of Dómain. The mortal

kings came to a voted decision to pass a law against the performing of any sort of magic. To *be* a witch or wizard was a serious crime; punishable by death. That was the result of the fear that grew in the lands of Dómain. Fear had always been a poison, and it was one of Dómain's greatest killers.

Vulga vowed to wreak havoc across the lands and he would do so with all his powers. He would send creatures of darkness like vampires, giants, fengária, mortal raiders and many more to take the lives of the innocent. Kah'Li wanted to prolong the suffering, not simply end the world – the demon wanted the world to live and witness its suffering rather than simply have it destroyed, so without Vulga being completely aware, Kah'Li may have held a tight leash around his neck.

Many learned of the darkness growing in Vulgaron, but only one king made the decision to act without creating some ridiculous law that would only harm the innocent (although this king urged to create the law to ban all magic). This king was King

Tulius Gráll of Tyminus.

4

King Tulius Gráll, of Tyminus, was the first king of the six realms to retaliate against Vulga in the year 230, six years after the fall of Vulgaron. Tulius Gráll joined his forces with the forces of Túll. At that time, ruling Túll was King Nórd Turgan. King Nórd didn't want to go to war but had no choice as Vulgaron was his realm's neighbouring realm, and they were next to be invaded by the darkness that had engulfed Vulgaron. Tulius had a mightier army of 10,000 while Nórd had 6,000 at most for the land of Túll was home of mostly farmers.

King Tulius and his army were welcomed with honour as they entered Túll. Songs were sung and feasts were made. It was a celebration. But it would be short-lived. As Tulius and Nórd gathered for battle the queen of Túll, Norí Turgan, watched them on their send-off, with their son by her side, and she

said: 'Go with honour, go with bravery, but heed my warning, war will not save life for it only brings death and sorrow.'

That was Norí last attempt to change their minds about marching into Vulgaron, but it wouldn't change anyone's mind; it was too late. Norí wanted to work on a more defensive approach but that wasn't King Tulus Gráll's way. He knew how to fight.

And so, the two armies marched to the dark and fiery borders of Vulgaron in hope to slay the great and evil sorcerer, Vulga. The people of Túll watched in pre-mature mourning. It was as though they were marching to their graves; many of them knew it. But Tulus was hopeful in his quest. He was arrogant, but that didn't mean he was a bad man. He did much good, but his position made him ignorant to danger, and his fear of magic folk made him believe ignorant things.

16,000 soldiers wouldn't be enough to defeat the darkness of Vulga, especially that his own army had grown so magnificently over the years, and Vulga's armies were

always very different to others. They were demons of the underworld, and dark folk that made their pledges to Vulga so that they'd be spared, but now their oath of life had been sworn and was unbreakable for Vulga (or Kah'Li) owned their souls. There were also giants, vampires, trolls, goblins, evil spirits, and much, much more terrifying and unheard-of creatures before; some that have no name yet; never before seen.

## 5

The clouds were as black as night and it completely blocked out the sun. There was an orange and red glow from the flames of burnt trees and what were once homes of the ordinary folk of Armeneth which were long gone or changed to darkness. The knights of the two armies grew weary as the land of Vulgaron was a graveyard, and the eerie silence sent shivers down their spines. It was surely darkness that had taken over the land as the armies walked gingerly to their doom.



Time was lost in Vulgaron since the blocking of the sun and of the moon. It was Vulga's plan to force that same darkness on the rest of the world and so Tulus could not hold back. He must defeat the dreadful sorcerer.

All of a sudden, a strange trembling sound roared over a mighty hill as the two armies came to a valley. It was both sides of the valley that Vulga's horrible warriors charged down, their faces deformed by evil and skin changed by madness. Both Tulus' and Nórd's armies fought valiantly but many of them to their death. They had suffered a great and terrible loss and Nórd himself was wounded, but not bad enough to make him turn back just yet.

Tulus led them out of the treacherous valley, but next was a large and dangerous forest that was full of vampires and fengária waiting to ambush. Fengária were once ordinary folk but the evil curse of the fengári, or fengária for plural, turned them into something else altogether, and it's contagious

to the scratch or bite if the victim survives the encounter. Their skin would change to mangy fur, their eyes turned red, and thoughts controlled by the invading beast within. But many of them would shape-shift uncontrollably until eventually becoming a permanent beast. There would be more to tell of the fengária in later tales.

## 6

The forest was a city of trees. It was as easy to get lost there as it was to get lost in a maze – only this maze could kill. The forest was named Lírwood and was renowned for its greatness in size. It was then the most dangerous forest in all of Dómain.

One by one, the knights of both armies were being taken down by vampires in the dark. It was terrifying and disorientating for all warriors of Tyminus and Túll. The valiant armies were split into two, and Nórd, after taking an arrow to the chest from a foul warrior hidden high in the trees, was carried

by those who remained of his knights, and brought out of Vulgaron. The army of Túll retreated with their fatally wounded king. Few made it out alive, even less made it out unharmed. By the time they reached the gates of Helmwith, the home of the king and queen of Túll, Nórd was truly dead. Norí shed a tear of sorrow that she knew would come and made it her mission to set up the perfect defence against Vulgaron. Walls were built and fortresses rose up high to keep out an invasion at the borders between Túll and Vulgaron. She spent her entire time of ruling to make sure it was all finished before her son became king and she succeeded. The wall would keep Vulga's armies out of Túll for many years.

But during the time Nórd was carried back to Túll, King Tulus and his remaining knights continued to fight their way through Lírwood forest. They were completely outnumbered by Vulga's army which at this point included vampires, vampire bats, fengária, foul and deformed warriors, giants,

and many other unknown creatures of darkness.

For days they had wandered the land of Vulgaron and fought in search of Vulga's lair. There wasn't a moment to rest; Vulga made sure they couldn't. It was a hopeless search for most had fallen; so few remained. But King Tulus was persistent. He couldn't give up after everything they had been through. He didn't want it all to be in vain. But it would be.

In a tower so tall and surrounded by dying trees stood Vulga the terrible, watching out from the arched window. It was smaller than you would expect for a mighty sorcerer king, although it was supposed to be a secret lair. It would be best to be subtle to stay hidden.

## 7

King Tulus and his knights came across the tower with awe and wonder. Many of them had no more strength left in them, but more foul warriors came anyway. Vulga's

armies kept on coming and by the looks of it there was no end.

'Attack!' Tullius roared as he charged head-on toward the tower.

He fought his way through the enemy and while his knights continued to fight and die outside, Tullius made his brave way into the tower. His sword turned red with the blood of his enemies.

Inside the tower was dark, damp and had a stench of death about it. It was full of dark magic. Cages hung from the ceiling like bird cages, but they were for no birds. Human remains were still locked away in some of those cages and there were skeletons shackled to the walls, frozen in their last position in which they had died. One of the skeletons locked away in a hanging cage still wore a king's ring on its bony finger.

Tullius couldn't see through the darkness and so he grabbed a lit torch and continued to search for Vulga. With the torch in one hand and his sword in the other he done what no other had dared to do, or lived long enough to

reach. He made it to the lair of the great and powerful evil sorcerer. But this tale doesn't end quite so gloriously.

Tulius reached the highest point of the tower. It was where Vulga himself had dwelt. Tulius didn't hesitate and he charged with his mighty sword. Vulga picked up his staff and sent lightning into his direction. The lightning was rushed and Vulga missed his target at first. Then he tried again with a strong gravitational push sending Tulius back onto the wooden floor.

Vulga felt like the champion in this unforgettable battle and so he stood over Tulius with his arrogance but Tulius quickly turned over and sent his sword through Vulga's chest. The sorcerer fell to the ground with a thud and was clearly dead; the sword protruding from his chest. Tulius stood up with his victory but when he went to retrieve his sword Vulga had risen again.

'You do not have the *power* to defeat me!' Vulga shouted a mighty shout, and with Tulius' own sword he swung it at him but not

to kill him just yet. Tulus went down after the powerful strike.

Tulus was greatly wounded but still alive in the chains of Vulga's dungeon. Most of King Tulus' knights were slain in the battle but spared few so that word would be spread of what had happened and now Vulga planned on killing Tulus but making him suffer first. The dungeons of Vulgaron are the worst in all the land of Dómain. No one had ever escaped or survived them unless Vulga wanted them to survive. The so-called lucky few knights were held in the dungeons with Tulus and were only sent back to Túll's border as a message once Vulga was finished with Tulus.

It was the one hundredth day that Vulga decided to bring death to Tulus. Tulus was held chained on an alter in front of a crowd of the foul followers of Vulga. They cursed at him; they swore at him; they threw anything they could at him; they had no mercy.

Vulga called for an executioner named Keller Stein which was one of many of Vulga's

loyal servants that had everlasting life under his spell unless killed in battle. Vulga granted that gift to only the ones he most trusted under his rule. But that dark magic comes with a price. The longer someone is under that spell, and if they are mortal, the more deformed they become in body and soul. If they would break their oath to Vulga, they would lose the false life and die. Others who were granted that power by Vulga were the foul warrior commander Góron Stíl and his son Níthe Stíl who both come into more tales further down the line.

## 8

King Tulus could not bring Vulga to his death for the curse was too powerful. No matter how great Tulus was as a king or a warrior he could not kill Vulga for Tulus was not pure of heart and soul, and he had killed before for glory and also certainly wasn't a virgin. Once again, the curse conjured by the powerful and dark witch, Vulga's mother, had



defeated a man brave enough to make a stand against the reign of Vulga. But Vulga could never die unless he was killed by a brave *virgin* warrior, pure of heart and soul nor to have killed for glory. That was a cruel joke for a curse and Vulga's mother had most likely known that. Chances were no one like that even existed.

And so, the executioner, Keller Stein, brought his axe to Tulus' neck and with one swing he was beheaded in front of a cheering crowd of foul followers of darkness and the few knights of Tyminus that were only there to witness the tragedy.

Thus, ended the tale of King Tulus Gráll and his brave but vain siege of Vulgaron, but from then on Vulga would strike back at the rest of the world by spreading out dark creatures and foul followers as spies and ambushes throughout the land of Dómain. Vulga vowed to take revenge and there was no one to stop him but the brave warriors of the lands that were not taken by darkness. But even they stood little chance as none of those

warriors were known to fit the description of the *one* that would defeat Vulga and put an end to the darkness so that the world could move on, change, grow.



## *The Explorer and the Oracle*

### 1

The map of Dómain shown on the previous page was drawn by an explorer named Leon Dégan in the year of 386. The map is clearly unfinished, but it shows enough. Leon was from the land of Bardor and started his working life at the quays, but it became his dream to explore the rest of the world despite what dangers lay ahead. It may have been the dangers that called to him; he wanted excitement and adventure!

As he worked at the quay, the ocean called his name with every wave and every ripple. He would stare out to the horizon and wonder what was happening across the sea. He thought that maybe there was someone just like him staring back. He believed there was more to this world than the land of Dómain, but many called him crazy (and many were too afraid to sail to the horizon, and for good reasons). That was when he

decided to pack up everything and live his life exploring the great world. He couldn't find anyone courageous enough to sail out to the unknown so he had to make do with the lands of Dómain. He became a traveller and explorer. Someday, he hoped to buy a ship and crew to explore the unknown seas.

There was nothing keeping him in Bardor anymore; he had no family to worry for him. Many had thought that he was quite the unusual sort, so he was a lonely man.

As Leon set off to leave Bardor, he passed the old ruins at Ryevale. He had heard tales of legends of the castle of Ryevale, and had visited it many times before. But this time he looked at it differently; he knew he'd never see it again and that made it look more beautiful. There was more for him to see out in the world so mysterious to him. He travelled on.

He came to Telús; there wasn't anything too unusual there – just flat lands and the odd house or two. Then he passed by Serin Castle, the home of the king of Telús. It was heavily

fortified, of course, but Leon only stopped to re-supply himself – nothing of interest to him there.

Along his way, he would stop into Inns and small taverns to hear stories and tall tales for him to investigate. He kept a small but thick journal to take notes and had his blank canvas to draw his map of Dómain.

Funnily enough, no one had ever made a full map viewing all of Dómain before Leon, although there were maps of individual realms. Progress had been slow since the coming of Vulga and the falling of Armeneth.

Leon's travels brought him all over; he explored the rocky peaks of the High Mountains; paddled a boat in the Hidden Lake (only to come close to being some lake monster's dinner); journeyed through endless fields in Túll and back north again as it was too dangerous to venture into Vulgaron; cautiously moved through swamps and bogs in Tyminus for which took him three years alone. Leon had found an ancient tree near Lake Lóran which a group of settlers

worshiped as a god. Leon tried not to judge on his travels for it got him closer to discovering more. The Sacred tree of Lóran would stand for many, many years and the religion grew like the branches on the top of the old tree and gained followers from all over Tyminus and beyond.

Once Leon became satisfied with what he had learned he would move on. Crossing the bridge into Septus, after a rest and resupply in a village, he would then make a dangerous and tiring climb over the Natus Mountains and climb the great Mount Gorge, the tallest mountain in Dómain. The air was freezing and snow rested on the rocks the higher he got. It was mainly ever pilgrims that climbed Mount Gorge but it was a dangerous hike. Leon could feel the pain in his feet and the exhaustion in his legs with every breath. Right before the highest point of the mountain he found a small door that had been built into a cave. He thought this was quite peculiar and he had to investigate. Leon was drawn to unusual things like a river to the ocean. He

pondered to himself that it may belong to the old pilgrims from long ago and had been abandoned ever since and felt silly as he lifted his shivering fist to knock on the wooden door. *Knock! Knock!* Leon almost laughed to himself imagining someone call to enter. But of course, in strange lands like these, there was someone home. The door opened and a small old lady greeted Leon and pointed for him to come inside. Leon froze for a moment, trying to decide if he had finally lost his mind from the cold. Leon started to move his feet and found himself inside, sitting by a warm fire and the old lady brought him a soothing cup of tea. The lady was old but Leon couldn't help but notice her eyes. They were blue and captivating.

'I don't mean to be rude, but how are *you* livin' up here?' Leon begged a question.

'Am I living?' she laughed.

Leon just smiled, trying to stay polite as the old lady sounded a little off to him.

'Have some more tea, Leon,' she nodded to the cup.



'Thanks . . . wait, I didn't tell you my name—'

'I know you, Leon.'

'I'm sorry, but I don't know you; should I?' he said politely.

'I am many but not many have met with me.'

'I see,' Leon said, 'I should be leavin' soon,' he placed his cup on the table and prepared to exit his seat.

'Leon, I am the Oracle, the Messenger, the Guide. I have heard many names over the years but no one has ever simply called me Juliath, my actual name.'

'Juliath? I don't completely understand.'

'I have come to you to warn you of where your travels may lead you.'

'But I came to you,' Leon laughed a little.

'Is that right?' she grinned again as if to find Leon's naivety endearing. Her grin wasn't sinister; it was the complete opposite, like the smile a mother gave her child. There was love and she was beautiful. 'Your journey will bring you to great pain and suffering,

which you will endure for many, many years. There is no avoiding this unless you simply return to Bardor and end your exploration days. But I beg of you to understand the importance of your journey and that you must undergo all that pain, as your pain is a link in the chain to defeating darkness—'

'Wait . . . this is a lot of information to take in an' to be honest I'm findin' it hard to believe.'

'Is it *proof* you want? Your kind always want proof,' Juliath showed Leon to a looking glass on a counter-top. It had an oval-shaped mahogany frame, and as clear as a window. Looking glasses that clear were a luxury; even rare for the rich, so Leon was a little shocked by the image of himself, so draggy and tired.

'Look into there,' she pointed to the looking glass.

Leon stared at his reflection and waited for something to happen; his reflection stared back. Leon turned to Juliath to ask what to look for, but he noticed something strange before he could ask; his reflection didn't turn

with him. He stood still again and watched as his reflection fell to its knees in pain and began to turn into some wild beast. His skin was ripping and his clothes tattered.

'What am I seeing!?' he questioned, not able to take his eyes away from the reflection.

'The future,' Juliath answered.

'What'll happen to me?'

'Something horrible, but the reward would be great at the end.'

'Defeating darkness?'

'Yes, and for that your afterlife will be in Paradise.'

'And what or who is this *darkness*?'

'You will be one of the first links in the chain that puts an end to the terrible sorcerer, Vulga.'

Leon thought for a moment as he took his seat again.

'Well, what's it I must do?' he asked.

'Someday you will cross paths with a wizard known as Merthill DeWisengrae. You will need to help him, but it will be difficult as you will be cursed, and oddly enough, what

makes it difficult is also the only reason you cross paths with the wizard, becoming a link in the chain.'

'If this is the future than it was goin' to happen anyway; so why tell me all this?'

'The future hasn't happened yet so it is not written in stone. There are an infinite number of possibilities; and I can see into the windows of possible outcomes. There's even one vision where you never left Bardor, and I can look into that future in the looking glass, but luckily, we exist in this life where you *have* left Bardor which brings you closer to meeting the wizard. I have to tell you this so that you will make it your goal.'

'There's another version of me that's still in Bardor?'

'Well, that version of you doesn't exist in the way you can comprehend; there is only one of you but there are an infinite number of possibilities of you that exist in some shape or form. This is the central dimension.'

'I think I need another drink,' Leon said as he leaned back into his chair.

'I know, it's a lot to take in, but understand the importance of what you must go through in order to do what's right.'

'I really better be leaving now, I'm sorry,' he got up and slowly backed to the door.

'You can leave, Leon, but you will remember what I told you.'

On Leon's climb down the mountain, Juliath was right, he couldn't stop thinking about all that she had told him. All the pain and all the suffering he felt from his reflection had stayed with him with each cold step down the shivering mountaintop.

From what Leon had said early about needing *another drink*, he found himself in the nearest tavern once he reached the bottom of the mountain. He took a break and stayed at the Inn for a few days to ponder on things. He wondered who the wizard, Merthill DeWisengrae, was and how he can help. What does a wizard need help with from an ordinary mortal? Although, Leon would even admit it himself; he's no ordinary mortal, and all that he had and shall experience is far from

ordinary.

## 2

Leon had found many great places in his travels which can be seen on the map that he had drawn. It took him many years to get what he had got down on that paper.

All the locations on the map of Dómain are places that Leon had explored or heard about. The map is not completed to the fullest because Leon had suddenly stopped exploring and discovering new places, and uncovering unseen mysteries. He never did get that ship and crew that he had hoped for back at the quays of Bardor.

It was unclear what exactly happened to Leon. The last known place he was heading to was Dreadwood forest located in Gredius. There was nothing after Dreadwood forest. His journal was never found, only a map which he had left in the room in which he was staying in Dreadwood village.

Some believed that there was something

dangerous in that forest which was why Leon went to investigate in the first place. He had heard tales of horror about Dreadwood. But it wasn't always so dark there, so something came to Dreadwood and lurked in the woods and took whoever it wanted. Leon had felt that it was his duty as an explorer and adventurer to find out why the forest of Dreadwood had changed over the years – why it had become so foul.

Leon's body was never found, but it was rare to ever find any bodies of the victims of Dreadwood, which frightened folk even more so. Not knowing how these people simply vanished into thin air. Some folk say that it's the work of Vulga's dark magic; others say that *all* magic is dark. Some say that it was a vampire lurking in the woods; others say that it was a wild beast. The tales go on and on and on. Whatever it was, it was a dark soul and had taken the lives of many wary travellers, and from then on, Dreadwood forest was infamous. So, for many years, bounty hunters ventured in but never to

return. Darkness had truly fallen over the land of Dómain.



## PART I

### *Tolrog the Giant of Fogmór*

#### 1

After the great loss of King Tulus and his warriors for the battle of Vulgaron, Queen Norí of Túll had built a wall so high and mighty so that none could enter from the dark lands. And since that great battle, Vulga had been weakened by the use of his powers. But that was only momentarily as his powers were growing with the years. He absorbed the time in the land of Dómain and that was why time seemed to be still, yet days and nights passed still.

It was the thousandth year and Túll's defence had lived up to its expectations lasting as long and as tall as Queen Norí had hoped. She had saved her future generations because of her quick thinking but this forced Vulga to search for other ways to get to the

rest of Dómain. Vulga had commanded one giant to make his way across the Caírrth Sea, North of Vulgaron. He didn't need a boat, he didn't need an army, just one giant named Tolrog. He sent Tolrog across the dangerous sea to Telús. Giants were known to be quite the swimmers.

There was a small unexpected village at the coast of Telús known as Fogmór. It was directly across the Caírrth Sea from Vulgaron. It was only a small village where lived some fishermen with their families. They had no real form of defence let alone against a giant. After all there was no reason to attack Fogmór; it was of no significance or of any importance. But Vulga didn't care, he only wanted to spread his evil across the land.

Giants were rare to see which sounds ridiculous given their size. The smallest giant would be at least ten feet tall and that would be a young giant. The tallest known height of a giant was twenty feet and that was before Tolrog was seen by those at Fogmór. Tolrog was the largest giant ever seen before at the

height of nearly fifty feet! No village stood a chance.

## 2

In the village of Fogmór were a father and son. They fished together for a living. Róman Bermor was a fisherman and his son was Tóman. Tóman was a young boy at the time but his father saw him old enough to help with fishing and working round the village. People used to fish in Caíirth sea before darkness fell over Vulgaron (then it was known as Armeneth) and the sea became home to strange sea-monsters, some thought to be myths. There were stories, before Vulga, of sea-monsters but it had become more rampant over the years. But now Róman brought his son fishing at the River Tóg, east of Fogmór.

It was a sunny day of Sumral but for some reason the birds were not singing their usual songs of the morning. Róman noticed this for the sign of the coming of darkness but

as the people of Telús grew ignorant of the raging war across the sea, he quickly forgot about it and thought of it no more.

‘Tóman! Tóman!’ his father called. ‘Fetch the nets. Let’s get to work.’

And just like that Tóman came rushing round with both hands full of fishing equipment –a bucket full of bait hanging from his wrist, three fishing rods over his shoulders and the nets dangling round his neck like a scarf.

Róman had already brought the horse and cart and waited for his son to fill the cart with the equipment. Felix was the name of the horse and he was a magnificent creature. So large and strong and obedient and loyal was he. Felix was mainly white with two spots of brown, one on his shoulder and another over his left eye. He was a beautiful horse and one of Róman’s prized possessions. The horse was given to him by Gretil, his wife, a while before she had passed away from a terrible illness known as Tar. Tar was a plague caused by the evil witches of the north, supposedly, which

has never actually been proven for no witches of any kind claimed for the illness. Some simply say that it was an ordinary illness caused by no one in particular, but of the conditions in which people lived. It turns the victim's insides black; they cough up blood so gruesomely, and the blood they cough is dark in colour, till they can cough no more.

And so, the horse, Felix, means so much to Róman as it was the last gift from his wife before she died. Since then, Róman had raised his son alone.

It was a perfect day but probably not for fishing. It would be better to fish in the light rain but there was no time to waste. Róman had to make the gold to make a living for himself and Tóman.

The cart was full and they were ready to go to work.

'Go!' Róman yelled to Felix just as Tóman jumped into the cart and on they went to the River Tóg.

Calm was the river in the sun that shone so brightly in the clear blue sky. It beamed down on their faces as they started to set up the fishing gear. Tóman readied the bait whilst Róman searched for the perfect spot to fish. They were hoping to catch large salmon which was Róman's favourite fish to catch. He'd get a heavy pouch of gold for them in those days.

And so, they had begun fishing. It was a tedious way of life, but peaceful for those who have patience, respect and understanding for all living things. It was no life for a warrior at heart. That was why Tóman felt bored until something would finally bite.

Hours passed and there was finally something biting down on Tóman's line. His father rushed over to support him and coached his every move.

'Don't let the line snap! You can do it!' he whispered with encouragement, trying not to help too much.

Tóman finally reeled in his fishing rod,

and caught on the end of the hook was the largest salmon he had ever seen. It wriggled and thudded round as he dropped it onto the solid ground.

Thump! Thump! Róman whacked the salmon on its head to give it an instant death.

'Go now to the next life . . . if we meet the same fate may we be judged as equals as the circle of life is greater than I. We thank the Seven Kings for giving us this way of life. May the Guardians of Anima always be with us,' Róman said.

'It's just a salmon, Father.' Tóman smiled.

'Yes, but a life is a life, no matter the form. That's why I said what I said . . . Anima is about living and how we act in this world determines our next.'

'I hope I'm not a salmon . . .'

'No more joking round . . .' Róman said. 'This is a great catch of salmon!' he cheered.

'That's the biggest fish I've ever seen and I caught it!' Tóman smiled to his father.

'Bigger than any of the ones I've ever caught,' Róman said. 'You'll be a great

fisherman, better than I!’

Tóman smiled with joy. He loved to fish with his father, as boring as he might find it at times. Maybe it was the time that he had spent with his father that he loved, not so much the fishing part. The loss of his mother at such a young age made him afraid of losing his father, too, so he loved spending time with him in any situation. But soon everything would change to horror as the water and ground began to shake and tremor. It was like an earthquake that shook the very ground beneath their feet.

‘Hastily! To the cart!’ Róman urged Tóman and so they gathered what they could and made a run for Felix and the cart. Tóman looked back as they had forgotten the salmon but by the river there was a massive giant. It was Tolrog and he was heading for their town of Fogmór. Many homes and unexpected folk would be killed if nothing was done. Tolrog didn't seem to notice Róman and his son but moved fast with great steps towards the defenceless town.



Róman brought Tóman to a safe distance and left him with Felix whilst he tried to help who he could at Fogmór. Tolrog was already there and causing havoc and peril. Houses burnt and crumbled to the ground and villagers fled for their lives. Few men tried to fight off the fifty-foot giant but they were killed with one swipe of his bat which was actually a large tree trunk.

Róman searched and searched, dodging debris of all sorts for anyone left alive. He managed to save a young family of villagers from their own house caving in on them. They were reluctant at first due to fear to follow Róman but he forced them out just before the house collapsed to the ground.

'Run to the mountains!' he yelled while he continued to search for more folk.

Tóman watched, with sorrow from a distance – his home falling apart, the town in which he was born, crumble down and burn to dust – and his eyes drowned with tears.

Róman went from building to building saving the lives of many people but there was

only so much he could do and he forgot about his own life. He was in as much danger as anyone else there. A lady cried that her husband was still trapped inside their home and so he rushed in without thinking, to rescue the man. The building caught fire and started to quickly blaze. The heat was unbearable and the wife of the trapped man cried out with pain as the building came apart and fell to pieces with them still inside. That was the end of Róman's life but the deeds he had done that day were never forgotten and the village folk he had saved spread the word of his bravery and so his son was looked after and loved and honoured by all who had heard the tale of Róman Bermor. Those who had survived had fled and searched for a new place to settle and eventually call home. It wasn't an easy task.

#### 4

But the tale of Tolrog was not finished just yet. Ever since the defilement of the town

of Fogmór, Tolrog made it his place to dwell. Tolrog had gotten lazy and comfortable where he was; forgetting Vulga's quest to travel all over Telús to cause tremendous damage. It was just as well giants were known to be quite lazy creatures. Although some villages near to Fogmór were destroyed by Tolrog, he never ventured too far. There was a great bounty out on the giant but no slayer had ever dared to venture to Fogmór to slay Tolrog. He was a mighty beast.

## 5

Many years had passed but still none felt brave enough to collect that bounty. The king of Telús at that time didn't want to spend the resources on one giant, as long as Tolrog stayed in the old town of Fogmór.

Only one man was willing to try twenty years after the attack at Fogmór and that was Tóman Bermor seeking his revenge. Years he had trained to become the mightiest slayer of all of Telús. And so, he was. Tóman was known to have slain fengária, vampires,

witches and even great sea monsters, but never a giant. He had made it his number one goal to slay the giant of Fogmór and to take back his home, his birthplace, to avenge his father.



Tóman rode in on an old horse which was his life-long companion, Felix, into a village on a rainy night. It was the village of Fallith, a good number of miles north of Fogmór, the closest village to Fogmór with settlers. He tied and settled Felix down in a barn while he made his way into the local tavern titled as **The Fall Tavern**. A lone crow cawed at Tóman as he walked away from the barn. Tóman paid no attention to the old blind man who muttered to himself on the muddy road, nor did he notice the crow land on the old man's shoulder as if to whisper secrets in his ear.

Tóman came in from the drenching rain outside and he dripped soaking wet. His boots squelched with every step and he asked for a mug of water. A local drunk laughed and teased him for not ordering alcohol but when Tóman pulled down his hood to reveal his face the man stood back with fear and quickly apologised for he knew him to be Tóman the

great slayer of Telús.

‘I need water for my horse, too,’ Tóman muttered.

‘I shall bring it to em!’ the drunk offered as he tried now to get on his good side. So, he rushed out with a bucket full to the barn.

‘I’m looking for volunteers to help me with a bounty,’ Tóman announced.

‘What sort of bounty be that then?’ the man behind the bar queried.

‘The slaying of a giant.’

‘You don’t mean the giant of Fogmór!?’ the barman said. ‘You won’t be getting volunteers for that!’

‘Those who volunteer will be rewarded handsomely as much as I.’

‘Those who *live* to be rewarded!’ a man yelled with his face in his pint.

‘So, be you cowards!? The giant will not stay at Fogmór forever. Soon he will come here to your homes and bring them down with a stomp! This be your only chance now to make sure that won’t happen.

‘He has broken many other villages since

the breaking of Fogmór so let us put an end to his reign of terror once and for all!’

‘I’m not riskin’ my life for any town,’ a drunk said. ‘We’re no mercenaries. You came to the wrong place.’

‘The wrong place I may have come for all I see here are cowards and drunks too afraid to fight for their homes.’

And Tóman turned away leaving them in their shamefulness, returning to his horse in the barn. The man who brought the bucket of water to Felix was there and he wondered of Tóman’s plans. After telling him the man offered his services with great respect.

‘My name is Delby Dane and I’m not as bad as I am,’ he said before he hiccupped. ‘You’ll see when I’m completely sober. I volunteer to you my services in your quest to slay Tolrog, the giant of Fogmór.’

‘Many thanks Mr. Dane, it’s good to find someone with a sense of honour and I’ll be glad to accept your help,’ Tóman said.

‘Very well, then! Please, come stay at my home as my guest until we are ready to go



underway.'

Tóman had found his first companion in his quest to slay Tolrog and also somewhere to stay during a rainy night of Fóvar and that may have been less than he had hoped for but it was more than he had expected.



Warm and quiet was the home of Delby Dane. He lived alone in solitary but that was how he liked it. He enjoyed the odd drink, maybe a little too much. He also enjoyed reading, but in his library beside his books were also bottles of wine. He really enjoyed drinking too much and that was possibly the only bad thing about him for he was a very likeable man after you got to know him of course. Tóman's first impression of him was just a typical drunk. But Delby Dane was different, nothing like the other men in The Fall Tavern.

He was slightly over-weight and bearded, and was at the ripe age of seventy. He spent most his young life in the village of Fallith, being a regular punter at the tavern. It wasn't until he met Tóman that he even considered doing something adventurous.

Tóman slept in a comfortable bed in Delby's guest room which he often used for travellers that could not afford the

accommodations at The Fall Inn next to the tavern as they were rather costly.

## 6

By morning as the sunrise was blinded by a blanket of grey clouds Tóman awoke to the smell of breakfast. He walked into the kitchen to find Delby getting some food ready. Delby cradled over a stove and sipped from an old wooden spoon to give it a tester taste.

'I hope you don't mind soup for breakfas', do ya?' Delby said after taking a slurp from the spoon.

'Not at all,' Tóman answered seeming a little surprised of Delby's hospitality.

'Please, take a seat!' Delby pointed to the seating area. 'I have some questions for you.'

'Ask away, Mr. Dane.'

'What did I get meself into? I hardly remember much from las' night as a result of my drinkin', which I must never do again!' Delby paused for a moment. 'Ah! Who am I kiddin', I always say that!'

‘What!?’ Tóman said. ‘You have no memory of last night!?’

‘Well, I know who you are but there’s somethin’ else that I just can’t remember.’

‘Like what?’

‘Well, if I knew, that would defeat the purpose of forgettin’ . . .’

‘You agreed to join me on a quest to slay the giant of Fogmór.’

‘That’s a new one,’ Delby was shocked to hear. ‘Oh well, a promise is a promise, when must we journey?’

‘Are you sure you are up to the task?’

‘Positive – I think – now, when must we journey?’

‘We need to conjure up a plan and find more companions, after all it is the largest giant of all the known land we must slay.’

And so, they studied and talked over their ideas and tried to muster up a working plan. They had to figure out how to kill Tolrog so tall and great.

‘What is bigger than a giant?’ Tóman wondered.

'A mountain!' Delby answered eagerly.

'But how can you use that against him?'

'Not sure . . .'

'Wait, I know a mysterious man, close by actually. He's not exactly what you'd expect I'd recruit.'

'Who is he?'

'He's a wizard named Merthill DeWisengrae and he has perfected in the arts of fire and explosions.'

'But magic is outlawed, magic is dark, all witches and wizard are to be hunted and slain and you're a slayer!'

'That's how I've heard of him; through a bounty. He will create an explosive large enough to bring down a mountain. We plant them at Fogmór Mountain and I lead Tolrog straight into a trap and bring the mountain down on top of him, crushing that foul beast!'

'What makes you think Merthill will help us?'

'He will.'

'Why not just plant the explosives on Tolrog?' Delby questioned.

‘We won’t get close enough without him crushing us, trust me.’

And so, at that, Tóman and Delby began their journey together to find the wizard named Merthill and that was going to be little more difficult than they had anticipated.

## 7

Tóman rode his old horse, Felix, and Delby had to borrow a neighbour’s mule which hadn’t been given a name until Delby called it Tipsy after it kept throwing him off with its stubbornness.

‘I’ll never drink again!’ Delby grumbled as he’d hop back onto Tipsy.

## 8

On they went as they continued their march through an old forest to find Merthill, the wizard of fire and explosives. It wasn’t a largely known forest. It was small and not much lurked in the woods except for animals

to be hunted, and sometimes there'd be a rare and dangerous encounter with a beast; so folk say.

Tóman and Delby were those unlucky enough to find one of those rare beasts in that old forest. While they followed a dirty path, suddenly out trashing and charging from the bushes was a wild boar and it caused Topsy to jump up in fright sending Delby to the ground. The wild boar was crazed and would seriously wound or even kill anyone in its path. Tóman jumped from Felix and ran to the rescue, and with his two bear hands he grabbed hold of the boar's tusks and pushed it back. The wild boar screeched back in rage and it overpowered Tóman and he was thrown to the side, crashing to the leaves, twigs and thorns. Then out of what seemed to be nowhere, an arrow landed deep in the skull of the boar. It fell to the ground and quickly died.

Tóman brushed himself off and helped Delby back up to his feet.

'Who goes there?' Tóman called out to



the unknown saviour that had shot the arrow.

‘Who are you?’ a woman’s voice called back but her voice echoed round the forest making it difficult to place.

‘I am Tóman Bermor and this is my companion, Delby Dane. Come out! Let us talk!’

‘Why should we talk?’

‘You saved my friend here; we could use someone with your talents for our quest.’

And then the woman came forward, showing herself being young and her thick, long blonde hair hung over her left shoulder.

‘Quest, you say?’ she said.

Tóman was speechless at the sight of her beauty for a moment.

‘You wanted to talk? She wondered while he stared in awe.

‘Yeah, we have a quest,’ Delby said. ‘We’re goin’ to kill the giant of Fogmór.’

‘How d’you expect to do that?’

‘We have a plan.’

‘Right then, I’m in!’

‘You’re in?’ asked Tóman. ‘Just like that?’

‘Let’s just say, I’ve been waiting for an adventure. Also, it looks like you’ll need me. My name is Gloria Gíld.’

Just like that, the beautiful and wild Gloria Gíld became a new member to their companionship and joined them on their journey to defeat the great giant, Tolrog.



It was a long and winding pathway. Gloria was on the back of Felix with Tóman as she hadn't got her own horse.

'What was a lady like yourself doing in the forest anyway?' Tóman asked her.

'Do you have a problem with a *lady* wanting to be herself?'

'What? No!' Tóman said. 'I'm just curious...'

'Sorry, I'm just used to people tellin' me what I should and shouldn't do. I don't want to live my life like that. Why should I, just because I'm a woman, not be adventurous and be married off to be some man's slave-wife? Not for me! I want to be free! So, I ran away and now the forest is my home, the world is my home.'

'I respect that,' Tóman said, and he really did. 'I wish there were more women like that.'

'Thank you.'

It started to get dark and they needed to stop for the night to sleep. Up ahead they

could see a dim light. It could be somewhere for them to stay for the night. That was what they had hoped. Gloria advised against staying there and to camp out in the forest instead, but Delby and Tóman longed for the comfort of a bed after being on the road for days. As they approached the light it became clear to be a home. It wasn't just any home. This had a sign in the front that displayed "Bed then Breakfast". The word *then* was no mistake.

'This is just what we need!' Delby laughed out.

And before you could say "B&B", a man came rushing out to welcome them and led them in through the front door. The door was heavy and wooden; he shut it right behind them.

'Come-come, welcome-welcome,' he announced as if he had had it prepared and hadn't seen anyone in a long time which was quite possibly true, for he seemed to be settled in the middle of nowhere.

They needed (or more so wanted)

somewhere to stay so they followed and took a seat as he had asked. Tóman made a request for three beds for them to sleep, and the man joyfully accepted. He smiled a horrid grin and his eyes were red where they should have been white. Gloria subtly grabbed Tóman's arm to suggest leaving as she didn't trust this man. There was something about him that shivered her bones and made the hairs at the back of her neck reach for the sky.

But Tóman ignored her (and Gloria ignored herself, too, to be fair; she found herself also craving that bed which she hadn't had in quite some time). The man brought them through, and to the comfortable beds. They were in three separate rooms. It looked as comfortable as home to them all so they took the offer. It was impossible to refuse. It even looked appealing to Gloria, the woman who chose to live in the woods. The strange man licked his lips and grinned with pleasure.

As night fell upon them, they became tired and went to bed. But Gloria still didn't trust this man. Her instincts told her to

investigate. And so, she snuck out of her room but didn't tell the others. She made her curious way through the hallway until it led her to a door that was different to the others and it was locked. Once again, she crept back to find a key. There were noises coming from the ceiling – something was moving round. Then she noticed a hole. It was a small hole in the ceiling. It was a peek-hole. If there was one there, then there could be more! She began to move faster but still quite silent. She was good at moving quietly. Gloria then came to a key cabinet and she searched and searched until she found a key unlike the others, and brought it right back to the strange door. She put the key in the door and it worked. The door creaked open – too loud for comfort. It was a dark stairway down to a basement. It looked like a dungeon. Then suddenly Gloria was shoved from her back and down the stony stairs and disappeared into the pitch black.

Delby was awakened by a loud and disturbing sound. He slowly and carefully

threw the covers from him and got out of the bed. It was dark so he lit a flame on the candle stick. The light glowed and flickered as the flame danced in the dark. Shadows moved and spooked Delby enough to make him shake. Candle grease dripped to the wooden floor along with the sweat from Delby's forehead. He gingerly opened the door but something stopped him. It was extremely silent but he could hear one slight sound. It was the sound of someone breathing heavily. It came from behind but when he turned there was no one there. He followed the sound and came to a small hole in the ceiling above him. BANG! The door was slammed before he even realised it was opened, and his candle blew out with a gust and he was left in total darkness.

Tóman's sleep had been disturbed by a large bang and a thump. He took his sword and made for the door. He opened the door out into the hallway and left his room. He searched Gloria's room and she wasn't there. He searched Delby's room and he also wasn't



there. He should've listened to Gloria when she advised on leaving. He went down the corridor and eventually found the same door that Gloria had found. He tried to open it but found that it was locked. So, he kicked the door down and with his sword he charged down the stairway so deep. It brought him to an underground jail. There were cages and there were shackles. Tóman then found Gloria and Delby locked up in small cages begging to be freed. Tóman then turned and lifted his sword up in time to block a blow to the head. It was the man who owned the B&B and he swung at Tóman with a mace in one hand and a sickle in the other. The man was crazed and he fought with everything he had, screaming to the top of his voice. But Tóman was a mighty warrior and he sliced off one of the man's arms and it fell to the ground, still gripping the sickle. In pure rage he swung with his other arm, holding the mace, and Tóman again chopped it right off. Armless, the man charged like a rhino but that resulted in his beheading. Another figure came from

the shadows. He held a dagger in his bone-thin hand and scurried towards Tóman like a serpent. But this creature was no match for Tóman as he kicked him back with the bottom of his boot. The creature growled like a dog, screaming profanities until Tóman ended his life with a swing of his sword.

Tóman searched for the keys and freed his companions from their cages. The man was a cannibal and had hoped to make them the breakfast in "*Bed then Breakfast*". He had done it to many other unfortunate travellers before but thanks to Tóman, he will never again. They were so close to their doom at such an early stage in their journey. But Tóman was a mighty warrior, indeed.

And so, by morning they had taken what food they could, that wasn't human, and started on their way again. Just outside there was a family of travellers and they were asking about staying at the B&B. Tóman told them that they can have the house but also of course about the previous owner and his dark ways. If they hadn't stayed and killed the

cannibal, then the family would have been the man's next lunch. The family were lucky that Tóman ignored Gloria and stayed.

## 10

Finally, on the road again, they discovered their hunger, so they took their breaks and rested their feet, but they didn't get much food from the B&B as most of the food there was human. Before long they ran out of food and Gloria suggested a hunt. They all agreed and the hunt was successful thanks to Gloria. Tóman got a fire going and they had rabbit. The three of them sat round the fire with full stomachs, but there was something about Tóman and Gloria that seemed more than just a companionship. They grew closer over time and Delby felt somewhat out of place at times. He started to feel unwelcome and would go on walks to leave the two of them alone. He didn't really mind it; he was an old man now and had had his fair share of romances in his prime. Delby

probably knew there was a romance blossoming between Tóman and Gloria before they even knew it themselves. It made him laugh.

But on the fourth day, when Delby was wandering alone he came across a small cabin in the woods. It was a strange sight. The cabin was wooden and there was a firelight coming from one of the windows. It seemed home to a gentle, kind folk so Delby approached the door. And before he could bring his hand up to knock, the door opened up and standing in front of him was a small, bald old man with a thick, round, grey beard. His face wrinkled but his eyes shone a bright icy-blue which looked young and kind. He held himself up with a large cane and because of the old man's height the length of the cane went just over his head. The kind old man invited Delby in for a drink of water and Delby gladly accepted it for his thirst needed some quenching. The old man didn't say much about himself but when Delby asked where he was from the man answered with just

“somewhere up north.” It was a curious answer with little details but Delby didn’t want to be rude to his host by prying into business other than his own.



The old man handed Delby a cup of water and Delby said 'Thank you,' but inside he was wishing for something a lot stronger.

'So, what's your name, kind stranger?'

'I'm just an old man, what's your name?'

'I'm Delby Dane from the town of Fallith,' he said, ignoring the oddness of the old man's previous statement.

'Fallith? Why have you travelled so far?'

'We're on a quest.'

'We?'

'Yes, my two companions are back at camp. We're goin' to slay the giant of Fogmór! Right now, we're looking for a wizard named... Aw what's his name...?'

'Merthill?' The old man said.

'Yes! That's it! Merthill!'

'Why are you looking for him?'

'To help us slay the giant.'

'What makes you think he will help?'

'My companion, Tóman, has an idea.'

'Tóman? This wouldn't be Tóman Bermor you speak of, would it?'

'Yes, he's a good friend of mine actually!'

He seemed to gloat.

‘I doubt Merthill will help anyone to do with Tóman Bermor, a slayer that has slain wizards and witches.’

‘But how do you know that?’

‘Because I am Merthill!’ He shouted as he rose from his seat and a fire grew in his eyes. He most certainly was a wizard of fire.

Delby couldn’t move with the fear of being turned into a flaming body running through the woods searching for a source of water. His eyes widened and he stiffened in his seat that was originally offered to him by Merthill out of kindness.

‘You dare hunt and trap me with Tóman Bermor, the king of slayers!?’ Merthill pointed the top of his staff at Delby’s head.

‘No! We mean you no harm!’ Delby pleaded.

The door to Merthill’s home suddenly broke down and Gloria came from the other side with her bow and arrow on display. Merthill sent a ball of flame towards Gloria and she jumped right back out the door and



the ball of flame exploded after crashing to the wall. Merthill's home caught fire and a wall of fire blocked Gloria from any entry back into the cabin.

Then the voice of Tóman called from outside and Merthill listened.

‘Can we talk?’ Tóman wondered.

‘Why should I trust you, Tóman Bermor?’

‘Because I am a man of my word and I promise I will not harm you,’ he said. ‘Please come and speak with us.’

And the fire went out. Nothing was burnt and it was as though no fire was ever lit. Delby rushed out of the cabin and stood behind Tóman and Gloria. Merthill seemed to take shape of the weak old man again as he walked very slowly out to them with his staff tapping the wooden floor.

‘So, speak,’ Merthill said.

‘We need your help,’ Tóman spoke.

‘And why should I help you? You have slain friends of mine just because they were wizards or witches. You kill for money!’

‘And that was wrong and dishonourable of me. I believed that all who practiced in magic was a dark creature but I was wrong. The law is wrong for making it a crime because of one evil witch. I don’t believe that anymore and I want to make it up to you by clearing your bounty... but I need your help.’

‘What changed your mind about us who practice magic? What made you see that everyone is different no matter the kind? Anyone can be good or evil; where you’re from has no effect on that.’

‘Many months ago, I was given a bounty by a man that was rather rich. He had bought land on the north side of Telús called Toom. He was telling me that he was building a town, and seemed quite decent of a man. He then told me that magic folk had come recently and started to cause all sorts of trouble, putting curses on the land, making builders ill and bringing great and powerful winds and storms to stop him from building homes for people.

‘So, I went without hesitation. Those

witches and wizards sounded evil and horrid. The rich man gave me the location to where they were hiding and he sent a few of his own men along with me.

‘The night was dark and the rain spat with the wind. I could see a light at a camp and we made our move. We had the camp completely surrounded and I gave the order to attack. The first one I killed was a tall wizard with a large pointed hat. He was killed instantly from the blow of my sword. Then I saw children screaming and crying at what I had done...

‘There were witches trying to protect their young but the men that had went with me cut them all down. Every wizard and witch were slaughtered at that camp and I just stood there over the tall wizard I had killed. In his hands was a book titled “*The kindness of magic*”. He was their teacher and the children were his students and the witches, their mothers...

‘They were on that land long before that rich buyer and he saw them as an obstacle.

There was nothing evil about those people. And the rich man who gave me the bounty lied about most everything. He wasn't building homes but he was mining for more gold as if he hadn't got enough already. I left that place and never returned but I want to go back, I need to go back and take vengeance against that man. His name is Góirim Gently.'

'Why didn't you kill him there and then?' Merthill wondered.

'After the incident I just ran and kept running, before I knew it, I was lost and then I thought of vengeance and that made me think of Tolrog, the giant. So first I must slay the giant of Fogmór then I will return to kill Góirim Gently.'

'Vengeance is a sickness that can take over your life.'

'Do you not think I am a better man now than the man I was that murdered the innocent? I make a vow to you that no innocent blood shall be spilled by my blade, only the evil.'

'I will play no part in your blood-

spilling, now be gone with your companions and leave me be,' Merthill said as he turned to his cabin but out of nowhere an arrow narrowly missed his head and stuck into the wooden door. It was an arrow from hunters in the woods. There was a group of seven men and they quickly surrounded the cabin.

'We foun' 'em! We foun' 'em!' One of the men cheered.

Tóman, Delby and Gloria held their guard not knowing who these strangers were. Merthill held his staff up in defence.

A man with long receded hair and a horrific scar over his right eye stood forward out of the group of seven. He seemed to be their leader.

'Look wha' we 'ave 'ere lads!' he exclaimed. 'It's none but the mighty wiz, Merthill! There's a bounty on your 'ead, you know tha'?''

'Oh, my Lord! It's Tóman Bermor!' Another of the seven had spotted.

The leader of the seven came to Tóman.

'Well, I don't believe me eye! It is!' he

said with surprise. 'Nice to meet ya! My name is Frederick Formby,' he took a bow which seemed sarcastic and a mockery to any higher class but he was just showing off with a little humour. 'Isn't it funny you've come for the bounty too? But you'd leave this one to us, won't you?'

'I'm not here for the bounty,' Tóman said firmly with one hand on his sword and Formby noticed.'

'I'm confused... you are *The Tóman Bermor*, right?'

'Leave now and no one gets hurt.'

'Hold on now! We came 'ere for a bounty, and we're gonna leave with one! Are you gonna get in our way?'

'Yes.'

Formby went to swing his sword to Tóman but he was too slow against the great warrior, and Tóman tattered his hand from his arm with a single swipe of his sword. Another man charged behind Tóman and again he was faster and swung his sword right round decapitating the man. There was

an archer about to fire his arrow at Tóman but Gloria sent her own arrow through the archer's head sending him to the ground, dead. The remaining four hunters retreated as they carried their leader, Frederick Formby, out of there to lick his wounds.

The entire time, Merthill was watching on as if he was watching a play.

'They'll be back, we need to get out of here,' Tóman said to Merthill.

Merthill stayed silent for a brief moment and stared emotionlessly. He took a look at the two bodies of the bounty hunters and seemed to make a change of mind.

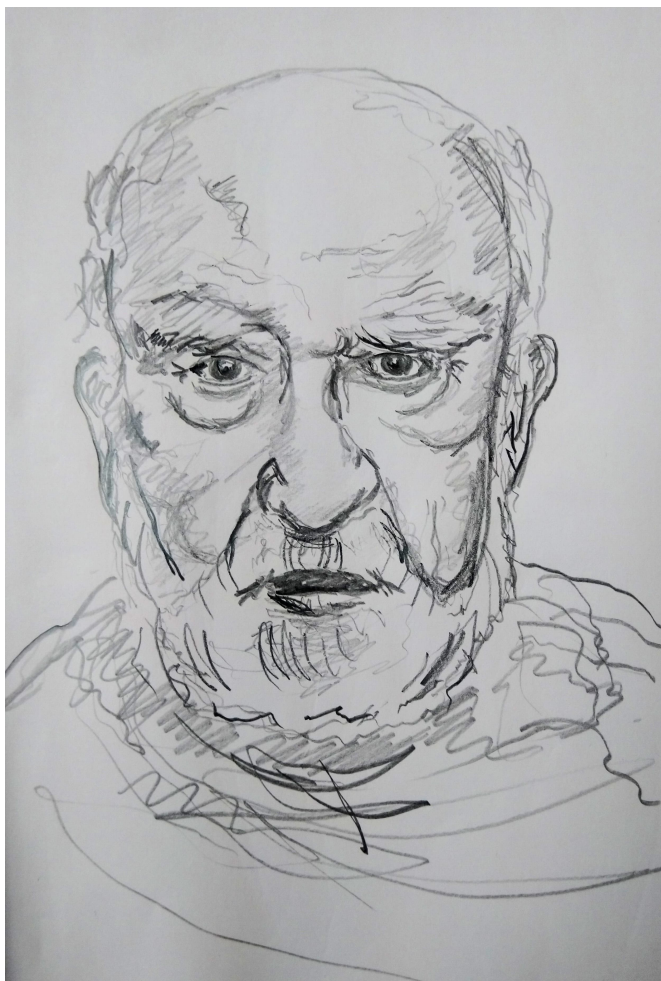
'Where shall we go then?'

He had no choice but to go along with Tóman and his companions. The bounty hunters would come back for him. They wouldn't let those two men die in vain. Plus, Formby had lost his hand and that made it personal. Merthill would much rather live peacefully in his cabin, but being a wizard in those days was too dangerous as magic was outlawed over fear after the devastation that

Vulga and his mother had caused many years ago (Vulga continues to rage on).

‘We’re goin’ to Fogmór,’ Tóman said.





And so, the four of them travelled along the road to Fogmór which wasn't very far from them anymore. Merthill had an extra horse so no one had to share that time, and Delby still had his mule, Topsy.

They came to a narrow road with thick trees on each side that seemed to curve and bend making it look like a tunnel. It was midday so the sun was shining but in the tunnel of trees up the road, it was complete darkness. The horses became spooked, including Felix.

'There's something not right about that path,' Merthill said. 'We should go round.'

'That would be another few days of travel!' Tóman said. 'We can't do that...'

'Going through there might not only cut the journey short but someone's life, too,' Merthill argued.

'It's a risk we must take!'

That was a risk they all took. The four of them, including Merthill, headed into the

dark road through the woods. Merthill was right of course and Tóman should have sacrificed the time to go the long way round instead of sacrificing the life that would be lost in that treacherous place.

The darkness played tricks on their eyes. Shadows lurked in the trees round them, but nothing was clear. The road was longer than they had anticipated and their horses needed rest. They reluctantly made a halt and gave the horses water, and let them get their much-needed break.

Merthill lit a flame and a fire was made in a pit.

‘We need the light to keep the shadows away,’ Merthill said after lighting the fire and his eyes sketched the surroundings.

‘But that could attract them!’ Delby worried.

‘Not the dark creatures I’m thinking of.’

‘What dark creatures?’

‘Vampires . . . feral vampires,’ Merthill said. ‘The light should keep them away for a little longer. They might think it’s sunlight.’

‘Vampires!’ exclaimed Delby. ‘There aren’t any vampires round here... are there?’

‘I’m sorry to say that you are wrong.’

‘Stop talking about vampires,’ Tóman came over as he sat by the fire. ‘Now get some rest, we’re on the move in half an hour.’

Tóman and Gloria managed to grab some sleep. Merthill chose to stay awake and Delby could not sleep. Merthill watched the trees but nothing was out of the ordinary. He was a brave and wise wizard and he knew what he was talking about when he talked about almost anything. Minutes passed very slowly and Merthill’s eyes grew tired and heavy and without him even realising it, he fell asleep sitting up. Only Delby was left awake but he hid himself under his coat like a child only to take a peek every now and then. He noticed that the darkness had become thicker. The fire was dimming! He sat up with fright but it was complete darkness. His eyes tried so hard to see but it was almost as if his eyes were shut tight. He couldn’t see his hand in front of his pale, wrinkled face. He tried to

shout but he couldn't with the fear. But suddenly Merthill jumped up and threw a ring of fire round their camp revealing several feral vampires with blood in their hands and faces. They had fed on someone or something. Tóman and Gloria were awakened by the brightness and heat of the ring of fire and took out their own weapons.

'Vampires!' Merthill shouted to Tóman as if to say *I told you so*.

Gloria fired her arrow, striking one of the feral vampires but it didn't seem to harm it.

'Your weapons are useless against these creatures unless you hit the heart!' Merthill shouted as he sent flaming balls in all directions.

A feral vampire came down from above and was about to grab Merthill from behind. Tóman made it on time and with his sword he killed that vampire with one stab. Tóman had slain many vampires before. His sword was specially made for killing vampires and many other dangerous creatures. This forest was

truly haunted by the vampire kind. There must have been an infected vampire nearby to have created these feral creatures.

There is a little more about vampires but they will be explained in more detail in another tail.

Tóman and his companions battled throughout that night against the feral vampires until the last one fell. Exhausted, they gathered up everything and began to make their move but Delby could not find the horses. Unfortunately, throughout the night while they slept all the horses were taken by the feral vampires. They were all sadly killed by the looks of it, including Felix. Tóman took the news hard and couldn't hold back the tears. Felix was the last thing linking him to his family. Felix was a noble and loyal stallion. It shook them all.

Merthill was right about a life being cut short but this time it was three horses and a mule, not just one. They had to keep moving. They had to get out of the woods now that they were all walking. It would slow them

right down.

## 11

It was a grim walk as they were mourning for the loss of their horses. They were the first of them to die and it showed how quickly it can all change.

Tóman didn't speak much till they found their way out of the woods. The road widened and it began to clear and soon the woods were behind them as a horrible memory on the horizon of the past.

Still, Tóman wouldn't speak and he walked ahead of the others so that he could mourn in peace. When Gloria went to comfort him Merthill stopped her.

'Give him a moment,' he said.

Tóman sat on a boulder and listened to the wind blow through the leafless trees. It was almost Gevru, the time of darkness, snow and ice. One hundred days of Gevru is always a tough time for everyone in Dómain. But there are some creatures that thrive on it; that

darkness. Humans were not one of them.

The signs of Gevru were strong and Tóman worried that it could be too late for them to reach Fogmór on time. He had no time to waste; he couldn't let Felix's death be in vain. He wiped his tears and made his way back to the others who had been waiting patiently.

The cold snapped and the wind snapped in the last days of Fóvar. They walked and walked through fields and over mountains till the old village of Fogmór was in sight. It had rained and it almost snowed, but they continued to move onward. They had really felt the importance of this quest as they came closer to Fogmór. They were near the end of their journey.

Merthill wasn't exactly sure if he was going through with helping slay a giant. He only joined them on the journey to get away from the bounty hunters.

The four companions walked together again in the direction of Fogmór. There was no sign of a giant yet. The land was desperate.



It was too quiet and abandoned due to the giant.

‘This was your home?’ Merthill broke the silence.

‘Yes, and I wish to take it back and bring up my own family, I hope,’ Tóman looked to Gloria and she smiled.

‘Family is very important,’ Merthill said. ‘Where is this giant we must slay?’ Merthill could understand Tóman now, no matter the evil that he had committed in his young slaying days. Tolrog was truly a creature of darkness.

‘You’ll know when you see it,’ Tóman said.

## 12

The ground beneath their very feet began to shake and quake. There was no doubt in their minds; it was Tolrog, the giant! He had not spotted Tóman and his companions as they hid for cover. It was much better to attack by surprise than to fight a

giant head-on. That would be a death wish. They did not wish to die here.

'Everyone remember the plan?' Tóman asked all his companions and they each nodded back to him.

All of them dispersed without being spotted by Tolrog. Tóman then went out into the open and with a shout, he called the name of the giant.

'TOLROG!'

And the giant turned with rage to see who dare come to him at his settled home. Fogmór belonged to him.

'I am here to slay you, beast!' Tóman announced.

At first, the mighty giant didn't seem too shaken by Tóman, and he then spoke in a deep, droning voice.

'YOU COME TO DIE?' the giant said.

'I've come to kill you!'

The giant laughed and it rumbled the ground yet again.

'You deserve to die, Tolrog!'

'THAT'S NOT MY NAME!' He was

furious. The giant had once been under a different name, long ago, until he swore his service to Vulga. His true name had since been long forgotten in tales.

'That's what they'll call you in stories told,' Tóman said, trying to enrage the mighty beast.

'THE ONLY TALES WILL BE OF ME SQUISHING YOU, LITTLE MAN.' He drooled and it made a splashing sound on the ground next to Tóman.

'Prepare to die, Tolrog!'

'THAT'S NOT MY NAAAAAAME!' he shouted again and had had enough of this talking.

Tolrog (as he was remembered in tales) stood up and slowly began to charge, and Tóman started to run in the opposite direction. Giants were known to be slow but they took large steps for which Tóman could not outrun. To slow down Tolrog, Gloria shot arrows at his face getting one of his eyes. This made the giant even more angry. Tolrog was gaining on Tóman and the arrows were no

longer doing their job. Tolrog reached his hand down to pick Tóman up but out of nowhere Tóman was rescued by an old friend, Felix. Tóman was surprised to see his horse still alive. They never did find the horses bodies. With Felix, Tóman could now outrun the mighty giant. When Tóman started to lose Tolrog he would wait for him to catch up. Tóman was leading him to the mountains, right into a trap!

Tóman came to a valley with steep rocky cliffs on each side and just as he came out the other end, Delby pushed huge boulders from the clifftop blocking where Tóman had just went through. The rocks were sharp on the High Mountains so if it were to work, Tolrog would never destroy another village.

Tolrog came to the valley and noticed a dead-end but when he went to turn back, larger boulders began to fall, trapping him in the valley. Merthill's magic started to take effect as fiery explosions caused the cliffs to crumble and collapse down on top of Tolrog. Tolrog was killed by a mountain just as they

had planned.

It was a very successful bounty. The first successful slaying of a giant without any casualties and this was the largest ever known giant.

Tóman stood so valiantly on top of the rocks that had buried Tolrog, the giant of Fogmór. He had taken back his home after all these years and most of all for his father.

From there, they went back to the ruined village of Fogmór. Tóman stood beside what used to be his home. Gloria, Delby, and Merthill watched him as he took it all in. It brought back long forgotten memories of his father and even few of his mother he never knew he had. It was as though that rubble was a portal into his own subconsciousness and he had finally found it. It was an overwhelming feeling inside the pit of Tóman's stomach. He turned to his companions but was suddenly struck down by an arrow to the neck. Gloria screamed out with horror as Tóman fell to the ground. It was Frederick Formby and his four bounty

hunters. They ran in for the attack but Gloria, Delby and Merthill fought back. Gloria's arrows killed two of the hunters. Delby swung up a plank of wood, blocking a blow of a razor-sharp blade and killed another hunter as he battered him with the plank. All that was left was Formby and one of his hunters. Formby laughed out and charged with his one good hand but was quickly turned to ashes by one of Merthill's fiery tricks. The last bounty hunter tried to retreat but Gloria's last arrow made sure he did not.

Gloria rushed to Tóman but it was too late. It was a deadly shot and Tóman Bermor bled out very quickly. Gloria cried holding Tóman in her arms and Delby was frozen with shock.

'I am sorry, Gloria,' Merthill said. 'He was a good man, indeed,' Merthill came close to Tóman's body. 'Go now to the next life and may it be done to us, too, as the circle of life is greater than I. We thank the Seven Kings for giving us this way of life. May the Guardians of Anima always be with you.'

Tóman Bermor's body was buried where he was born: in Fogmór. Many speak of him as a great warrior and a defender of the light, slayer of the darkness (even though that realisation came late in his career as a slayer). And his tale will live on forever.

Gloria returned to the woods where they had first met, and lived out the rest of her days alone; but not completely as she took Felix with her. Together, they roamed, and lived off the lands and never forgot Tóman Bermor.

Delby went home and quickly went back to his old habits, never to go on an adventure again. But over time he learned to control his bad habits with moderation, and became the town story-teller. He felt it was best to honour Tóman's life than to mourn his death, so he told of their adventures together and many – young and old – enjoyed listening.

But Merthill's tale did not end there. He remembered Tóman telling him about a rich

man named Góirim Gently. Unfortunately, Tóman didn't live to take vengeance, but Merthill decided to take that upon himself.

It was a few weeks after the slaying of Tolrog when Merthill came to a land ravaged by greed. There were minors everywhere searching for Góirim's gold in mines. They had been quite successful since the slaughter of the young witches and wizards at their school. What Merthill was about to do next was completely out of his comfort zone of fire and explosives. Merthill conjured up a great curse against Góirim Gently and he was none the wiser.

Firstly, the minors couldn't seem to find what they had once found with ease. Góirim pushed them to work harder and if they didn't find any gold then they wouldn't be paid as little as they had got.

Secondly, Góirim became ill and he was bedridden, forced to watch on as his little empire fell. He was helpless and many minors saw his weakness and left with tons of gold. The greedy man was robbed by those he had



mistreated.

Lastly – but not the least – as most curses happen in threes, Góirim crawled from his bed to get a look at his gold (what was left behind by the minors that couldn't carry anymore) that was once stacked so high and glorious. He was shocked to see that it had all turned to dust. There was one bar of gold that caught his eye's attention as it glimmered in the light. Again, he crawled and crawled with little strength he had left, and as he reached out his weakening hand so frail, the bar of gold fell to dust with his touch. There he died of exhaustion and his illness, with a hand-full of dust.

Merthill never imagined himself committing such an act, but it turned out that Tóman's death hit him harder than he thought; he was quite fond of him, indeed. Merthill had lost loved ones in the past, and they had always tormented his aching heart, so the death of a friend would truly break a heart that had already been damaged. Merthill needed time to think after he this

incident. Curses like this leave their mark. He killed Góirim out of rage and that was now his haunting.

But more, much more, was to come.

## Part II

### *The Witch Hunter*

#### 1

It was illegal to practice magic, so it was essentially illegal to *be* a witch or a wizard. It had been that way ever since the powerful and evil witch cursed the entire land of Armeneth (to be renamed Vulgaron), and raised the vilest sorcerer there had ever been, Vulga. It was a cruel law that was passed, but that was because of fear. People were afraid of someone with such powers. They could get cursed. It terrified everyone, even the greatest of warriors (especially the warriors).

This tale began many years (two-hundred years) after the slaying of Tolrog, the giant of Fogmór. It began on a bright day of Sumral, 1200, in the realm of Gredius. Gredius was the land furthest north which was closer to the land of witches and wizards, the unknown land of Fuar, across the Northern

Sea. It was never truly known if that was where magic folk originated, but it was where many chose to escape. That was most likely the reason for Gredius' frequent dealings with wizards and witches. On the west side of Gredius stood The Omega, a training ground for all hunters and slayers. The best of the best trained there. It created a brotherhood, an army of slayers now with oaths and agreements. It was only set up a while after Tóman Bermor's time, and they learned of many great bounty hunters and slayers in The Omega (but with Tóman, they left out the part of befriending a wizard and changing his slaying ways).

## 2

Fúramhir Tóll was a bounty hunter who lived in Dronewith, in Gredius. There he had a family. He had a wife named Sirí Tóll and a young son named Fúram. Fúramhir taught his son that those who practiced magic were dark creatures and would cast a spell on you unless

you killed them quick enough; just what he learned at The Omega. Fúramhir had no idea how wrong he was. Besides the Omega, it was his father, and his father's father who had taught them the same thing. He was brought up in that hatred, born into it and now he was just passing the torch.

Fúramhir was quite a successful bounty hunter, and he had hoped that his son would be, too, someday.

One day Fúramhir had a strange visitor come to their home. He was a small, mysterious old man that seemed to have come a long way to see him. Fúramhir invited the stranger in and offered him a drink, signalling to Sirí to fetch for it. Fúramhir felt there was something strange about this old man. There was something strange, all right. He sent his son, Fúram, away while he spoke to the old visitor.

'Apologies for dropping by unannounced,' the visitor began to speak quite politely. 'But I'll just cut straight to the point for which I am sure you are eager to

know. I have a bounty of sorts for you.'

'Bounty?' He wondered as Sirí placed their drinks in front of them and left the room quietly.

'Yes!'

'Why would you come to me?'

'You're a bounty hunter, am I right?' the visitor asked. 'I've been observing you. You remind me of someone I once knew. I see the same potential he had, in you.' *But could do with a touch of manners*, he thought but did not say.

'Who is this man you speak of that I remind you of?'

'He is long dead now but that's not what I've come to say. I have a bounty for you. There is an *evil* witch I have had trouble with. She lurks in the Dreadwood forest.'

'Dreadwood? No, I can't risk goin' to that place! No way!'

'Hear what I have to say,' the visitor pleaded.

'Say what you must but Dreadwood forest is lost to darkness.'

‘It would be the last bounty you’ll ever need; I can assure you. There’s another thing about the bounty I should tell you. It’s also a *rescue* mission. A student of mine was taken there by force and now she needs help, but I am too old now as you can see.’

‘I’ll think about it.’

‘If you go, please take care of Gwen. She has such a good heart.’

The mention of a name seemed to get to Fúramhir. The bounty became a rescue mission and this woman named Gwen was in trouble. What if it was Sirí? She must be someone’s somebody.

‘Why won’t you go?’ Fúramhir asked.

‘Look at me,’ the stranger gestured his hands from his head to toe. ‘I’m too old for adventures.’

‘What is your name, old man?’

‘You are not ready to know my name just yet,’ he then took one last sip of his drink and stood up from the table. ‘I will see you again, Fúramhir Tóll. Tell Sirí, I thank her for the drink. I must go now.’

And just like that the strange man was gone. He most certainly was strange. He was so confident that Fúramhir was going to complete the task even though he had never really accepted the bounty. Fúramhir found it curious, but also couldn't help but like the stranger. He would think about the bounty, but not jump into it just yet. Fúramhir just didn't want to leave his family as he had been away most days of the year before, and now he was thinking of retiring, but he wouldn't have had the gold. Maybe this bounty could be his last. There would be more than enough gold for the retirement in the Dreadwood bounty.

Fúramhir was undecided for about two days after the visit from the stranger.





One day he was returning home earlier than expected with his son, Fúram, from a walk to the town. Sirí wasn't expecting them home for at least two more hours, but to everyone's surprise, the mood of that day changed quickly when they got home. Fúramhir noticed the front door of their cottage was left open, something felt strange. He asked Fúram to wait outside while he went in. He pushed the door gently as he remembered that it creaked. He squeezed in silently and made his way through his family home. His heart raced, and he got a surge of adrenaline as he began to hear a moaning sound. It was his wife, Sirí. At first, she sounded as if she was in some sort of pain, but the words she began to scream were definitely not "help me". Fúramhir could feel his heart pound in his throat as he started to open the bedroom door. His heart fell when he was revealed what was on the other side. Sirí was in their bed with the man that tended

to their garden. It definitely was not the garden he was tending to at that moment. Fúramhir charged and threw the gardener from the bed, and beat his naked body while Sirí screamed out nonsense. It was a crime to bed with another while married and it was severely punishable in those days.

Fúramhir castrated the gardener there and then, and their son saw everything which wasn't what Fúramhir wanted, but he was too enraged to notice. After torturing the gardener, he was taken away by the doctor, without his manhood, but still with his life. Sirí was left to face the consequences with Fúramhir who now felt no love for her, only hatred.

For days after, there was great tension in the Tóll house. Even though Fúramhir felt anger towards Sirí, he could not bring himself to punish her; after all, he had taken out all his anger on the unfortunate gardener.

And now he found it easier to make up his mind on that bounty. Fúramhir told his family that he was going to slay the witch of

Dreadwood, but he would not leave Sirí to herself so he got his two cousins to stay and watch her. Sirí knew that's why they had been asked to stay. Fúram didn't want his father to leave, but it was almost a relief as there would be no more painful arguments all throughout the night.

Fúramhir had no idea how long he would be gone; days, months or even years. His journey would begin now, but he wouldn't go alone. Whenever Fúramhir would go on a bounty he would have had help from his partner, Godárd Gellin. They went way back, fought together and almost died together. He knew Godárd would help again not only for old times but for the fact of Godárd's hatred towards witches and wizards.



The two of them began their journey on a dark, cold night of Gevru. The snow began to fall late that year, but it started to fall on that night. Godárd saw it as bad luck at first, but Fúramhir kept on moving and he quickly followed. They travelled in worse.

There was an eerie feeling in the village while they left on their horses. It was almost as though it was a funeral. Ever man or woman that had ever ventured into Dreadwood forest never came back. People got a good look at them while they left as though they'd never be seen again. Then they could tell tales of how *they* had seen them with their very own eyes.

The road would be long, so they left prepared. They were both no strangers to long journeys or dangerous ones at that.

They were well wrapped for the cold weather biting at their skin, and well packed when it came to food. Their horses were strong with experience, and so there was no turning them back now. Especially now that everyone in the village had come to see them

off. The time to change anyone's mind was as dead as the gardener's sex life (may the Guardians of Anima bless his balls).

#### 4

As the sun was awoken, they stopped for much needed breakfast. Fúramhir spent much of the journey explaining to Godárd the details of the bounty. Godárd had only two questions: "Who was this old stranger?" and "What makes him think this Gwen is still alive in Dreadwood forest?" They were both questions worth answering but Fúramhir could not answer either. That was for the strange old man, or time itself to answer. Time always tells. But time is warped these days.

The sun had now risen and so must they. Gredius was a dull, desolate land for the most part, but now that it was in the cold and dark time of Gevru it was even more bleak. The snow only got thicker and the days were much shorter. Night would fall within a few hours.

They came to a hill and the sun seemed to rest on the top, so orange. The sun was not alone. Godárd noticed a silhouette standing in the light. Fúramhir had an idea who it was, but he wasn't completely sure just yet. As they went to investigate it soon became clear that Fúramhir's suspicions were right. It was the stranger that had given him the bounty.

'Took you a little longer than I was hoping, but at least you came . . . and you brought a friend?' the stranger said and then looked to Godárd as though he had bitten his own lip.

'I never got your name last we met,' Fúramhir said. 'This is Godárd Gellin, we go way back. I will need some help. This is Dreadwood forest we are talking about, now.'

'Never mind . . . you are here now and that is what matters. We must hurry as our time is precious!' the stranger swiftly turned and walked ahead while leaning on his walking stick. Godárd and Fúramhir looked to each other with confusion. But they quickly followed.



'You never told me your name, stranger?' Fúramhir caught up with the old man.

'You may call me Tóman Bermor,' he said without giving any eye contact. They had thought that name was familiar, but couldn't place it.

'Tell me about Gwen.' Fúramhir asked.

'She is more to me than I let on. Not only is she a student of mine, she is my daughter, adopted . . . but there's no difference. I need *your* help with this, not Godárd.'

'Why can't Godárd come?' Fúramhir questioned. 'If he doesn't come then I don't.'

'It will only bring darkness bringing *him* . . .'

'How would you know?' Fúramhir said. 'He's coming and that's the end of it!'

There was no forcing Fúramhir to do something that he didn't want to do so this man who was called Tóman gave up on it and allowed Godárd to join them.

There was something about Tóman Bermor that bothered Godárd. He was most

certainly a strange old man, but there was more to him than they knew. Godárd hadn't heard Tóman telling Fúramhir that he should have come alone but he could still tell that he was unwanted by him.

The journey to Dreadwood would be a long one and now that there was three of them it seemed to slow them a little more. Tóman was keeping something else secret, and now it seemed that he was going to go with them to Dreadwood forest. That was something both Fúramhir and Godárd would be against for he was just a withered, old man; a burden to them both, especially when in danger. The journey between home and Dreadwood had been a quiet one, but terribly long and cold. But that wasn't such a bad thing; it was safe. Dreadwood would be far from safety.

## 5

There was much darkness in the forest of Dreadwood. It was unknown for many years

what the reason for its darkness was until stories had emerged not long ago that it was home to a dark and evil witch named Meredith. She had been there since the forest was risen, apparently (and she turned to darkness for her hatred of mortal men), and when people started to venture into the woods, it was only then that her existence was known or at least some sort of darkness was known.

The days were short, but they seemed long to their horse's legs that had to carry them a lot of the way. It wasn't till they came to Dreadwood village that they left the horses and took the rest of their journey on foot.

Then one cold night they came to the edge of the woods. There didn't seem to be a way in. The forest was fortified by thick, thorny bushes so sharp they looked as if they'd do the same damage as Fúramhir's sword. It was as if the evil witch of Dreadwood had known that they were coming, so she created this obstacle. They must pass it. It's never a good idea to split a

hunting party, but they had to find an entrance; although, Fúramhir urged everyone not to enter the woods alone, but to come for him if they found an entrance. And so, they had split.

Fúramhir searched and searched but found no opening. It started to frustrate him, so he immediately wielded his sword and swung at the thorns to break his way through. It worked. He made his very own doorway into the woods, but something was on the other side. It wasn't clear what, but its silhouette looked great in size. It began to make a horrible rumbling noise and Fúramhir backed away slowly. He knew that sound, he knew that smell. It was a fengári! He had slain many before for bounties, but this one seemed different. It was larger. It was more terrifying. As the fengári came out through the hole that Fúramhir had made, it stood out into the moonlight, he could see its bright red eyes, matted and bloodied fur so ragged and torn in patches, and paws so large with their razor-sharp knives for nails. It was most certainly a

beast and whatever parts there were of the man this beast once was, they were in no way visible then. But who was this beast as a man? It wasn't known just yet. The curse of a fengári was a mighty and dark one. An immortal life is given to a person who becomes a fengári but at a massive price.

This massive price came across Fúramhir's mind as it raced with adrenaline. His fear was growing as the fengári came towards him for the curse is infectious with the slightest scratch; that is if the victim survives the encounter.

Fúramhir quickly snapped out of his panic and held up his sword in defence, and just on time as the fengári swiped its daggered hand/claw/paw in his direction sending him to the ground; but still luckily not scarred. Fúramhir fell to the moss-covered ground expecting another deadly hit but as he turned, the fengári was blown back by a ball of fire so hot and mighty that it sent it back a couple of feet. The fengári started to burn and it screeched in pain and rolled the fire out. But

then it ran away with the fear of getting hit again by more burning flames and he disappeared into the dark forest.

Fúramhir searched for his saviour and was surprised to see Tóman standing with his walking stick, but not looking as frail as before. That was no walking stick, it was a staff.

‘You’re a wizard!’ Fúramhir exclaimed with shock.

‘Yes, I am.’

‘Who are you and what’s goin’ on?’

‘My true name is Merthill, and I am a wizard looking for help. And you are who can help me,’ he said while helping Fúramhir, to his feet, who hesitated at first to accept his hand.

‘So, this isn’t a trap?’ Fúramhir asked as he always expected darkness from those who practiced magic.

‘Many years ago, when I was a young wizard learning my ways, I became close friends with a witch, and she was powerful and wonderful and beautiful.

‘We taught each other in many ways, and we fell in love. I still love her. Years passed and we only got closer. We had a child together, a little girl, but that was round the same time Vulga was brought into this world and it became a crime for us to be alive. All because they thought we were all like Vulga and his mother.

‘Then one day, bounty hunters found out where we were living and they tore down our home, and our baby . . . was killed,’ Merthill paused for a moment as if all the memories were coming back to him now. ‘We couldn’t hold back our rage, and so we used our magic and killed every one of those hunters that had come for us. But we would never be the same again, my wife, Meredith would never be the same again.’

‘The witch of Dreadwood is your wife?’

‘No! That is not my wife, not anymore. Meredith was so wonderful, but after that night with those bounty hunters, she turned to darkness and almost took me with her, but I came to my senses and learned how to

grieve for our child. But she saw it as weakness and betrayal, and so she turned on me, too. For years I have searched for her, but I shamefully gave up, and looked for peace and solitude, instead.

‘Then all of a sudden, Gwen came into my life. I found her not many years ago, lost and alone. She was only a child and she told me that her family had been killed by bounty hunters. She was also a witch. I took her in and called her my own, and she eventually called me her father, though I never asked. I taught her what I could and she learned more than I could teach. Gwen will be a great witch, but at the age of twenty now, she is still young and with much more to learn.

‘But somehow Meredith found out and she found me much easier than I had hoped. And now she has Gwen, and she wants me to come for her . . . and of course I will. But I can’t kill Meredith, it’s just out of my power . . . and that’s where you come in.’

As though on cue, Godárd came rushing over having missed everything.



‘What happened? Find a way in?’ he asked.

‘Yes, we found a way in,’ Fúramhir said. He had surprised himself as he had decided to continue with the quest, knowing that Merthill was a wizard. Did Merthill use his magic to persuade Fúramhir, or did Fúramhir simply change his mind?

## 6

The woods were dark and eerie – they always were these days. There was no way of telling if it was day or night now that they were within the trees. Tricks were being played on their eyes and ears, but they had to keep moving. They had to keep a sharp eye as that fengári that had attacked Fúramhir earlier was still out there, somewhere in the dark and ghostly shadows.

Godárd still had no clue about who this old man who called himself Tóman Bermor really was. Fúramhir decided not to tell him as his life was saved by Merthill. Everything

Fúramhir believed was turned upside down and into a million pieces. It made no sense to him. His life was saved by one of those he made a living by killing.

Each step they took into the dangerous woods felt like a bold move. They were going where few have gone before, and all of them never to return.

Hours passed and supposedly the sun started to rise with a bright yellow light, but they couldn't tell under the rooftop of trees. They then came across a cave in the woods. There were track marks in the ground at the entrance to the cave as though something big had walked in and out many, many times. Merthill was first to go to the entrance of the cave but Godárd pushed him aside.

'What you doin', *old* man?' Godárd whispered with a snap. 'We have no reason to venture in there.'

'We have to kill that fengári before it kills us . . . this looks like its den,' Fúramhir said as he took out his sword and began to walk into the shadowy cave.

‘Well, I’m waiting here!’ Godárd protested.

Fúramhir went in and Merthill soon followed. Godárd stayed behind, so Merthill then lit up his staff to make a light in the dark cave Fúramhir still felt uncomfortable to be around magic, yet was also finding himself amazed. It was deeper than they had thought and the walls became wider apart the further they went in. They eventually came to a dead end and it was clear that this was where the fengári would sleep. It was unknown where the beast was hiding at that moment, although now that it was daytime it was back in the human form (unless it was permanently trapped in beast form). Merthill discovered some human objects laying out in the ground. There was a journal and he picked it up to read. It was a leatherback and on the inside was a hand-written title that said “Journal Entry of Leon Dégan”. He noticed that the years dated on it ranged from 389 to 404. Merthill opened it on a random page and it read:

*. . . for many years I have explored the world but I have so much more to see. I'm glad to leave Bardor but it will always be my home.*

*I may go back someday, maybe when I've completed my map, and I can tell my tales . . .*

Merthill then skipped ahead through the pages of the old journal:

*. . . I have so little time but so much to do! If only I had more time!*

*I can't stop thinking about that Oracle and what she said to me . . . I mean, if what she said is true about the pain I will undergo then will it be worth it? How can I help a wizard? I've never heard of this Merthill DeWisengrae . . .*

With the mention of his name, Merthill freezes in thought. Maybe the answers are further in the journal?

*I've been dreaming and seeing. Ever since I met that Oracle things seem clearer in my dreams.*

*I've always believed there was more than the land of Dómain in this world. I have drawn what I have seen.*



*These visions are what I believe to be the world! You can see the land of Dómain (with its dragon-shaped head in the middle of the second map. These are undiscovered lands! I must be the one to explore them!*

Merthill continued on a few more pages.

*I've always been curious about Dreadwood*

*forest but people have told me of the dangers. That only makes me want to investigate it even more! Something must be wrong with me if I can't resist a bit of danger. Are those stories really true?*

*I was told one story by a man in the village of Dreadwood. What a sorrowful little village it was to visit. A man told me that he once knew of a farmer. Somehow, the farmer's cows got out of his barn and scattered all round Dreadwood. He spent the entire day trying to catch them all. But one cow ran into Dreadwood forest and the farmer went after it. Maybe he wasn't thinking straight, after all, it was his livelihood.*

*For days the farmer was missing, but no one was brave enough to venture into the woods for fear of becoming yet another victim of Dreadwood. Many folks have left their settlements in Dreadwood village, but those who couldn't afford to leave were left behind to live in fear.*

*The man then told me that it wasn't the last time that the farmer was seen. One day, he came back, which was strange because most tales of Dreadwood say that none have ever returned. But he wasn't the same. He was turned into something*

*else. Something that wasn't human. His eyes were as red as blood and his skin, withered and torn, displaying his flesh so painfully and patches of dark fur. It was a terrifying sight indeed, so I hear. They say he was changing . . .*

*The farmer pleaded for help but not the way that I would have thought. He pleaded for a merciful death. They all thought he had gone mad after being in that forest, and so they granted the farmer's wishes and he was hanged before nightfall as he requested . . .*

As Merthill turned the pages towards the end of the journal there was a dramatic change in Leon's writing, including his spelling:

*. . . why did I not listen to the people? They warned me of the dangers! I was attacked by a fengári in the woods!*

*I know what this means . . .*

*I am afraid of the night! I am afraid of the night*

*Im afraid of the nigt Im fraid of niht . . .*

*Who? What am I?  
I can't forget, don't forget yourself.  
You are Leon Dégan,  
Leon Dégan  
Leon Degan  
Leon De . . .*

Merthill could only guess what had happened to Leon before he could finish writing his name. Any pages after that were filled with mostly gibberish that would only make sense to Leon at the time he was writing it. The curse of the fengári was a dark one and it was unknown if any cures existed. The only thing known to cure the victim was death.

Fúramhir put his hand on Merthill's shoulder suggesting that they should now leave, but then they both heard a noise from the shadows. It was Leon in his human form hidden behind some boulders.

'Come out!' Fúramhir ordered with his sword ready to strike.

Leon slowly moved out from his hiding spot, revealing his many scars and burns



given to his fengári form for him to bear. He looked an absolute mess. It was obvious that he was under the fengári curse for many years. All fengária lived until they were killed as that curse (of the ever-changing beast) brought immortality.

Leon didn't speak, but only grunted and cried.

'Leon Dégan?' Merthill called his name and he seemed to react as though desperately trying to remember. 'Do you know who you are, Leon?'

'What are you doin'? he tried to kill me!' Fúramhir questioned Merthill.

'Le . . . Leon . . .' Leon muttered absently.

'Yes, that's your name,' Merthill tried to help him to remember. 'How do you know my name?'

Leon shook his head in confusion.

'Merthill DeWisengrae; you wrote my name in your journal.'

'The . . . the wizard?'

'Yes! How do you know me?'

'I don't,' he desperately tried to

remember. 'I'm supposed to help you . . .'

'An Oracle mentioned my name to you?'

'Yes . . .' Leon paused for a moment. 'Juliath,' his memory seemed to flood back the more they spoke.

'What do you help me with?'

'I don't know.'

They all stood in silence, Fúramhir was more in awe of the situation he found himself in.

'Why have you come?' Leon wondered.

'To find Meredith,' Fúramhir said.

Leon stood up straight and rolled his fists with anger and Fúramhir held his sword thinking that he was about to strike.

'That witch cursed this forest and cursed me!' Leon said.

'She turn you into a fengári?' asked Fúramhir.

'She put fengári in these woods and one of them scratched me,' Leon said. 'I will help you find her; I can take you to her!'

'You can do that?' Merthill asked. 'You might be dangerous to us . . .'

'I'll do all I can to help,' Leon said. 'Tie me up if it's close to the night.'

'Can you even tame a fengári?' Fúramhir laughed alone.

'I'm sorry, my sense of humour has dimmed over the years of isolation,' Leon said.

'Right, we need your help, but if you turn, I'll have to do what I need to survive,' Merthill said.

They all agreed to help one another, and gave Leon Dégan a change of clothes. The soft fabric on his scarred skin felt soothing and seemed to bring back distant memories that he thought were only dreams. He had been wearing clothes he'd found or stolen for such a long time; it was strange to be *given* some.

## 7

As they left the cave Godárd noticed the new member to their group but they said nothing to each other for a minute until Merthill passively said: 'We need his help to

find the witch.'

Godárd didn't reply to Merthill, and just gave Fúramhir a look as if to question all that he is doing. Godárd didn't like this one bit – there was something very different about this bounty. Godárd had a sensitive gut, and it had got him and Fúramhir out of sticky situations in the past. Once he had saved them both from an ambush of vampires because his gut had told him something was up.

On they went in search for the witch of Dreadwood forest with tensions high.

Godárd, still oblivious to the truth about Merthill, had now wished that he had never joined Fúramhir on this quest. He didn't like anything about it at all. And he kept a watchful eye on this new addition to the crew, Leon Dégan.

They were getting so close and Merthill could sense it. He could sense Meredith's presence. And then he thought, if he could sense her then she could sense him. But it was too late now.

Once again, their eyes seemed to play

tricks on them as tree branches looked as though they moved certain ways that made no sense. They quickly learned that they were no tricks on their eyes. They were different kinds of tricks all together. It was an ambush sent by Meredith. At least they knew it wasn't a fengári as Leon was still in human form.

What they saw looked to be human but also tree or plant. They were surrounded by men made of earth. They had thick vines for arms and sharpened wooden axes for weapons. Meredith had a small army of wood people.

They were fierce and loyal to Meredith. Wood people had no love for any folk outside the forest and would be quite barbaric to anyone they came across, but not without a reason. For many years, since the dawn of time, people have ravaged their homes and twisted their minds with concrete and fire. Meredith had promised them the perfect revenge and so they vowed to protect and obey her.

Fúramhir, Merthill, Leon and Godárd

were completely out-numbered and were forced to battle for their lives. One by one, Fúramhir and Godárd cut the wood people down swiftly with their sharp swords. Even with the presence of Godárd, Merthill had no choice but to show his true self and his abilities. He cast a spell that sent rings of fire surrounding the four of them, burning all in its path. Godárd looked on with shock, and also disgust, that he had been traveling with a wizard all this time. Godárd threw his eyes over to Fúramhir as if to ask him if he knew about Merthill. The look on Fúramhir's face gave that away and Godárd could tell. It enraged him.

But then something else started to stir in the woods.

'Oh no,' Leon said.

The night had crept right up on them and Leon was beginning to turn.

Those left of the wood people fled for their lives knowing too well what was happening to Leon. While Leon turned, Fúramhir and Merthill held him to the ground

and tried to tie him up, but Leon was too strong. Fúramhir called for Godárd's help, and as reluctant as can be he held Leon down as Merthill finally finished tying a knot. Leon was captivated. They stood back and watched as Leon changed into a Fengári. It was a horrid sight. His eyes reddened and his skin tattered as patches of ragged fur appeared and razor-sharp claws daggered out from where his hands once were. Then the ropes started to rip and snap. Each of the others stood back with fear for the beast of Leon was so magnificent. Leon broke through the ropes as though they were bits of string and let out a roar and fled for the thick trees away from Merthill's orange flames.

But suddenly, Merthill's flames became weakened as water came crashing in and then soaking him to his knees. Merthill wiped the water from his eyes to get a look. It was Meredith. He couldn't believe his eyes after all this time and no matter the circumstances, he still looked at her with love, but also sadness and pity. She still looked the same as the last

time he had seen her. She hadn't aged like he had for she had uncovered an ageless spell to keep her youthful and beautiful looks.

'I don't believe my eyes!' Meredith announced. 'My husband has come for me and he brought two bounty hunters!' she looked at them like they were rats. 'And Leon; you brought them here after I gave you immortal life!?'

'I came for my daughter,' Merthill spoke up as he regained his feet.

'YOU'RE DAUGHTER DIED MANY YEARS AGO!' she shouted. It was like a red rag to a bull and then she switched back to calm just as fast as she began to shout. 'Gwen is who you're looking for?' asked Meredith. 'You call her your daughter?'

'Where is she, Meredith?

'She's with us,' she pointed back behind her revealing Gwen locked away in a cage made of thorns. Merthill was horrified with the sight of her looking so vulnerable and trapped.

Merthill wanted so desperately to save



Gwen but he could not harm Meredith. He still loved her after all this time.

Fúramhir and Godárd charged and lunged at Meredith with their swords but they were both sent back to the ground as she pushed them with a powerful force field.

‘You brought these bounty hunters here to kill me!?’ Meredith screamed and scowled at Merthill as he lay down on his knees and cried.

The powerful and mad witch of Dreadwood forest then turned to Fúramhir and Godárd with rage in her eyes.

‘I will give you both what you deserve!’ she shouted just before Merthill sent a ball of flame against her back causing her to fall with pain. Fúramhir swiftly sprang up to his feet and drove his sword into the chest of Meredith. She bellowed quite frighteningly that it sent Fúramhir back a few steps. The sword stayed where it pierced Meredith’s chest. She put one hand on the handle of the sword while she lay on her back. It was too painful to remove. The slightest touch gave

her great pain. Merthill came closer to her.

‘What have you done?’ were Meredith’s last words and she died with her eyes wide open, staring right into Merthill’s soul.

Merthill could not speak. His heart broke and his mind ached. The grief and guilt struck him hard but he could not forget about Gwen. He rushed over to the cage of thorns. Those left of the wood people stood back in shock and fear. They would not attack again.

Merthill forced the cage open and Gwen literally fell into his arms. He helped her to her feet and Fúramhir came closer. Godárd kept his distance as his hatred for their kind was no different than before.

Fúramhir got one look at Gwen and was immediately in awe of her beauty. She had milky-white skin and jet-black hair. Her eyes were like blue crystals in an underground ice cave. She was utterly the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

Godárd didn’t care much for her as he suspected that it was some sort of trickery. She could have been a toad for all he knew.

But she wasn't a toad. She was her true self and she was as beautiful inside as she was outside. Fúramhir couldn't take his eyes from her.

Then the fengári version of Leon came crashing through the trees again. Merthill and Fúramhir were ready to strike him down until something strange happened. Leon stopped in his rage and looked as though he began to recall old memories. No one had ever seen a fengári act this way. Leon moved calmly to Gwen and sat down beside her; he looked even larger beside Gwen as she was so petit.

'What is goin' on!?' Fúramhir questioned as he could not believe his eyes.

'You tamed the beast,' Merthill said to Gwen.

'But how?' she wondered. 'I didn't mean to; I just didn't want anyone to get hurt.'

'Magnificent,' Merthill said.

Even as they started to walk Leon followed and protected Gwen. He was her guardian and would die to save her.

They had returned to the sorrowful village of Dreadwood when the morning came and the settlers were astounded. They had never seen anything like it before. Not just one but all who entered the forest plus another they were searching for returned, and not to mention the return of Leon Dégan. They could feel the darkness from the witch of Dreadwood forest no more. Her madness was lifted with the coming of her death.

Godárd continued to follow but he kept his distance. He was mainly trying to figure out what to do next; how to free Fúramhir from his bewitchment.

‘I thank you all as my saviours,’ Gwen said. Her smile was beautiful.

Fúramhir would find himself getting tongue-tied. He was made speechless on account of her beauty. It happened to many men but never to Fúramhir before, not even with his wife.

Merthill led them into the tavern and

there they would discuss their next move. Godárd did not sit with them as he sat at the bar trying to conjure up a plan. Merthill seemed melancholy and there was no wondering why. The love of his life was killed and he had a part to play in her death. The sorrow and guilt began to take its toll on him and no magic that he knew of would stop him feeling that way.

There in the tavern, Merthill began to speak.

‘I am so sorry to say that this is where we must part . . .’

‘But why?’ Gwen questioned him after only just being reunited again after all this time.

‘I must go . . . my grief is too much for me to bare, and I need to go on a journey to regain my strength and beliefs for I am beginning to question my very *existence*.’

Gwen couldn’t take any more of it, so she stood up and stormed out in protest. Fúramhir was about to get up to get her back, but Merthill stopped him before he could

leave his seat and told him to let her be for the moment. Although, Leon was faster and followed Gwen like a shadow; he was her *protector*. Merthill's eyes looked so filled with a sadness and a grief he could not carry. Fúramhir genuinely felt sorry for him. He didn't know exactly what was happening; one minute he despised witches and wizards, but the next, it's totally different. Everything he had believed and taught his only son had changed.

'I am not fit to carry on with this journey,' Merthill said. 'Will you take Gwen to a safe place in Bardor to a relative of mine?'

'I will,' Fúramhir said. 'I promise to do everything in my power to take care of her.'

'I thank you; I knew I was right about you. You're a good man,' Merthill said while he stood up so frail and left for his own journey for which he must take alone.

Outside he met Gwen to whom he told he loved and she had said it back, eventually. It was a goodbye but it wasn't forevermore or so they had thought.

Fúramhir then came to Gwen and spoke to her for the first time.

‘I will take you to Bardor, Gwen.’

She looked at him as if she had only started to really notice him. She could see that he had a handsome way about him and his eyes captured her the most. But she kept her sudden interest well hidden.

Their journey together was then about to begin, but Godárd had other plans. Although, he could do nothing because of the presence of Leon. At least Merthill had gone, but Leon was a fengári, and a loyal one at that. He didn't think Fúramhir was an issue; he had to get rid of Leon. Godárd had to play it safe.

## 9

They were to leave Dreadwood soon after rest. They were all the talk of the town since they escaped the forest, so they got the royal treatment they deserved. Each of them got a room to rest up in. Leon had not slept in a bed for many, many years. The cotton sheets

were softer than the moss and branches he used to sleep on. It seemed a bit too much so he slept on the floor beside the bed, besides, the cotton made his skin itch. Gwen was in the room next to him, of course; and Godárd was on the opposite side. If Godárd was to do something about Leon, he had to do it before nightfall. While human, Leon had great natural strength, but when he turned into his night-form he was monstrous. So, as Godárd knocked on Leon's door he had to be prepared.

'Ah, Godárd,' he answered. 'What can I do *with* you . . . or is it *for* you? I can't remember. Yes! What can I do for you?' He scratched himself behind his ear like a dog.

'I need you to come with me,' Godárd said.

'Where?'

'I need to show you somethin' . . . it'll be helpful for Gwen.'

'If you say so, lead the way.'

And Godárd led Leon outside. It was still daytime, luckily for Godárd. As Godárd



was an experienced slayer, he knew the weaknesses of a Fengári. That was to pierce the heart or remove the creature's head . . . or both; but then again, isn't that a weakness for any living creature? Fengária were considerably more difficult to kill than your average wild animal, but these creatures live under a curse. They change, they eat, they change, they live on and on and on till they become permanent in beast form. Therefore, a stab to the heart or the removal of the head would cure the creature of the curse; the same way that Meredith had been cured.

They came to a large pond where the edge of the forest grew. Leon was no fool and he could smell something foul in the air and it surrounded Godárd like a cloud.

'Why did you bring me here, Godárd?'

He did not answer.

'What's your plan?'

Again, he did not answer. He only held up a small crossbow with one hand and fired it into Leon's chest. Leon clutched his chest in time to protect his heart with his own hand as

a shield. He screamed and dove backwards into the pond. Fortunately, it was deep and Leon disappeared in a flash. Godárd did not expect this. He rushed to the edge of the pond and fired more arrows into the water causing ripples to spread out in circles, but there was no sign of Leon. Maybe he drowned or so Godárd had hoped.

It didn't matter now, Godárd had to hurry. This was his only chance. He returned to the tavern and requested that one of the maids called for Fúramhir and Gwen.

He waited with a drink in his hand and a few empty glasses. There was nothing else he thought better to do than to drink at that moment.

As Fúramhir entered the tavern and then to his old companion, still hunched quite grimly at the bar, he could tell something was wrong. Godárd got up from his seat slowly as Fúramhir called to him, but in his hand, he had a dagger. Fúramhir stood as a shield between him and Gwen who was now scared and confused.

‘You’re under a spell, Fúramhir!’ Godárd yelled from the bar. ‘You don’t know what you’re doing!’

‘Godárd, lower your dagger!’ he said this as calm but as sternly as possible.

‘She’s a witch!’

‘I know, but all that we knew before is wrong.’

‘Then to save you, I must kill you . . .’ Godárd then took out his larger sword, challenging his old friend. A fight between two friends is more brutal than that of two enemies. And it would be brutal. Godárd lunged across a table that stood in his path and swung his unforgiving sword at Fúramhir. The swing was blocked, Fúramhir punched and then kicked Godárd back, but then he came at him, charging again. Fúramhir reluctantly brought his sword down at his old friend but that, too, was blocked.

Gwen stayed well back in fear. Her powers would be no use just yet as she was still young.

Their strong and mighty arms locked in

a chain of strength pushing greatly against each other after their swords were dropped to the floor in a struggle. Godárd took out his sharp dagger again and tried to cut Fúramhir which he dodged each swipe as he jumped back. Fúramhir continued to plead to his old friend to stop, but he would not listen.

Godárd came towards him with the dagger again, but something stopped him in his tracks. It was Leon! He lifted Godárd by the neck and threw him across the room crashing through tables and chairs.

During the entire fight the man who owned the tavern hollered from a distance for them to leave, but he would not risk his life interfering. But then there was silence. Leon had come in just in time.

Godárd lay with a bloodied face on the floor where he has been thrown. He looked up at Fúramhir with disbelief and anger.

'So, this is it, old friend!' Godárd shouted. 'You gonna kill me now?' He spat blood out onto the floor. 'Or you gonna have your dog kill me?'

‘No, I won’t,’ Fúramhir said as he then turned to walk away.

But Godárd quickly climbed to his feet and charged again with the dagger in his hand. Fúramhir was the faster man. He stopped Godárd’s arm and twisted his own dagger into his gut. Fúramhir immediately regretted it, and Godárd fell down with pain and a terrible wound. It wasn’t Leon that gave Godárd this fatal wound, it was his old companion he thought was no issue. Fúramhir dropped the bloody dagger and quickly ran to Gwen and they got out of there without looking back. Fúramhir couldn’t look back. The three of them left Dreadwood forever, leaving Godárd to die in the tavern.

For days Fúramhir, Leon and Gwen travelled together across the vast and dangerous lands of Gredius. It was cold and the wind was bitter, being that time of year. Gwen was grateful to Fúramhir for fighting Godárd for her safety, but she wouldn’t mention it as she knew it would hurt him as they were friends for many years.

Fúramhir was sorry he had to fight Godárd, but he wasn't sorry that he did it as he was protecting Gwen. His feelings for her grew and grew with every sight of her. And little did he know, she began to have similar romantic feelings. They seemed to be destined and drawn to each other.

It was one freezing night when they learned of the other's feelings. Fúramhir got a weak fire going but Gwen suggested that they huddled together to keep warm. For the first time in many years Fúramhir was nervous at the closeness of a woman. She was absolutely beautiful. He was very handsome, but he didn't really know how handsome he truly was. All that went through his mind was fear and embarrassment of being rejected.

Luckily enough for Fúramhir, Gwen would be the one to make the first move. This was their only chance while Leon slept in his fengári form, unaware of what was going on. She kissed Fúramhir softly on his lips, he then took over as if becoming the leader in a dance and they kissed as though they thought it was

their last kiss.

## 10

The day had risen and the snow had melted which was strange for Gevru. As they began to move again, they talked even more than before. They had fallen in love.

They finally reached Bardor and this time, Gwen would lead the way to her relative, Magellin, who lived in the village of Sít.

They made their way down the River Ór which passed by Sít just over half the way. Soon they would reach the village as it would shortly be in sight. Magellin, too, was as old and grey as Merthill was. For many years Magellin walked the lands of Dómain after leaving his birthplace of Fuar like many before him (though Fuar was never truly the land of the magic folk, despite many tall tales, it was for Magellin after his ancestors migrated north long ago). He eventually hid out in the land of Bardor as it was always

known for the people and kings and queens to be quite accepting of others no matter the type, faith, or place of birth, even if it was made against the law to be of a certain kind.

Magellin welcomed his cousin's adopted daughter with open arms, but seemed to dislike Fúramhir's presence from the start. He knew of Fúramhir's past; what he used to be. But Gwen vouched for him that he was no longer that man and how he took part in the saving of her life. For that Magellin made an *exception* for Fúramhir and they could stay with him as long as they needed. He had no objection towards Leon, but mainly curiosity. Never in his lifetime had he ever seen a fengári become tamed.

## 11

But meanwhile as the wind blew a cold snip in the village of Sít, a horrifically wounded man fell into the village of Dronewith back in Gredius, Fúramhir's hometown. The wounded man travelled such



a long and painful distance to get there. People stood back, fearing the bloody mess that he was. It was Godárd and he was losing strength fast. Finally, he reached his destination which was the home of Fúramhir's family. Sirí and Fúram flocked to Godárd's aid and he collapsed to the muddy ground. His wounds took their toll and he muttered his last words to Fúram.

'Your father has been bewitched . . . only his death will cure him . . .'

 and Godárd moved on as his breath stopped with a sudden choke and the life left his forsaken eyes.

From then on Fúram vowed to take vengeance. He remembered everything his father taught him about becoming a witch hunter. He trained year after year till he became stronger than his father was at his age. Fúramhir sent his son many letters, but they were all unanswered, all thrown into the fire for fear of becoming bewitched too. Fúram became a great witch hunter and soon he would hunt for his father. He couldn't

forget all that his father told him about witches and wizards; it was all he knew.

Fúramhir missed his son and wished so much to hold him again, but he could never return to Gredius. It had been a few years after the rescue of Gwen and now they had built their own home on the land owned by Magellin. It was small, but it was all they wanted. Fúramhir and Gwen had a child together and her name was Gwyneth. Fúramhir was now a husband to a witch and a father to a witch; something he never imagined he would be. But he was determined to raise Gwyneth right, unlike Fúram. Instead of teaching her to hate, he would teach her to love. And as she grew older and more beautiful than her mother, she quickly became known as the fairest on all the lands. By her teenage years, Gwyneth was strangely more powerful than most witches and wizards at that age. She healed the sick, she enriched the poor, she rewarded the good because of the love that she had learned. Already, at such a young age, Gwyneth

became a myth, a story to tell throughout the land of Dómain and she was always much more beautiful than the stories told. Her eyes, so large and blue showed an innocence about her and she also had her mother's dark hair that grew so long it could reach down passed her knees. Gwyneth Tóll was named The Good Witch of Bardor, but it was, of course, still against the law to practice magic and any bounty hunter that dared hunt for her could never follow through with the bounty as they froze at the sight of her majestic beauty. If they didn't freeze, and pass her beauty off as a trick, her father, Fúramhir would strike them down before they got a chance. He loved his daughter and he would never let anything bad happen to her. But that was never in his power.

## 12

In the meantime, during the birth and raising of Gwyneth, Merthill was travelling on his own journey. He suffered a great amount

of grief and he longed for a happiness again. He longed to see his love again. But the last words that she had said to him were "What have you done?" and it broke his aged heart.

Merthill must have walked many, many miles till he came to a sparkling river. Its shallow waters curved and bumped over rocks and round bends in the earth. He slowly stumbled closer to the river till he could see his old reflection in the water stare back at him through the ripples. A tear of grief fell from his eye and into the water, and suddenly there was a bright light so blinding that Merthill fell back on the moss-covered ground.

Merthill was frightened especially once he began to hear his name being called faintly.

'Who goes there?' Merthill demanded to know at once.

'It's me, Merthill,' the voice said more clearly.

'That does not answer my question!' He stood up onto his feet.

The extremely bright light started to dim

and a figure became clear to be hovering over the water. Merthill watched on with anticipation as the light became dimmer by the second. When it finally cleared and the figure could be seen, Merthill broke down in tears. It was the spirit of his love, Meredith.

‘My love . . . I’m so sorry . . .’ Merthill fell to his knees into the shallow river. ‘I wish I could change everything! Please forgive me . . .’

‘No!’ Meredith said. ‘I cannot forgive you; for there is nothing to forgive.’

Merthill became speechless, his heart seemed to stop along with time itself.

‘The madness had taken me, but now I am free. I ask that you forgive me for everything that I had done,’ Meredith said.

‘I love you, Meredith,’ Merthill said. ‘I forgive you.’

‘I love you, Merthill. Now, I must grant you with a gift that I had stolen in my life, but I know you will use it for good. You have a quite important part to play in this world as I have learned, and you will need the strength

and the youth to do what is needed. I grant you the power I once possessed.'

And in another flash of light Merthill was lifted from the river and he was changed. His skin became tighter and his bones became stronger. Thick, long, black hair grew on his head where he was once bald, his mouth was surrounded by a dark beard that came down to his chin and his power doubled too. He was youthful once again.

As he was lowered to the ground again Meredith began to fade away, but just before she disappeared, she managed to say one more thing. And that was:

'You must find the one to lift the curse of Vulga. We will meet again, my love.'

Then she was gone, and Merthill was reborn with a great power and strength and youthful looks.

Merthill could not believe what had happened. His grief-filled heart was cured of its heaviness and now he had a mission. And it was the greatest mission of all. If he was to fail, it could mean the end of Dómain, and the

end of Dómain is the end of all worlds.

## 13

Word had spread to Fúramhir that his son, Fúram, had become such a great bounty hunter, and that he had accepted the bounty on Gwyneth. It was Fúramhir's most horrific nightmare he could imagine. Fúramhir tried to calm Gwen, telling her that they were well hidden on Magellin's land and that he would never find them, but she didn't believe him mainly because he didn't believe himself. So, Gwen and Fúramhir asked Magellin to take their daughter far away, accompanied by Leon, too. Gwyneth protested of course, but she had no choice in the matter.

On a sunny Sumral morning Gwyneth was taken away by Magellin carriage pulled by a horse. Tears flowed from her face as she waved her parents goodbye, and they stayed behind waiting for Fúram to show.

Days passed and nights went unrested and still Fúram didn't show. Fúramhir and

Gwen had their first argument in their entire marriage for they grew tired and forlorn. Fúramhir stormed out of their cottage and found a tavern close by to sulk in. After his fifth pint he decided that he had had enough and built up the courage to apologise to Gwen. He knew she meant no harm and he knew he was a pig-headed fool. He couldn't even remember what the argument was about. He returned home to say how sorry he was and how much he loved her.

Just like the time he returned home to Sirí cheating with the gardener, the front door was left open as he returned. He moved quietly through the cottage, but it was so silent; he could hear his own heart beating. Images of Gwen in their bed with another man flooded his mind just like Sirí had done. But when he finally reached the bedroom it became clear that it was in no way the same situation. Gwen's naked body lay spread out on the bloody bed and her unblinking eyes stared frighteningly into Fúramhir's. He rushed over to her, nearly slipping on puddles



of blood on the floor and held her dead body in his arms, screeching out a painful cry that awoke the entire village.

There was no sign of anyone who had done this to Gwen. Whoever had done it was then gone. Fúramhir buried the love of his life that day and did not re-enter their cottage days after. He lived in the tavern where there was a good supply of moonshine to grieve in. He was determined to find whoever it was that had raped and murdered Gwen. He asked round the village and nobody would admit to seeing anything until he came to one farmer that was out working on a nearby field the day of Gwen's death. Fúramhir didn't know what to expect and definitely didn't think that the farmer would say he saw the man that had done it again, and that he was in the tavern at that very moment; the same tavern that he was then living in.

Fúramhir ran quickly with his old sword ready to avenge the death of his love, Gwen. When he finally reached the tavern, crowds gathered, wanting to see justice done.

The man was inside the tavern and Fúramhir took out his sword ready to kill whoever it was. But it was revealed to be his son, Fúram. He stared at his father with pure hatred and anger. Fúramhir broke down with tears and dropped his sword to the ground unable to fight his only son no matter the monstrous deeds he had done to Gwen.

‘I did this for you, father,’ Fúram said as he lifted up his sword. ‘I will hunt for Gwyneth and I will finish what I have started; what you have taught me.’

He then brought down his sword and stabbed his father directly through his heart and he fell to his death beside a puddle of blood and tears. His eyes held the same expression of horrific pain and a sadness too heavy even in death.

There was no justice in the village that day. Fúram killed his father and Gwen, and now his next target was Gwyneth whom he thought to be an abomination that needed to be exterminated. The villagers feared Fúram so he was told of Magellin and how he took

Gwyneth away in a carriage. He was happy to hear this as they were slower and much easier to track. Fúram left the sorrowful village with a gallop of his horse, and soon he would have Gwyneth in his vengeful sight.

The carriage moved slowly as it walloped and dithered on the stone-littered road. Magellin sat at the front of the carriage controlling the horses. He was calm and moved quietly along. Gwyneth sat so still inside the carriage with a sudden sadness and grief stricken over her. Leon tried to console her but she knew, somehow, what had happened to her parents. She didn't know the entire details, but she was certain something horrific had happened.

Gwyneth began to panic and she frantically called to Magellin to stop, but she didn't need to as their path was blocked by a young man in the middle of the lonely road.

'Who goes there?' Magellin hollered as he halted his wide-eyed horse.

'Do you not recognise me, Cousin?'

'Merthill? Is that you?'

And so Merthill explained how he found his youthful looks again, and Magellin explained just about everything he knew right back. Merthill met Gwyneth for the first time and he could already sense her power. She was even more powerful than he was, even with his youthful gift from Meredith's spirit.

Gwyneth was happy to meet her adopted grandfather, but she could no longer ignore the darkness that befell her moments ago. She told Merthill of her horrifying feelings about Gwen and Fúramhir and it chilled him to the bone.

'I should never have left . . .' was all that Merthill could say. His heart was yet broken again for the loss of Gwen. 'And you, Gwyneth are a powerful witch to have these senses at such a young age . . .'

'So are the feelings real?' she wondered. 'Are they dead?'

Merthill brought her close and could only hold Gwyneth. She reminded him so much of Gwen.

Fúram was on the right tracks and sooner or later he would reach the end of them. It was only a matter of time. He only stopped to give his horse water; Fúram was not thirsty, for the only thing he was thirsty for was the blood of the witch, Gwyneth, his half-sister. His hatred was what drove him. That was the same hatred his father taught him before he met Gwen. Fúram became more and more enraged as time went on while he lingered over his terrifying thoughts. Those thoughts brought him closer to catching Gwyneth.

The trail was fresh in the mud on the winding road. The look of determination in Fúram's eyes grew with every second.

There was smoke from a campfire rising over a hill just ahead. Fúram stepped off his worn-out horse and planned to sneak up on who he suspected to be Gwyneth. The camp was in his sights. It was the cart that Gwyneth was in, but there was no one to be seen. There

was a dying fire next to the parked cart, but no horse. Fúram walked over with his sword ready to puncture his victim, but there wasn't a soul nearby. Fúram screamed out with rage that Gwyneth had gotten away from him this time. He would never give up.

Gwyneth now moved on horseback with Magellin, Leon and Merthill. It was Merthill's idea as he thought they could move easier and faster. He felt it necessary especially after Gwyneth's horrible feelings about what had happened to her parents and how right he was.

As they moved along the stars seemed to follow them in the night sky. It was a clear but cold night. Leon's fengári form seemed calmer the longer he spent with Gwyneth, the same affect her mother, Gwen, had had on him. Merthill could see that Gwyneth was grieving still and could relate, of course, so he moved closer to comfort her.

'Some say that the stars are the spirits of those who have passed,' Merthill spoke to Gwyneth as he looked up to the night sky.

‘There must be a lot of stars . . .’

‘A lot more than we can see.’

‘Why am I so different?’ Gwyneth suddenly asked Merthill.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I can do things even you cannot do . . . there must be a reason.’

‘Yes, I believe there's a reason and we'll find out soon enough.’

On they continued their journey searching for a place to live and to learn of their purposes. Then they came to that place. It was called Ryevale, East Bardor. It was an old abandoned castle, left in ruins from a battle long ago before the seven kings made peace. It was perfect for them.

Ryevale was in pieces after all these years, but once Gwyneth set foot in the castle it arose once more. The fortress came back to life and was repaired by Gwyneth's unknown magic. Merthill and Magellin stood back with disbelief. Gwyneth seemed not to believe it herself either. The castle didn't rebuild with stone but with earth. Trees seemed to come to

life and boulders rolled to build a mighty fortress. The castle became part of the earth; protected by earth. Vines and ivy wrapped round stone and pulled it back together and an enormous tree became one with the last standing tower so tall and great.

There, Gwyneth took her seat at a throne with grace and Merthill, Leon and Magellin all stood by her side, vowing to protect and to serve her in all her goodness.

## 15

As time went on, folk heard of the good witch that now sat in Ryevale Castle and many settled nearby hoping to live under her ruling and protection. Merthill and Magellin were the first of Gwyneth's disciples, but more were to follow. Leon was more of a protector, a knight.

The third to come to Gwyneth and to make the sacred vow was another wizard named Jorg Bannin. He was a young wizard, but he was more open-minded than most. His



head was bald and his body was masculine which was rare to see for a wizard as they didn't really need fitness with the amount of magic they had.

The fourth to come was a witch named Vienne Valor, and she looked as though she had seen a lot more darkness than she had hoped. She was clearly an older lady, but she was certainly still quite pretty. Vienne had strong beliefs for Gwyneth. After hearing stories of Gwyneth's powers, she went straight to Bardor, then to Ryevale to finally start what she believed to be good.

As the word had spread throughout the realms of Dómain it would gain Gwyneth many followers, but also many enemies. There were many that would want her dead. Not only the dark followers of Vulga, but also those who feared she would become yet another Queen of darkness. Gwyneth was most certainly not of darkness, but the ignorance and fear of mortal men would be blind of that.

It was a rather large castle, Ryevale, but Gwyneth didn't have an army. There were many villagers settled in the village which she helped build, but they could not defend against a raid. Gwyneth's only defenders were Merthill, Magellin, Jorg, Vienne, and Leon. But would they be enough against an army?

Fúram Tóll never stopped looking for Gwyneth and when he heard of her whereabouts, he got together his very own army of witch hunters. They were strong in numbers and fearless in battle.

Settlers evacuated the village and hid in the castle where Gwyneth promised they would be safe. Fires could be seen from the village as it was burned to the ground by Fúram and his men. It was a dark, dark night but there was a flickering orange glow from the flames that lit the hills. Gwyneth didn't

want a war, but the war came to her anyway. All of their powers would be made clear that night. Fúram sent in the first hundred men, but they were all immediately turned into ashes from Merthill's powerful flames. Again and again, Fúram sent another hundred, but Merthill's flames were too strong. Next Fúram got the catapults and sent boulders into the air to rain down on Ryevale, but now Jorg would show his powers as he slowed the stones in mid-air and sent them back to where they came from, destroying the catapults. It took much energy from Jorg and he could not fight anymore with his powers that night. He was still a young wizard with much to learn.

There were still many of those left of Fúram's army and they showed no sign of backing down just yet. He was determined to storm Ryevale Castle and kill the abomination that was Gwyneth. It was Vienne's turn to defend Ryevale. She shut her eyes and started to meditate, and clouds began to gather over Fúram's army. There was a rumble of thunder, and rain started to fall, but when it touched

their skin it would melt and sizzle and they would scream in agony. From then many of Fúram's men began to retreat, mortally wounded and deformed by the acid rains. But Magellin then came from the castle by himself. Those left of Fúram's army charged with rage but Magellin sent lightning in all directions cutting them all down one-by-one and Fúram's army was no more. But where was Fúram?

Gwyneth was devastated that there had to be so many deaths, but luckily there was no loss from their side. Gwyneth went to the people who were hiding in the castle so that she could bring them home. But they all still seemed afraid. She promised to rebuild their village, but still, they would not move. Then it became clear. Fúram stood out from the crowd with his sword in his hand and stared Gwyneth dead in the eyes with pure hatred. The people were helpless and cried for what Fúram was about to do to Gwyneth. He lifted up his sword and something happened. Fúram stopped still as he could hear Gwyneth

speak, but her mouth wasn't moving. She was in his head!

'Everything you know is wrong,' the voice said. 'You are my brother, my blood.'

'I WILL NOT BE FOOLED LIKE MY FATHER!' Fúram yelled and started to walk faster to Gwyneth with his sword. Leon rushed in his fengári form in their direction but something else happened.

As his sword came inches to Gwyneth's throat he stopped. His sword was dropped to the ground and he began to have a strange fit that shook him from head to toe. He was still standing straight while he shook and his eyes widened with fear. Then all of a sudden, he became absolutely still, frozen in the spot. His eyes focused but seemed absent, his mouth hung open and he drooled a little. Fúram was different. Gwyneth had wiped his brain clean and as a result he had no memory, no words, no hatred, no thoughts until Gwyneth gave him one and that was to walk; just walk till his last breath. And with a grunt, Fúram started walking. He reached all the way to the end of

Telús when he finally fell to his death and the witch hunter hunted no more.

## *A Dreadful Warrior*

### 1

It was many years later and still Gwyneth and her followers lived in Ryevale. It was the year, 1250, to be precise. Throughout all those years there had been numerous attempts on Gwyneth's life, but still they were all unsuccessful. Gwyneth and her disciples were too powerful. Luckily for the rest of Dómain she was not a witch of darkness; she was not what many had feared her to be.

One day, a rider entered the village of Ryevale. It was a mysterious man that asked many questions of Gwyneth. He wanted to know what the villagers thought of her and if the stories were true. Gwyneth was no fool and so she heard of this mysterious man outside her gates so she invited him in so that she could answer his questions herself.

Gwyneth was closely guarded by her loyal disciples while the man approached her

throne. He was a young, handsome man of good height and muscle. He was definitely a man of the sword, but was he a friend or foe? His hair was blonde and shoulder-length; well-groomed as a matter of fact and his jawline was squared and symmetrical. He gazed up to Gwyneth with his dark-brown eyes waiting to be spoken to.

‘Why do you come to Ryevale, stranger?’ Gwyneth asked the mysterious man.

‘I’ve come for you,’ he said.

‘You won’t have a chance against us here, you are mortal.’

‘My apologies for the misunderstanding, I mean you no harm,’ the man explained.

‘Then why is it you ask so many questions of me at the village?’ she wondered out loud turning her head to Vienne as if to have her agree.

‘I want to serve you, my Queen. I want to become one of your disciples.’

‘But you are mortal!’ Vienne couldn’t help but point out. ‘This man is of no use to you, Gwyneth, he has no powers and the life



of a mortal is far too short.'

'I may have no powers like the rest of you but I will do everything I can to protect you. My life may be short but I will give it all to you. Let me live to protect you,' the man said.

'What is your name, stranger?' Gwyneth asked him.

'My name is Valen Serious, son of the king of Bardor, Sólin Serious.'

Gwyneth seemed shocked at the revealing of the stranger's identity. The son of the king of Bardor wants to help her while other kings throughout the realms wish her dead. For centuries Bardor has had many kings who have always defended the rights of witches and wizards making it a safe haven for their kind. But never had a royal blood come in person to offer a great allegiance.

'I have noticed there are no guards, my Queen...'

'Please, I am not a Queen.'

'You are to your people and you sit on a great throne.'

‘Maybe so, but what was this about guards?’

‘Ah yes, all this time and it had just been you and your four disciples and a fengári defending this castle. I want to help you by giving you an army.’

‘I don’t want a war, Valen.’

‘Neither do I but it will come whether we ask for it or not. I’m not giving you my men so that we can fight wars, I’m giving you my men so that you can protect your people and defend yourself even better than you already have.’

‘How many men?’ she queried.

‘Five thousand and strong.’

‘You want to be a disciple? Do you know that’s a vow for an eternity?’ Vienne added.

‘I give you my life and soul, my Queen,’ Valen said with absolute certainty and passion.

‘Very well then, Prince Valen, you are the first mortal man to become one of my disciples. I hope I won’t be disappointed,’ Gwyneth said as she then stood up from her

throne and escorted by Merthill, she left the keep.'

## 2

Far from Ryevale, across the dangerous Caírth Sea, in the dark realm of Vulgaron, there stood an army of great and terrible warriors. Thousands stood round the tall tower of Vulga's lair. Inside the lair at the tallest point, Vulga was speaking to Góron Stíl, the commander of those thousands of warriors surrounding the tower.

'I cannot ignore her existence! She must be killed,' Vulga said.

'I will be the one to do it, my Lord,' Góron said as he stood so tall at attention.

'Yes, you will,' Vulga said while he slowly walked round in a circle. 'And you will take your army into Bardor and kill everything and everyone you find. On the seventh day of your army's invasion, you will be joined by another larger fleet which will be led by...'

‘My son, Níthe, will lead them. I will weaken Bardor’s defence with my ten thousand warriors and Níthe will bring fifty thousand more across the Caírrth Sea.’

‘Yes, Níthe’s army will be ready very soon,’ Vulga said. ‘You will not fail me, Commander Stíl.’

‘I will not fail you; the Good Witch of Bardor will die.’

Góron Stíl left Vulgaron with his ten thousand men for the first great invasion sent by Vulga. Bardor was still unaware of the danger it had been put in but it would all soon be clear. Commander Góron Stíl was a dreadful warrior and he would soon bring fire to the land of Bardor.

Word had eventually spread from scouts of Túll that a fleet was sailing from Vulgaron to Bardor. King Sólin Serius was hasty in preparing his army. Bardor Quay was so heavily fortified for the invasion and the workers and villagers were evacuated north. Sólin sent out messengers to all other realms for support. It would be a few days till those

messages were answered so for now it was Bardor alone to fight Vulga's army.

Góron and his battle raving warriors crept their way to Bardor. Sólin's brave knights at the Quay knew of the attack but they would've never have been ready for that battle. They were out-numbered – Bardor wasn't known for having a large army – and they were out of time. Góron and his ten thousand men came in from Cairth Sea firing with their catapults bringing down a fiery rain. King Sólin did the right thing of evacuating the ordinary folk and the workers from Bardor Quay as it was a complete and utter devastation; a massacre. King Sólin ordered a retreat so that he could save what army he had left. Góron's men slaughtered absolutely everyone in their path. There were no prisoners taken. Sólin had escaped with his few men left and fled to Fónroth which stood the king's second stronghold in Bardor. It was from there that Sólin would send a messenger to Ryevale, to his son, Valen, for help. The messenger would reach Ryevale by morning.

Valen had five thousand men and also as Sólín had hoped, the backing of the Queen of Ryevale.

### 3

The birds did not sing the morning after the invasion at Bardor Quay. That wasn't a good sign. Gwyneth awoke to an eerie and mournful feeling. She could feel what had happened and it frightened her so much.

Magellin greeted Gwyneth on that silent morning and asked her of her feelings.

'I feel there's a great darkness coming,' was her disconcerting reply.

And as though on cue, Valen entered the scene. He seemed on edge as he walked closer to Gwyneth.

'What's wrong, Valen?' Gwyneth questioned him as he approached.

'Bardor Quay has been invaded, my Queen. A messenger came from my Father; we must help!'

'We cannot go to war for a king that has

refused, on many occasions, to aid Ryevale,' Vienne acted as a spokesperson for Gwyneth while she stayed silent.

'That same king sent me with five thousand men to aid you, Gwyneth!' Valen said. 'The war is coming whether you like it or not . . .'

'You're right,' Gwyneth finally spoke. 'We must leave before we're too late but we cannot leave Ryevale unprotected. We will only take two thousand men and Merthill, Jorg, and Vienne will stay behind while Magellin and Leon joins us.'

'But, Gwyneth . . .'

'It must be done, Vienne, we cannot hide from war.'

Gwyneth, followed by two of her disciples: Magellin and Valen; and her protector, Leon, left Ryevale with two thousand men to Fónroth to aid King Sólin Serious and his wounded army.

But they would not reach them on time. King Sólin and his army were heavily surrounded, Fónroth would soon fall. Góron

and his murderous warriors set the fortress in flames. Sólin and those few who remained, with no way out, were trapped inside Fónroth castle. It is believed that Sólin gave his men a last speech before leading them out, one last time, of the gates to charge head on at Góron's army. His last words are unknown. They were greatly out-numbered but put up a last mighty fight till the last man was left standing. Góron took no prisoners.

Gwyneth, Valen, Magellin, Leon and their two thousand men arrived late to the slaughter at Fónroth. They walked through a heavy mist that lay over the castle. Valen's eyes darkened with a blackness so burdensome. The ground was lumpy on the feet but as they looked closer it became clear that it was bodies; hundreds of bodies. They were all killed by Góron and his men.

Valen hopelessly called out for his father but he was nowhere to be seen; he would not want to find him in his state either way. Góron viciously took Sólin's corpse and placed it on a crucifixion for all to see. But with the heavy



mist, they were still unaware of the horror. It would soon be discovered hours later as the mist began to clear and while there was a search for survivors. Sólin's corpse was found by a foot soldier who then rushed hastily to Valen. Valen was stricken heavily with grief once his eyes gazed upon the tragic crucifixion of his father, Sólin.

'Get him down!' he cried. 'Get my father down!'

Valen urged a proper burial for the dead king of Bardor and so Sólin's body was buried at Fónroth but the grave would stay unmarked until the end of the invasion on Bardor.

Gwyneth felt the need to console Valen in his time of need. Valen may have been one of Gwyneth's disciples but he was now Bardor's king, also. While Gwyneth came to Valen he broke down. She held him close, understanding his pain.

'This is not the end, Valen,' she said. 'Your father waits for you in Paradise, as are my parents.'

'Is Paradise for all of us, no matter our wrong-doings?' He asked as he looked up with his tear-filled eyes.

'No . . . but your father is there and you will see him again; our bodies are just a capsule containing our souls.'

Something quite strong then came over Valen as he felt the great urge to kiss Gwyneth. He was passionate and she did not stop him. She, herself, felt the same urge just as their eyes met and their lips caressed with each smooth touch. As they kissed Gwyneth's magic showed in the moment as red roses grew from a once dead stem, candles re-lit, fire-flies danced round them in a swirling trance and the cold and damp air became pleasant and warm.

The next hour came with the returning of a scout that Gwyneth had sent on horseback. The scout heralded a tale of the dark road that lay ahead. Villages, farms, homes of all kinds were viciously raided by Góron's army, still standing strong. They could easily find Góron for he left a trail of

bodies in his path wherever he would go.

From Fónroth, to follow Góron, Gwyneth led them north-west of Bardor. Magellin wondered if there was any particular target for Góron or were they simply going all directions, killing all in their path? Gwyneth had no answers for Magellin but they knew one thing: Góron must be stopped.

The rain started to fall upon their steel armour sounding like the flicking of a bucket. Their feet would sink up to their ankles in the wet mud. Góron's army marched nevertheless. Góron did have a target and that was to kill Gwyneth and her disciples at Ryevale. Vulga feared Gwyneth for she was his biggest threat. She was legendary for her power. But little did Góron know, she was not home.

The bell of the lookout tower at Ryevale rang so loud and morbidly as Góron's army approached. Merthill stumbled to the top of the wall and what a sight it was. An army of near ten thousand men stood outside Ryevale

Castle. Firstly, they approached with catapults and sent boulders into the air and down on the fortress. Ryevale was greatly outnumbered but their defence was strong. Jorg did his best to stop the boulders and sent them right back where they came from destroying some of Góron's catapults. Vienne was quick and she turned the rain to acid. It burned Góron and his army but still they fought.

Already, Góron's men were trying to break down the gate into the castle. Archers of Ryevale did their best to put a stop to them but somehow the gate broke open and Góron's men charged through. Jorg was first to the gate and he brought his fist to the ground and it caused a great shockwave, sending many of the enemy to the ground but he began to feel the heaviness of his power and became weak. An arrow from the enemy hit Jorg just above his knee and he fell helplessly to the ground. And again, as he tried to get to his feet, an arrow pierced his back and he screamed out in agony. Ryevale

knights died as they tried to protect him but they were all killed at the gate. Góron came to Jorg and finished the job himself. Jorg had been killed.

Vienne brought the villagers deeper into the underground tunnels to keep them safe for as long as possible. Merthill stayed out to fight alongside those who remained. It was a great struggle for the knights of Ryevale and many lost their lives. Merthill's power was strong and he fought many of Góron's dreadful warriors. But he then took a deadly arrow to the right of his chest. Góron came nearer as he had him in his sights. Merthill was weakened but still he kept up the fight. With a point of his staff, bright red and purple electricity shot out with deadly accuracy, putting an end to many of Góron's men. But still Góron came closer and closer.

Then a light appeared over the hill at Ryevale. It was Gwyneth and the rest of the army that had joined her. They were hasty to advance on defending the castle. Hope rushed through the veins of Merthill and he got back

to his steady feet and charged head on, with his staff in one hand and a sword in the other, at Góron and his men. One man – one wizard – faced Góron and hundreds of his men. His power was so overwhelming, many of the enemy retreated, only to be cut down by Gwyneth, Valen, Magellin, Leon and their army. Góron refused to quit so easily. He faced Merthill head-on but he was no wizard. Merthill smote him with a powerful spell that sent his soul to the deepest dungeons of Hell. Góron and his dreadful army were defeated once and for all.

But it was not over just yet. There was news of a fleet even larger than Góron's, led by Níthe Stíl, his son. They would reach Bardor Quay in just a few days. But Bardor had no more defences. Gwyneth's army was all they had left but they were only over two thousand strong; not much against the fleet of nearly twenty thousand, and with one less disciple. They had no choice in the matter. There were ordinary folk all over Bardor that needed a defence; many had already fled the

country, north.

Firstly, they were to tend to their wounded at Ryevale. Secondly, they had to prepare for war. Gwyneth tried her best to avoid war but it had come to her anyway just like Valen had said.

They would leave the next morning for Bardor Quay with just over two thousand men so that night everyone thought it would be their last – for most it would. Vienne was to stay at Ryevale with the ordinary folk on Gwyneth's request and was told to flee the country to Gredius after three days.

Gwyneth found her company with Valen. Alone, they waited out the night that could easily be their last at Ryevale. That thought was heavy on both their minds as they could not fight their passion. Together, they laid, after taking what could not be taken back, Gwyneth's virginity.

'I love you, Valen,' Gwyneth said as she rested her head on his naked chest.

'I love you, Gwyneth.'

As the moon lay to rest and the sun arose so majestically the people of Ryevale wished their warriors well as they moved on to battle. They had hoped for Gwyneth's safe return as they had had so much faith in her. Vienne watched on with hope as Gwyneth, Magellin, Merthill, Valen, Leon and two thousand men marched to Bardor Quay to defend all that was good.

By the end of the second day, they had reached the quay early enough to set up a good defence. It was now a matter of hours till Níthe and his massive fleet would be in sight on the horizon. So much destruction lay ahead.

The quay was a graveyard from Góron's invasion. What was once a lively and busy – 24 hours a day – quay was now as eerie as a tomb and as cold as a frosty moonlit night. It was quite cold and everyone could feel it. So, fires were lit and songs were sung for not only to distract them from the cold but of the fleet



that was nearing on the horizon of Cairth Sea.

Merthill's wounds had quickly healed thanks to a wonderful potion from Gwyneth; they wouldn't even scar. He stared out to the dark ocean reflecting the stars of the night sky. The sea was so calm it looked like the edge of the Earth as the water acted as a mirror.

'That's as still as glass,' Magellin said to Merthill as he approached.

'The calm before the storm,' Merthill replied.

'Well, is it ever stormy before the storm?' Magellin asked sarcastically and Merthill laughed.

'We'll make it through this storm, Merthill, I know it.'

It wasn't long from then that the fleet could be seen. In the black of the night, they could not be seen but as the sun started to rise with an orange glow over the sea, there were many ships close enough to see the Vulgaron Flags and the warriors waving their weapons ready for battle. The ships came as fast as they could but something was shifting the waters.

Gwyneth held her hands up to the heavenly skies and a great thundery, black cloud was formed and waves so tall began to crash to the fleet. It slowed them all down but one ship. They came to the dock and began to storm Bardor Quay. They were men lost to darkness, some unchanged, some deformed by years of unnatural life given to them by Vulga while they made an unbreakable oath. They screeched and shouted as they charged straight in. Gwyneth had archers well placed and they let it rain down on the enemy so swiftly. Many fell but still more charged on. As they got closer some of Ryevale knights drew their swords and started to attack. As the sun was rising, Leon had to fight in his human form but still he had great strength.

It was a gruesome fight but Gwyneth's knights came out on top, but at a cost; many were killed and wounded. It was only one ship but it severely damaged Bardor's defence.

Very soon after that more ships reached the docks and dark warriors came running at

them with terrifying rage. There were too many and so they violently broke through the front line of defence. Níthe's soldiers were everywhere but Gwyneth and her army held their own. They stood together against the dark followers of Vulga. Not one man faltered. The battle was a tiresome battle but they kept up their strength.

The battle went on and on but something changed in the enemy. Something stirred them. Gwyneth looked to the east and saw many ships. But they were not ships of Níthe's, but of Septus! They had answered the call when Sólin Serious had sent out messengers for aid. The mighty ships of Septus were far greater than that of Níthe's fleet. It was a quick battle on the sea and Septus wiped out the enemy fleet. Níthe was forced to retreat with only two other ships remaining.

Many of the knights of Ryevale were lost including Magellin. Merthill found him in a circle of dead enemy soldiers. He must have taken them all down with him before he died

from a pierce to the heart.

Not many were left of Gwyneth's army. Out of the two thousand there only remained a few hundred. But they stood together, never faltered and kept their ground. Bardor was saved, eventually with the help of Septus. The darkness of Vulga had been sent right back over the Caírth Sea but it would certainly be back for vengeance.

Gwyneth became weak and the battle had wounded her; not physically but mentally. She would part with Merthill and return with Valen, Leon and whoever else was left to Ryevale in Vienne's company to heal. Before parting with Merthill she told him to continue *his* mission and not to come with her. Merthill must find the one to break the curse and she knew it to be important. Merthill was reluctant but he came to his senses and headed East of Ryevale.

## 5

As time had passed many had learned of

Gwyneth and Valen's acts together. Vienne was as disapproved as a mother but would soon be accepting. But something began to change. Gwyneth seemed tired and restless at the same time. Not only was Gwyneth feeling weak, she was pregnant with Valen's child he would stay by her side to raise the child together as husband and wife. They had a baby boy and named him Salen Serius. It was just another person for Leon to protect. Salen would not only be the next king of Bardor but also be king for such a long time as he had the life span of his mother rather than his father. Valen's death was avoided as much as possible over the years by Gwyneth's magic. First, she had cured him of the sickness known as tar in his forties, then she cured him of a horrible disease called farse in his late nineties which would've made him blind at first before turning his brain to liquid. But after double his life time Gwyneth could not stop his deformities. She knew it wasn't right keeping him in this world for herself and Valen knew it too. He asked her to let him go

-men just weren't meant to live that long- and he promised her that they would see each other again but for now he would always be in her heart. And so, she let him go.

## 6

The tales of this world and of the people in it does not end here for this is merely the beginning of a world about to shake, shatter and vibrate across the wild lands and echo across the dangerous seas.

## Part III

### *The Adventures of Sara Turgan*

#### 1

The land of Túll was large and flat; perfect for farming. It's neighbouring country to the East was Vulgaron so for many years it was heavy with defence. There was a massive wall that stood on the border between Túll and Vulgaron and for all these years it had done the job. It was the Great Wall of Norí. But for many years Vulgaron had gone silent. Some speculated Vulga's death and that the curse had been lifted and others said he was only preparing his greatest weapon yet. For about 100 years, since the failed invasion of Bardor, Vulga was, in fact, preparing. It was like no other magic ever done before. He would conjure up something so dark many would not dare speak of it in detail. The time was coming to reveal that darkness.

Túll was in the ruling of King Múrius

Turgan and Queen Sierí Turgan. They had two children together; a boy and a girl. Montius was their seventeen-year-old son and Sara was their twelve-year-old daughter.

So green were the lands of Túll. Sara loved to go on walks by herself. Helmwith, the home of the king of Túll, was safe like that. Many people knew exactly who Sara was if they'd spot her skipping through their fields; they'd do nothing to harm her as every folk adored her and their king. Múrius was a greatly loved king. It would be hard to find someone who had a bad word to say about him on the west side of the wall anyway.

Something was stirring in the east after all these years. A look-out at the Great Wall of Norí noticed something out of the ordinary – in his lift time at least. There was a light in the distance; a fire maybe. He wasn't entirely sure but he reported it. His superior came as fast as he could and fear struck his face as he gazed in the direction of the light.

Múrius, Sierí, Montius and Sara were sitting down to dinner when a messenger



came to inform the king of the report at the Great Wall. As Múrius left the table Sara seemed upset about something. It was clear that she didn't want her father to go but he had to. They both knew that so they both said nothing.

## 2

So, after dinner that evening, Sara went on yet another long walk in the fields outside Helmwith Castle. It was a pleasant evening. The sky was still a pale blue but towards the horizon, where the sky met the earth, it was orange and red and then purple. Sara could see for miles; the land was so flat. There was no sight of the sun in the sky but it still wasn't quite dark. It was a beautiful place to be at that time.

Sara found her spot in old Jacob Larius' field to read the last few paragraphs of her book she had brought with her. She always brought a book and they'd always be about an adventure of sorts. This book was about a

young girl and her curiosity for the world. The young girl would leave home with her best friend and sail oceans, climb mountains and maybe even get into a little trouble and then to find their way home again so that they could tell stories of their adventures. Sara had hoped for that kind of adventure. That was probably why she would go on those walks all the time; hoping to cross paths with a great and dangerous adventure. Some folks say "be careful what you wish for . . ."

Jacob Larius saw that Sara was in his field. He was always terribly fond of Sara. He came from his cabin to greet her.

'Back again?' Jacob said as he walked from behind.

'I wish I could stay . . . I hate Helmwith Castle!' Sara closed her book and folded her arms.

'You don't hate it, really,' Jacob said. 'It's your home.'

'No . . . I want to run away! Father would never even notice I'm gone . . .'

'That's not true, little girl. Don't speak of

your father that way. I won't stand for that nonsense.'

'I'm not a *little girl* and someday . . . I'll leave and never come back!'

'Be careful what you wish for, *little woman*,' Jacob said. 'It's gettin' late, now, better head home before it gets too dark!'

### 3

The late night brought the cold along with it but Sara had not returned to Helmwith Castle. Queen Sierí Turgan and King Múrius Turgan became quite worried as she always returned before dark. Múrius immediately led a search party, which included Tólas Leigh and his two most loyal knights: Ósil Farl and Úsin Marticus, while Sierí stayed at Helmwith in case Sara showed. The snipping cold snapped in the air with the wind and sent a worrying shiver down Múrius' fatherly spine.

'Where could she be? Oh, where could she be?' was played over and over in the king's circled mind.

Tólas thought it would be good to split up and search a wider area at the same time. The king agreed. Múrius searched and searched, hoping that maybe Sara found her way home and is in her room at the very minute so he could return and give her a good talking—or sweet kisses of joy!

But still he had to keep looking.

Jacob Larius thought he would surprise a dark figure trespassing on his land in the dark shadows of the night.

*'Up to know good!'* he thought.

Jacob wasn't much of a fighter but he had courage and a sturdy stick. He jumped behind the trespasser and walloped him across the back and he screamed out. Jacob went to hit him again to get the intruder to his knees but his stick was suddenly sliced in two by a Helmwith steel sword. Jacob immediately shouted an apology for a horrible mistake. It was Ósil Farl. He then told Jacob of his search for Sara and Jacob was quick to tell him of his recent visit from Sara. Together they continued the search. It

would've been easier with the help of Jacob. Just as they were about to give up, they came to a field just off the edge of Jacob's land. It occurred to him there was an unused field on account of a sink hole seven feet deep. Carefully, they made their way through the field and there they found Sara in the bottom of the pit curled with his knees to her pale white face and shivering with the frightful cold.

Múrius could not be angry for he was too happy to see her alive. Sierí cried with joy and wouldn't let Sara go as soon as she threw her arms round her. She was safe and sound in Helmwith castle, for now . . .

At the Great Wall of Norí the watchman could no longer see a distant light. It was complete darkness—too dark to see. He requested that the way would be lit so that the lands close to the wall can be seen. The flames were lit up in a hot blaze only to reveal the watchman's worst nightmare. It was a dark army – darker than any other seen before. It was Vulga's weapon unleashed. The army was

not like any other army, they were skeletons with weapons. The watchman did everything he could sending a message to Helmwith before the Great Wall would fall. It was the first time Vulga had broken through to Túll.

#### 4

King Múrius sat with his daughter and gently spoke to her. Sara was embarrassed so she spoke little and though she wouldn't admit it she was glad to be home.

There was a knock on the door and Montius Turgan, Múrius' son, entered the room.

'Father, there's a message from Norí Wall . . .' he said with fear in his eyes and the scroll in his hand. 'I didn't read it . . .'

'Hand it to me,' Múrius asked, knowing well that Montius had read it.

The king began to read it and he stood up in a jolt. All that was written on the scroll was "*Army of the dead!*".

Múrius prepared his army for an

invasion they thought would never come. They had thought wrong. The difference with this *army of the dead* is they don't need sleep, food, water or rest; they will march and fight as long as time passes. They had to defend Helmwith for it was Túll's last hope. King Múrius sent out scouts to see how far the dead army had come, but none but a headless horseman returned as a message that they were close.

The plan was to hold up in Helmwith castle—it was their best option; hold up the defensive position long enough for help to come. And then the enemy made themselves known. They could be seen in the near distance. The people and the king of Helmwith could not believe their very eyes. It must have been some trick. It was true! An army of the dead, skeletons with no fear of death or sacrifice.

The king sat with his nervous and scared family in the hours before the attack, until he must go to the frontline of defence. That was his duty as king.

'Can I come with you when you go to the line, father?' Montius asked.

'No, I need you to protect your mother and sister.'

'But . . .'

'Please, Montius . . .' he laid his hand on Montius' shoulder and went silent.

'I'm sorry for everything, father . . .' Sara quickly came to him and hugged so tightly. Múrius felt she'd never let go.

'Sorry for what?'

'I said I hated it here but I don't, not really . . . this is all happening because of me . . .'

'You listen here, Sara, this is not your fault,' Múrius said. 'I love you with all my heart and soul. Remember that.'

'I will,' her tears fell from her rosy cheeks as she held her father with an awful grip.

And like that king Múrius left his family and joined the front with Tólas, Ósil, Úsin and many more knights of Helmwith castle, the last hope of Túll.

Helmwith was greatly outnumbered and



the skeleton army were first to attack. They sent deadly and fiery cannonballs into the air and down on the castle. Already with many casualties, Helmwith fought back but it did little damage to a dead army.

Not many were left standing to defend Helmwith. Múrius and his men were not enough. The army of the dead had broken through and killed every living thing in its path. Úsin took an arrow to the heart and he was killed instantly. Next to fall was Ósil leaving only Tólas and king Múrius to their doom. Then Múrius found his son, Montius, coming to help them defend the castle.

'What are you doing here, Montius!?' He shouted.

'What is right, father . . .'

But before anything else could be said, they were quickly overrun and they were stabbed a countless number of times. King Múrius crawled, as he bled his whole heart out, to his dead son to hold him in his arms before his own last breath. He reached and reached till his hand gently rested on

Montius' chest but he could reach no more. The king of Túll was dead.

Dead soldiers swarmed through the castle in search of survivors. It was a matter of minutes till they found the queen with her daughter. But queen Sierí Turgan acted quickly. There was an escape but only for Sara. The window was her way out but it was only few inches wide; not wide enough for Sierí. So, a rope of blankets was quickly forged and Sara was directed out of the window. They weren't at a dangerous height but a jump could not be risked.

'Run and never look back, Sara,' Sierí said while lowering the rope with Sara gripping tightly.

'But wait . . .' Sara couldn't find the right words.

## 5

That was the last time Sara saw her mother or any other member of her family at Helmwith castle or so she thought. From there

she ran without being spotted (luckily enough) as she was still quite small. She ran and ran till she reached Jacob Larius' field. He found her just as he was evacuating with quite an urgency. Halting his horse and carriage, Jacob quickly took Sara along with him.

'Don't worry now, my dear, it'll all be alright . . .' Jacob held her as he whipped his horse to send the carriage north. They were trying to leave Túll after the fall of the king to the invasion of this new and terrible enemy but they were not alone. All folk, young and old, brave and cowardly, rich and poor were evacuating to safety. A great war had just begun. Túll was the first of the realms to fall in many years since Vulgaron fell. Vulga made the first move in this war and it was a great move indeed.

When things start to fall apart for any reason whether it was an invasion from a terrible army or the overflow of the dungeons of Hell one type of person should be expected: looters or *raiders* as they were called often in the land of Dómain. They were rootless and

they were cowards and they were most certainly tremendously dangerous. With adventures comes a great amount of chaos.

With an army of the dead at an unknown distance behind them Jacob hadn't the time to think to look out for raiders. He didn't think it a problem with the speed he was traveling at anyway. At least until he came to a sudden and unexpected stop caused by rather large logs blocking the dirt road.

'Damn it!' Jacob snapped as he stopped the cart with a pull of the reins.

'What is it?' Sara called curiously from the back.

'Nothin' to worry 'bout . . . ' and he then whispered to himself, 'I hope . . . '

Jacob tried his best to move the log but it was impossibly heavy for him to lift it alone. He just about near gave up till he became startled by a voice calling from behind.

'Need a hand there, fellow?' The voice called.

Jacob froze at first with the surprise but now he became worried about the presence of

this mysterious stranger.

'What you doin' way out here by yourself?' Jacob asked.

'You look like you need a hand there, fellow,' the stranger said again, completely ignoring Jacob's question.

'I can't get passed this log,' Jacob didn't know what else to do than to play along. He had to distract this strange man from the cart and especially Sara inside the cart.

'Well, fellow, it looks mighty heavy,' the stranger said. 'You may have to walk from here on.'

'No thank you, I think we'll turn back.'

'We? Not many people I know count their horse as a "*we*".'

'Oh yeah . . . I do that sometimes . . .'

Jacob tried to fix his slip of the tongue.

'Be careful out there,' the stranger said. 'Haven't you heard, there's an invasion?'

'Thank you, I'll be careful,' Jacob started to walk back to his cart. 'You better get movin' yourself too, bein' on your own out here.'

'Oh, I never said I was alone.'

Jacob went still for a moment as he was in mid-climbing position onto the cart. He slowly turned his head to see the stranger's cynical grin grow and grow and shapes of three or more figures moved in the background in amongst some trees. It was what Jacob had feared; it was a trap. The stranger forced Jacob to the ground and kicked him a few times all the while cheering to his companions. The original stranger which seemed to act like their leader held Jacob by the scruff and whispered nothing but threats and curses and also something about gold.

'I've nothin' of value here . . .'

'Don't you know who I am!?' The stranger shouted as if it meant something important. 'I am the dangerous, the wild, the feared, the adventurous Jon Millant and these are my trusted men!'

'I've never heard of you . . .'

 Jacob said but was regretful after the kicking he got for it.

'You'll remember me now, won't you,

fellow!?' Millant said and he walked round Jacob as if stalking his prey.

Jacob may have been old but he was smart, very smart. He met quite a lot of people in his lifetime and he became an exceptional judge of character and listener. Jacob had realised that this so-called Jon Millant may beat him but he would not kill him as he wanted fame and therefore Jacob was needed alive to tell the terrifying story of how he came across Jon Millant so an idea started to grow.

'I heard you once killed a wild boar with your bare hands,' Jacob said as Millant started to walk to the cart but he turned with curiosity.

'I thought you said you never heard of me . . .'

'Yes, I did say that, but I was so scared,' Jacob said. 'You understand?'

'Yes, fellow, I understand and the story you heard of me is not true for it was *two* wild boars!'

Jacob tried his best to fight the laughs at

Millant's theatrical performance but hid it well disguising it as pain.

'That's quite amazing and brave of you but the most fantastic stories about you are the ones where you robbed from the rich to give to the poor and saved a whole village from those villainous raiders . . .' Jacob said. 'They're the stories folk tell of you most.'

Millant looked confused for a moment and his men stood in wonderment. But fame was fame to Millant.

'That's right! I did all those things!'

'Why are you beatin' me then, Mister Millant?'

'I . . . I . . . I thought you were someone else, who are you?'

'I'm Jacob Larius.'

'Oh! Not who I had thought, of course!'

'Could you do me a favour and help me move this log?'

'Certainly, my fellow!'

And so, the logs were moved by who had originally placed them there all because of the intelligence of Jacob Larius and the



stupidity of those raiders.

Further up the road Jacob explained to Sara what had happened and that she must be careful in this world for many bad people won't be as simple-minded as Jon Millant. It was a hasty lesson as there was no time to lose. Jacob had decided the best way to leave Túll was not to Telús by road but to Tyminus over the river Mór.

Fires lit up the horizon giving the sky an orange glow. The invasion was never-ending. Jacob had an idea where they had to go but the first thing to do was to get out of Túll safely.

## 6

They eventually came to a town east of Helmwith called Togon. Togon was once a town filled with much hope and was prosperous in many ways. The local markets were busy with success and the taverns were full to the brim. But now it was very near to abandoned and robbed of its riches. It was a

barren town with nothing but emptiness.

Jacob moved cautiously on. There was nothing for them there. And from the back of the cart Sara threw her book about the girl going on adventures and it landed in the dry dirt in the road quite possibly never to be read again. Sara didn't want this adventure; she wanted her family back.

Sara came to the front of the cart to sit with Jacob. Jacob didn't talk much but Sara had many, many questions as any other twelve-year-old would. Out of the many questions one of them was, 'Where are we going?'

'We are goin' to a town called Lóran in Tyminus. I have a bit of land there we can use to hide out till I think it's safe to go to Telús and hopefully find a familiar face.'

'Who's the familiar face in Telús?'

'Not yet sure, Sara, but I think it's worth a look. It's a place called Fallith and it was a secret fallback point for your family made by your father.'

'How do you know about this secret?'

'Your father trusts me . . . trusted me.'

'No one will be in Fallith for me . . .'

'Don't give up on hope, Sara, that'll be the last thing you do.'

7

For the next few miles Sara fell asleep in the back and that was when Jacob spotted a woman in a frightful and distressing manner. She waved her hands vigorously into the air for Jacob to stop and like the good man he was, he did. Her panic was soon no longer a mystery when a gang of raiders (which were taking full advantage of the invasion) surround the cart. The woman started to scream but two of the raiders grabbed her away, kicking and shouting.

'This the kind of men you are?' Jacob hounded.

'And what kind of man are you?' One of the raiders said as he came closer to Jacob. 'What have you in the cart?'

'You leave that woman with us and let us

go . . . '

'Why?'

'Because it's the right thing to do!'

The raiders burst out with laughter. Jacob should've known better than to try and dig out an ounce of morals from these raiders. They were more than raiders; they were rapists and murderers!

The woman's screams had suddenly stopped which Jacob knew for sure not to be a good thing. The lead raider smiled with pleasure.

'What is your name?' The raider asked.

'Jacob.'

'You can call me Sir!' The raider cheered and his friends laughed out menacingly.

Jacob was terrified. This wasn't like the last time with Millant. These were pure evil, not stupid enough to fool.

'We're goin' to take your cart.'

'You can't have it!'

'Like we couldn't have that woman!? You know what, I'm gonna take a look at what you got back here!'

'No, you won't!' Jacob shouted but he was held back by the other raiders.

'What did I tell you about callin' me Sir!?' He then came to the back of the cart and pulled open the drape only to take an arrow directly through the forehead. Everyone stood still for a moment even "Sir" until he collapsed to the ground with blood seeping from his head. Sara jumped out of the cart with a crossbow she had found in one of Jacob's chests.

'It's a girl!' One of the raiders yelled out with surprise. Their mighty leader was killed by a twelve-year-old girl. And she didn't stop there. Again, she fired another arrow right passed Jacob's head and into the raider holding him back.

'Woah! Little girl, no need for this!' Another raider yelled as he tripped back. The rest ran in all directions along with their dignity. This last raider was one of the two that had raped and killed that woman asking for help. But Jacob took the crossbow from Sara.

'You're too good with that,' he said as he held the crossbow away from Sara.

'Thank you, mister . . .' the raider said.

'Why are you thanking me?' Jacob held up the crossbow and pointed to the man's manhood, and took it from him. The rapist shrieked and cried and slowly died. Without another word, Jacob and Sara got back into the cart and left that wretched place.

The way out of that wretched place was a bridge over the river Mór. Jacob or Sara had absolutely no idea what to expect as there were only three bridges from Túll to Tyminus, the bridge of Dórran (furthest east just before the river became wider), the bridge of Yúl (north of a town called Lókín), and the bridge of Rammán, (north of Són and the furthest west). and war had just begun. There was no turning back. Jacob's prayers to all of the seven kings were not answered when they reached the first bridge, the bridge of Dórran. It was completely inaccessible after it was destroyed under king's orders (that king being King Bul Gráll of Tyminus). The

shattering sight shook Jacob's heart and left him feeling cornered and hopeless. King Bul Gráll would rather abandon the people of Túll than come to their aid.

'Where will we go now?' Sara wondered out loud.

Jacob searched his surroundings and found other refugees wandering, wondering where to go. *War is always brutal; war is always at home; someone's home.* And this time it was their homes but they had nowhere to run to. Tyminus was unwelcoming with fear and Telús was a risk. There was no turning back. They all kept going.

'Maybe the next bridge . . .' Jacob said to Sara, trying to give her hope. But he doubted it sincerely and Sara was no fool. She was a very bright young girl but she thought it would be better if Jacob thought that she wasn't scared. O but she was terrified. Not one girl, boy, woman or man was not terrified.

The numbers of refugees grew significantly as they went on. None of them seemed dangerous like any raider but Jacob

still kept his distance. He couldn't risk Sara being spotted. She was the daughter of the fallen king of Túll.

As the night thickened, the glow from the distant but nearing war brightened and they grew weary. They could almost hear the tormented screams from afar and they could only hope that it was not a foretelling of their fate. For many it was.

Many hopes were crushed when the refugees arrived at the destruction of the bridge of Yúl. This time they had witnessed the sabotage in process. The knights of Tyminus were ordered to destroy the bridges before any refugee could get through. In King Bul Gráll's mind it made complete sense. He suspected that the enemy would use this to their advantage and attack Tyminus disguised as refugees so he foolishly blocked all entries into *his* country.

Many refugees tried to cross the river but those who didn't drown and made it across were thrown back in by the guards on the other side. Those who didn't attempt to



cross headed for the last bridge, their last chance of survival.

The bridge of Rammán was their only hope. But as they moved something stirred from behind. Jacob searched but noticed nothing. At first, he thought it was a scream but no one else seemed to hear it. Then it happened again and this time others reacted to it. Jacob looked closely and people started to run. There was a battalion of skeleton soldiers. They had finally caught up on them. Jacob whipped his horse and the cart sped up. Many other refugees tried to board the cart causing it to flip to its side. Jacob quickly lifted himself and searched for Sara. She took his hand and they started to run. The enemy were right behind them slaughtering all they could. Whatever these creatures were, before they became soldiers in the army of the dead, there was not an ounce of it then. They showed no remorse, no shame in the killings – the exterminations – of all those innocent people. The screams would haunt Sara's dreams and thoughts for the rest of her life.

Sara's hand sweated as she gripped Jacob's hand so tightly – it even hurt Jacob a little – as it was so terrifying. It was like something from a nightmare. Running and running but feeling like they were getting nowhere. The closer they got to the bridge, the further they felt.

A man that was fleeing alongside them then fell to his death after being struck in the back by an arrow. It was all happening so fast but they were almost there.

But as they finally reached the bridge there was something wrong. Other people who had already made it were gathered in a crowd, still not yet crossed. Why haven't they crossed yet? They were being blocked off by soldiers of Tyminus. The crowd shouted and pleaded but they wouldn't clear the way.

They didn't have much time to make a decision. Jacob had to get Sara to safety. He moved to the front of the crowd and started to tear down the barrier piece by piece. Others joined in. Then the soldiers of Tyminus started to retaliate. It was a complete disaster! The

refugees were being killed by both sides; trapped like rats, treated like rats.

Jacob managed to break from the crowd and get back to Sara. He quickly took her hand and started to move further up river. Most refugees scattered from the bridge for those who stayed were doomed, either from the dead army or a soldier of Tyminus following king's orders.

Further up the river as the screams started to fade, somewhat, Jacob and Sara found something. It was a small row-boat.

"Thank the seven kings!" Jacob whispered with a hope.

Into the boat they leaped and Jacob grabbed a single oar and brought them across the river. Sara dared not look back at was once her home country. Túll was engulfed by darkness – Vulga's darkness.

Vulga's dead army tried not to cross the bridges into Tyminus, nor did they try to enter Telús. They held their position in Túll for now. Vulga was being careful; taking one thing at a time.

Jacob had finally taken Sara out of Túll but they weren't safe just yet. They were now refugees in a country where it was against the King's law to be a refugee at that time. Jacob had to be extra careful now that they had an unexpected enemy: the king of Tyminus.

Fires still burned and blazed over the border in Túll but the worst was behind them . . .

They had to find somewhere to sleep for the night. It was cold and damp – which describes most days in Tyminus throughout the year. The land of Tyminus was mainly bogs, water-logged fields and it was riddled with rivers. The folk of the land weren't too hospitable with their strong beliefs in many folklore and legends and with much scare-mongering from King Bul Gráll they were a fearful bunch.

It was going to be difficult to find a place to stay, no doubt. But they had no choice for it was certain to be a long journey.

They may have been in luck, finally, when they came across an abandoned shed

near the River Dun. Jacob made sure it was vacant. There was no one there and looked as though there hadn't been for a long time. The wood had been rotting for some time, whatever valuables there once was had been looted long ago, and the bog smell had seeped into the walls. It was the best they could find.

Sleep came surprisingly easy that night – they were exhausted, after all. Although, Sara kept jumping in and out of a reoccurring nightmare of the day that changed her life. In her nightmare her mother would be begging for help but Sara could only watch and do nothing; feeling helpless and useless.

Unfortunately, the rising of the sun did not bring much hope as it arose with darkness. Jacob was awakened by the sound of Sara's jolting whispers of fear.

'Someone's coming!' She grabbed Jacob's arm to bring him from his sleep.

Jacob jumped to his feet but a voice hollered from outside.

'Trespassers! Unlawful migrants!' The voice yelled. 'You bein' here gives me right to

kill by law of King Bul Gráll. You're on my land ...'

Jacob tried to think but it was all happening too fast; he had literally just woken up. Time ceased to exist and all that mattered was that moment. There was no thought about the past or fret about the future – it was primal, it was survival. That was when Sara made her move. Jacob didn't even notice her leave. As he looked out the window at the man who continued to yell his threats, holding a pitchfork, an arrow was fired into the man's neck. Jacob was frightened at first but suddenly relieved. He didn't wonder who shot the arrow. He knew straight away that it was Sara. Killing had become so much easier for her. The young would find it easier to kill as they have less understanding than older folk, which is why many dark rulers have used children as soldiers. Not only can they kill with greater ease but their opponents would freeze at the sight of a child. Jacob began to worry for Sara's soul from that moment.

They scavenged what they needed from the man and took his horse (no use in the hands of a dead man) and made their way north.

Jacob watched Sara closer and could see rage. That rage had grown from pain and into anger.

It was days to weeks by the time they reached a town known as Donluth which was surrounded by large boglands which certainly slowed them down. But what grabbed their attention as they approached Donluth was the horrible and gruesome treatment (or to be more precise: punishment) of other refugees from Túll that had managed to escape the terror of Vulga's dead army only to be crucified by the soldiers of Tyminus. They were nailed onto ten-foot-tall x-shaped crucifixes. They were on display for all to see but could not be reached as they were far enough into the bog, but it could still be seen that some of them were still breathing; left to bleed to their doom for nothing they had done – only the fear mongered by the cowardly

king of Tyminus.

Jacob could not shield Sara from the cruelty of this world if he tried. Though he thought to shield her would only make her unprepared. Sara was no longer a child for that ship had sailed long ago.

They couldn't afford to draw attention to themselves. But Sara muttered the words that Jacob had been expecting for a while now.

'I'm hungry . . .'

Jacob was also starving and they were getting weaker and weaker by the minute. They had no choice in the matter. So, Jacob conducted a plan, which was to hide Sara somewhere safe while he went into the town, hopefully looking like a visitor rather than an illegal immigrant.

Sara was a little reluctant on staying behind but she was too weak to argue. Jacob took a deep breath and made his cautious way to the town. As he entered the town over a small bridge a hooded rider watched from afar. Jacob was quick to find the local food store. It was called Jeremiah's and like the rest



of the town it was made of dark oak and seemed to be near rotting from the moisture in the bog air. And a sign displayed "ONLY NORMAL FOLK WELCOME!" which meant no magic folk, no tree folk, no fortune tellers, no trinket sellers, no mysterious folk of any kind. It wasn't the best of towns for Jacob and Sara to end up in which was why Jacob hadn't planned on staying. He had to be fast.

As he opened the door into the store, the owner, whose name hung above outside, stared directly to Jacob and followed him with his eyes as he moved like an eerie painting.

'Welcome, stranger,' Jerimiah said to Jacob.

Jacob just smiled and nodded in his direction, which displeased the owner.

'Where do you come from?' Jerimiah quizzed him. 'Travel far?'

'No, not far . . .'

'Where have you come from?' Jerimiah asked again. 'You look like you've travelled a great distance.'

'Just from a small village south of here

called Shirville, you know it?'

'Yes, I know of it, but your accent seems strange but familiar . . .'

'Yes, my grandparents were from Túll but I was born here in Tyminus, but after my parents died, I was raised by my grandparents which explains the accent . . . but they came to raise me here and have lived in Shirville ever since . . .'

Jacob lied with half-truth.

'Túll? How do your grandparents feel about all that is happening there now?'

'As you can see, I am quite old now, my grandparents are long buried.'

'I'm sorry,' Jerimiah grew satisfied with Jacob's answers. 'I apologise for all the questions; you understand with everything that is going on; can't risk meeting a migrant from Túll!'

'Yes, I understand,' Jacob bit his lip. 'Anyway, I don't have much time, may I gather some food and water?'

'Yes, of course!'

Jacob placed two breads and a pouch of

water in front of Jerimiah and then gave him the appropriate number of coins.

The owner was pleased and had no more questions for Jacob so he let him leave with his food and water without any trouble. Jacob was relieved. He had thought that things would get better once they got out of Túll, but that was not the case at all.

With a sack full of food, Jacob returned to where he had left Sara but she was gone! He called out for her but there was no answer from her. He was answered by someone else. It was a man's voice – the hooded rider.

'You took a risk leaving her alone,' the hooded man mumbled. 'I've been on your trail since Helmwith.'

'Who are you and what have you done with Sara!?' Jacob shouted.

'Be calm, it is only me . . .' he took down his hood to reveal his face. It was Tólas Leigh, King Múrius Turgan's right-hand-man. Jacob was amazed and thankful to see a familiar face.

'I'm glad to see someone else made it

out!' Jacob said.

'I wasn't the only one . . .' Tólas said. 'I managed to get the Queen out on time. I sent her to Telús with a few remaining guards. But I promised her I would find Sara for her and return with her.'

'Is she in Fallith?' Jacob asked.

'Should be by the time we get there.'

'She will be glad to hear that her mother is alive.'

'She's resting now but I think we should wake her to have some of that food you got there,' Tólas said pointing at the bag.

Sara began to get her strength back after much needed food and water. She was happy to see Tólas but it also made her sad as he reminded her of her family. But when Tólas told Sara that her mother was still alive she almost dropped with disbelief and hope.

'Where is she?' Sara repeated again and again.

'She's in a town known as Fallith, in Telús,' Tólas answered. 'That's where we're heading, now.'

'I told you someone would be there, didn't I?' Jacob cheered. 'Thank the seven it's your mother!'

'I may have failed King Turgan, but I will not fail the Queen!' Tólas said. 'We must leave as soon as we can. It's a long journey ahead of us.'

It was a long journey. Jacob and Sara had come a long way together already but there was so much more to come; miles and miles, horizons to horizons. And now Tólas was with them which made them both very happy, indeed. He was a great fighter and a man of his word; he would do everything he could to get Sara to Fallith. They would not be safe until they crossed the border into Telús, which happened to be the River Mór.

## 8

Jacob told Tólas of his land in Lóran near the lake just a little north, but it was of no concern to them now that they were certain of those in Fallith. There would be no major

stops along the way. That didn't bother Jacob; getting Sara to her mother was more important.

They crossed swamps, bogs, lakes, small villages and old ruins until they came to a settlement known as Loth. They were met by a strange man hunched with a hump and his face half covered up. He invited them to his home and warned them not to enter Loth for there were many of the king's men there, hunting for immigrants. They decided to trust the stranger but Tólas held the hilt of his sword tightly.

His home was small and lonesome – covered in moss, almost making it invisible to the passer-by. The door was shut by the stranger.

'So, this must be Princess Sara?' The strange man said as he faced the door. His figure began to change into something else or somebody else.

Tólas threw out his sword and shouted, 'Wizard!' but he was knocked to his feet by the stranger.

'Calm yourself!' The stranger shouted. 'I am no foe!'

'Who are you then?' Sara asked. 'And how do you know my name?'

'I've been waiting for you for a long time. My name is Merthill.'

'What do you mean you've been waiting?' Sara wondered out loud.

'Your friend there is right about me being a Wizard,' Merthill said. 'But we are not all like what you were taught.'

'How can we know for sure?' Tólas asked. 'This could all be trickery!'

'It could be a trick, but what would I gain from that? I am merely trying to help you.'

'Have either of you heard of The Good Witch of Bardor?'

'Yes . . .' Sara said. 'I read about her; is she real?'

'Oh, she's real,' Merthill said. 'She is my grandchild.'

'What are you doing here, then?' Tólas questioned.

'For Sara, of course.'

'You lay one hand on her and I will cut you down!' Tólas held his teeth together, only moving his lips to talk.

'You misunderstand me . . . I am here to help. I know how important Sara is – even more than you may think. She is not just a princess, she is the next step to ending Vulga's darkness once and for all,' Merthill said.

'How do you know that?' Sara asked with all her curiosity.

'Many years ago, I was told of someone with great importance in putting an end to Vulga's curse and that I must guide them in their journey.'

'That's Sara you were told of?' Jacob asked.

'I believe so.'

'So, what do you want us to do?' Tólas wondered.

'Don't go to Fallith, change your plan and go to Lóran . . .'

'What!? No!' Tólas snapped. 'We are taking Sara to her mother, the Queen.'



'Trust me . . .' A look of dread came through Merthill's desperate eyes. 'That is not a good idea.'

'Trust you?' Tólas said. 'Why should we trust you?'

'I think we should let Sara decide,' Jacob said.

They agreed with a silent turn of their heads toward Sara and she said, 'I want to go to Fallith to see my mother . . .'

Merthill closed his eyes with defeat but he could not change what was supposed to be. Sara was going to Fallith whether he liked it or not.

As they were about to try for some rest Jacob came to Merthill.

'How did you know about Lóran?' He asked Merthill with a whisper, and he just grinned a little and turned his head to fall into a sudden and deep sleep. He was an odd character, Merthill.

Tólas didn't sleep that night as he stood guard to protect Sara. He couldn't trust Merthill, a magic folk, just yet, especially after

all the stories he had heard of that kind of folk.

Merthill woke before the dawn and Tólas watched as he sat in the same spot he sat in last night.

'Wake everyone up now,' Merthill said to Tólas. 'We must leave now.'

'Why leave now?' Tólas asked but he may just have been questioning Merthill's decision because of who he was.

'You want to stay here?' Merthill asked. 'Be my guest.'

'I go where Sara goes.'

As they wake and continue their journey to Fallith the sky is dark purple as the sun begins to rise. Fumes from the strange landscape of Tyminus adds a mix of colours to the view from yellow to red and blue to grey.

They knew they were getting closer once they reached the winding Lír which is a small river that disconnects from the larger river Mór and the Mór is what they must cross to get into Telús.

They walked and walked even though

their feet hurt; they had been sore for a long time now.

'Can we rest?' Jacob asked as his old body couldn't cope with any more pain. 'Just for a moment?'

'Take a moment to catch your breath,' Tólas ordered. 'So, Merthill, who was it again that told you about Sara?'

'*You* wouldn't believe me if I told you.'

'So, tell Sara then,' Tólas suggested and Sara was quite interested.

'Very well, then,' Merthill said. 'I was told by a visitor from the other side.'

'You've got to be kidding me!' Tólas exclaimed as he paced. 'So, you're here because, really, you had too much moonshine! That's a totally different kind of spirit.'

'I was visited by my wife . . .'

Tólas went silent.

'Did your wife die?' Sara asked.

'Yes, tragic circumstances, but she learned something quite important and she was powerful enough to return to me and inform me of my duties after giving me back

my youth.'

'Youth, you look about Forty?' Tólas said as he scanned Merthill.

'Yes, believe it or not, I was a lot older and now I'm at my prime once again.'

'Your wife told you everything about me?' Sara was intrigued.

'Well, only what I needed to know and a few extra details.'

It would soon be safe once they crossed over the border, which was the river Mór, and into Telús. It was much easier to cross than it was to get into Tyminus the first time but they had done it. Over the bridge and into the land of Telús. The journey they had taken from there was much more peaceful. They had no fears of getting crucified under king's orders. The king of Telús at this time wasn't as cruel or paranoid. They passed the south of The Great Hall of The Gathering and it lived up to its expectations for Sara after all those stories she was told about it. It was magnificent and mighty with great white, round pillars at its entrance. But unfortunately, they would not

stop to look; they were so near to Fallith now.

After the Great Hall there were many beautiful green fields and colourful meadows to pass. It was truly a glorious sight; Tyminus was bleak in comparison.

Finally, they came to a sign indicating their arrival to Fallith. It started to get dark by the time they came to the village. There weren't many people around; just the odd one or two that watched from a distance. They were then greeted by a lady with a rather forced smile (a smile that looked as though it hurt).

'Welcome to Fallith!' She cheered. 'Call me Dorothy. Want a bed to sleep in? The Fall Inn is just the place to be!'

'No, leave us be,' Tólas held his hand up as if to tell the woman not to come closer.

'You don't know what you're missing!' Dorothy said with a grin that could make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up.

Tólas knew where he was going and it definitely wasn't to The Fall Inn. There were heading to a cottage on the edge of the village

that had been owned by King Múrius Turgan for a place to hide if things went bad. Things did go bad. Sara couldn't wait to see her mother. The excitement gave her a butterfly feeling in her stomach, but she also felt grief for the loss of her father and brother. She just wanted to be with her mother now but time went slow as they approached the cottage. Merthill seemed on edge which was strange as they were somewhere safe. It was a lot safer than Tyminus, or so they thought . . .

There was a plaque outside the cottage that displayed the words, "Cosy Cottage". It looked quite cosy, indeed – there were flowers in the garden that gave it all sorts of colours, there were wooden window shutters with finely carved emblems in the centre.

Suddenly, Queen Sierí Turgan came out from the cottage but said nothing as she stared at Sara. Sara ran as fast as she could into her mother's arms. She never held her mother so tightly before.

'I thought you were gone,' Sara said.

'I'm right here, dear,' Sierí said as she

looked down on Sara with a look of desire or some sorts. Once she noticed the presence of the others she stood back from Sara and invited everyone in. 'You must've come a long way,' she said.

While everyone went into the cottage Merthill turned away and searched the area.

'Are you not coming?' Sierí asked him.

'I'm just . . . going for a stroll.'

Something wasn't right and Merthill knew it. There was a reason Merthill didn't want to come to Fallith. There was something very dangerous there.

He walked through the village and couldn't help but feel being watched by many eyes. Then a whispering voice called to Merthill from an alley. He went to investigate with his staff at the ready. But when he stood into the dark alley his foot hit a red puddle of blood. There was a body and it was as pale as the white clouds as if the blood had been drained from him. Merthill did not know who the dead man was but someone really wanted to make sure no one ever got the chance to

know him. Merthill rushed back to the Cosy Cottage to warn everyone else of the unknown danger.

Sara was happy to see her mother but she couldn't help but notice there was something different about her. The way she walked and talked was not her usual. It was still in the time of night but Sara couldn't sleep like Tólas or Jacob. But she also noticed that Sierí was awake, too. She looked as if she was waiting for something or someone. Sara thought, again, there was something different about her mother.

Sierí could see Sara wasn't sleeping and she looked to get impatient as she fidgeted and twitched in her seat.

'Why don't you sleep?' Sierí said with an emotionless tone.

'I just can't . . .' Sara sat up from her self-made bed.

'You need to sleep.'

Sierí looked as if she was deeply frustrated and was bottling a rage that could soon blow.



'What's wrong, mother?'

'You're what's wrong!' Sierí growled as she stood up from her seat aggressively. 'You don't sleep; I will have to make you sleep!'

Then the door swung open and Merthill came through with his staff and created a light so bright and it frightened Sierí from the room and disappeared from the Cosy Cottage.

Tólas and Jacob were startled awake to see Merthill with his staff and Sara crying. Tólas assumed that Merthill had something to do with it.

'What have you done!?' Tólas held up his sword to Merthill.

'I have done nothing but protect Sara!' Merthill shouted. 'Her mother is not who you think . . .'

'Do you think I'm a fool!?'

'Tólas!' Sara called out. 'Merthill is right . . . that wasn't my mother . . .'

Tólas was stunned. He lowered his sword and became silent for a moment until he said, 'Then who was it?'

'A vampire,' Merthill whispered a fearful

whisper.

'But how!?' Tólas questioned with disbelief.

'My mother is really gone . . .' Sara said, catching everyone's attention as they seemed to forget her in the excitement. Jacob quickly came to her comfort.

'What must we do, Merthill?' Jacob asked as he held Sara close.

'First we must lift this vampire's curse from this village; to do anything else without doing that would be pointless.

'Sara's mother wasn't feral so she had been turned by no ordinary vampire; she had been turned by a host!' Merthill announced with accuracy and knowledge.

All vampires could only come out when the sun was down and feral vampires are sneaky and vile creatures with pale blue skin and flashing red eyes that help them see in the night and their hair is near to gone with single strands stretching from the top of their heads. These feral vampires come from the bite of those who were only infected by a host

vampire. But the host vampire is born a vampire and the ones that they bite can blend in with a crowd of normal folk as they look human and talk like a human but they still can't live under sunlight. They can be calmer than the feral vampires but they can be much more dangerous as they plan and plot their way to the blood of their next victim.

It would be no use for them to simply run; the host vampire would find them and Sara was targeted by who was once her mother. They must hunt for the host and cut it down and clean Fallith of its disease.

They needed help. Their plan was to recruit any volunteers in Fallith in the morning out in the daylight so that they would know they were not dealing with a foe. But as the sun rose, the town folk of Fallith did not. Merthill, Tólas, Jacob and Sara stood in the centre of Fallith alone. Merthill called loudly but there was no answer. But it wasn't that people were afraid – it was that there were no people at all. All the people of Fallith had been taken by this dark creature.

'We are alone in this one,' Merthill said as he turned to the others.

There was only one thing to do. As it was daytime, the vampires would be trapped indoors so Merthill lifted his staff and created his great fiery trick to burn all the buildings down. The fire roared as it swirled from building to building. The screaming screeches from the vampires trapped inside bellowed through the town as they echoed in their ears. Most vampires perished in the burning fires and some turned to dust as they tried to escape. But then something happened that Merthill did not expect. The black smoke arose high to the clouds and covered the shining sun. Fallith was under darkness.

The host came forward from the shadows and under the protection of the black smoke clouds from the sun.

Hosts are rare and there is no known number of them in existence; but there are ones that have become legends of their own. There was one host named Brill Token that used to lure his victims with faith or desires.

He'd have people follow him as he claimed to have a connection with the one true God; that his religion was the real one and that the Seven were only fool's stories. Brill then claimed to be that one true God and many followed him only to perish under his trickery. There are many different beliefs and religions but Brill's was not like any other as its only followers became vampires.

But the host that appeared to Merthill, Sara, Tólas and Jacob was not Brill Token. This host was unknown to either of them.

'What do they call you?' Merthill called to the host.

'I am Val Dragól,' he hissed showing his pin-pointed fangs. 'You've killed many of my children!'

'They're an abomination and so are you!' Tólas shouted, ready to charge.

More vampires stood behind Val Dragól including Sierí which was left slightly charred from the fires.

They charged at Sara and her protectors and all they could do was defend themselves;

there was no running. Merthill shot raging fire, Tólas used his sword, Jacob had a strong dagger given to him by Tólas, Sara had that crossbow she had used earlier. But was that enough?

Jacob was confronted by Sierí and she looked the least impressed.

'You took Sara from me!' she hissed. 'She's mine!'

Sierí threw herself at Jacob and he stuck his dagger into her gut. Sierí just stood back and yanked it from herself without hesitation like she was scratching an itch. She was completely unharmed and she then came for Jacob. There was a struggle with the sharp edge of the dagger for a moment and Jacob screamed out. An arrow suddenly bolted into Sierí's forehead and it sent her back. It was Sara and she cried out with anger and grief as she, again, shot another arrow to protect Jacob (who was then the closest person left to family she had). Sierí stood back up and stared at Sara with disbelief; an arrow sticking out from her head. There was a pause of time in

that moment. It was as though everyone around them stopped fighting to watch and Sara aimed her crossbow and sent her arrow into Sierí's heart and freed her soul of the vampire's curse.

Sara dropped the crossbow and fell to her knees on the dirt. Her tears turned the dust below her to a darker shade of brown and she brought her forlorn hands to her sorrowful eyes.

Val Dragól saw this from a distance and as he was about to take his chance in claiming Sara's soul he was cut off by the sunlight. He screeched and bellowed and vowed to get revenge on each and every one of them, even if it takes an eternity. Val disappeared into the shadows as the sun finally found its way through the smoke. Merthill saw this as a chance to escape and so he urged the others to go to Lake Lóran.

Sara wouldn't leave her mother's side until Jacob convinced Merthill that they should give her a proper burial. Even though Merthill thought it was important to get

moving as soon as possible, he knew it was the right thing to do for Sara. She had to bury her.

They brought Sierí's corpse away from Fallith and the town's massacre. The smoke from the town was on the line of the horizon when they finally decided to bury Sierí. Few words were said by Merthill as they filled the grave; Sara stayed silent, unable to cry anymore. She just wanted it to end. They all did. But there was more to their journey. They must find their way to Lake Lóran. That was there best and last hope of survival. They would only have to make the journey back. This time, the Great Hall didn't seem so appealing to Sara, she barely even reacted to it as it towered over, casting its shadow upon them all like a cloud passing by.

'Can we rest here?' Jacob asked, 'Only for a while . . .' his breath seemed to shake with exhaustion.

'We should really keep moving,' Tólas rolled his eyes.

'I only need . . . a moment . . .'



collapsed to the ground, clutching the ruin of a pillar from the Great Hall. Sara rushed to his aid and she noticed he seemed to be holding something close to his body as if it was an item of great sentiment. But there was no object of the sorts. Jacob was holding a deep wound under his rib cage, just to the side. He had tried his best to stop the bleeding but he had already lost so much.

'I didn't want to worry you,' Jacob said to Sara as he sat against the ruin.

'We have to help him!' She called out to the others. 'Merthill! Please!'

'I will do all I can, my dear,' Merthill said but Jacob could see in his eyes that there was nothing anyone could do, not even Merthill.

'Listen, Sara, don't you worry, it don't even hurt anymore.'

'You're all I have . . .' Sara found here tears again.

'And you'll always have me, remember.'

'We shall make you as comfortable as possible,' Tólas said honourably.

'But you can make it!' Sara cried.

'This is as far as my story goes, Sara,' he said. 'At least I get to go peacefully, by your side.'

'But I don't want to lose you . . .'

'Come 'ere,' Jacob gestured his hands towards Sara. All he could do was hug her tight. Words wouldn't make this any easier.

Now they waited by Jacob's side as his life clock ticked by.

'Strange,' Jacob said as he glanced up at the Great Hall. 'Why doesn't anyone come here anymore. When I was small, I heard stories there were once valiant soldiers standing guard and the kings of each kingdom met here regularly . . .'

'Things aren't like they used to be,' Tólas said.

'I hope things get like that again,' Jacob said. 'It would be a shame to leave such a building to ruin . . .'

'Things will change,' Merthill said.

'Take care of each other,' Jacob said. 'Don't go gettin' into trouble.'

And Jacob's burial was a respectful and

memorable one. The Great Hall became his tomb which many have come to know. Jacob will be remembered for his bravery and his loyalty and his love for Sara. That never dies.

Crossing the River Mór again was bound to be tricky. Tyminus was quite hostile during their last visit. But this time it was a ghost town. The bog-filled land seemed more eerie than normal. But they had to keep moving for in this land of horror was their place of tranquil, Lake Lóran. Lóran wasn't far and luckily the journey was quiet. Folk were either hiding, running, or dead after the fleeing of Túll's people. In fact, the king of Tyminus, Bul Gráll, was assassinated by his own guard. The knights of Tyminus were tired of his insane orders and his cowardly ways. Strangely enough, Bul's own family were in on the assassination. Bul was as terrible a father and husband as he was a king. Bul's son, Lyón, became the new king of Tyminus and the laws were changed for the better. He wanted to be everything his father wasn't. He wanted to be a great leader. But Vulga's vile army weren't

far and they would not stop till their invasion was successful.

The tranquillity of Lake Lóran was a relief. Jacob's shack was in a good condition and they were well hidden in case the invasion came further north from Túll. Merthill's job was done so it was time for him to go. But both Sara and Tólas were unhappy with that.

'There is more I must do,' Merthill said.

'So, you leave just like that?' Sara questioned.

'I must leave but I will be back. Tólas will watch over you from now.'

'I don't know the first thing about raising a child . . .' Tólas said.

'I'm no child,' she snapped.

'Good luck, my friends,' Merthill smiled.

Merthill had made up his mind and they soon realised there was no changing it. He was a man of mystery for sure. They said their goodbyes but had hoped it wouldn't be long till they see each other once more. As Merthill went on his way, Sara went into the shack.

She opened the door and was frightened to see a boy about her age. He bumped into her and she took out a dagger, holding it to his throat. The boy was terrified. Tólas came rushing over.

'Stop! Stop!' he yelled. 'He's only a child!'

She let him go and the boy leaped away.

'Who are you people!?' the boy shouted.

'Why you tryin' to kill me?'

'Who are you, boy?' Tólas asked.

'I'm Jon Rook, I work for Jacob Larius . . .'

'We're very sorry, Jon, Sara didn't mean to scare you.'

'I wasn't scared . . .'

Sara laughed through her nose.

'We're friends of Jacob, he said we can stay here,' Tólas said.

'Well, I'll wait till he comes back . . .'

'He's dead,' Sara said.

'What?'

'I said he's dead.'

'I know, I just . . . how?'

'Getting me here,' Sara said.

'You can stay, then, I guess.'

'We weren't asking you,' Sara said as she walked into one of the rooms.

'Why is she like that?' Jon asked Tólas.

'It's been a long journey for her,' he replied. 'Just give her time.'

And there would be much time for them to get to know each other as they stayed at Lake Lóran for at least two years. Lake Lóran was the safest place for them to be even when the dead army eventually did come up north to invade further. Lake Lóran was so well hidden that the war outside only came to them in distant noises and fires. There was nowhere safer to be in all of Dómain.

## *King of Septus*

### 1

Septus was one of the strongest realms of Dómain especially in its defence against invasions with a surrounding mountain shielding it from the evils of the world. The king of Septus, Jordicus Cullen, was old, soon to leave his throne to his son Judocus. So as Jordicus became senile with age, Judocus took control and charge of the defence against the great invasion of the dead army even though he had not been sworn to the throne yet and was still quite young at only eighteen years old. By his side was his good friend and guard, Rían Ó Cuinn.

The invasion of the army of the dead had broken through into Tyminus and many lives had been taken by the darkness. Septus had grouped with Telús and what was left of Tyminus to defeat the army of the dead and send them back to the pits of Hell.

It had been just under two years since

the army of the dead had invaded Túll and slaughtered King Múrius Turgan. The first great battles of this terrible war between good and evil was known as The Battle of the Bog. It was rightly named after the vast boglands of Tyminus. The battles there were gruesome and horrific. Many were killed in battle and many were killed by the bog itself, whether they became trapped and drowned or lost and starved. Vulga's dead army were also affected by the harsh lands. The army of the dead were kind of like sheep, they followed each other and were not that smart at all. So, when one accidentally walked into the deep bog and into a bottomless pit, many more would follow. This was a huge advantage for Tyminus and the rest of the world. Vulga lost most of his army there and it became known as one of his greatest ever mistakes in battle. But Vulga was growing in power and would eventually find his way through.

There were also many dark creatures and sworn followers of Vulga already spread about the land to cause enough damage



themselves. With the raging war, they began to crawl out of the holes and dark corners they once dwelt in.

Prince Judocus Cullen planned to attack in Tyminus as he saw how the bog gave them an advantage against the army of the dead, although there was a slight disadvantage of transport, too. But it was better than facing the army head on.

Judocus lead his army of thousands, with Rían Ó Cuinn by his side. For days, they travelled through the bogs and few had already drowned as their armour weighed nearly triple the soldier wearing it, but it was necessary. This was war. Moving was slow as they had to thread carefully but after a week in Tyminus they finally came across their first sighting of the enemy. A group of Judocus' scouts came across a small battalion of the dead army. No one survived from either side. When Judocus arrived with men, he was shaken by the sight of the bodies on the ground as if someone had placed each of them so carefully, staging the scene. Rían put

his hand on Judocus' shoulder in comfort.

The Battle of the Bog was also a rescue mission. Judocus planned to reach Griffenhall, North Tyminus, to rescue King Lyón Gráll and Queen Lúl Gráll and whoever else had sheltered in the castle. From there, they would push the army of the dead south. It was never going to be an easy task but it had to be done.

## 2

It rained like rain was infinite. The raindrops danced on the muddy ground. Fortunately, the rain revealed the dangers of the bog. What would normally look like solid ground was proving to be the exact opposite as the raindrops caused ripples showing its true form. But in the Battle of the Bog, where there was fortune there was also a catch . . .

With the endless rainfall came flooding and that brought up creatures from deep under the surface of the bog. Creatures that were thought to have been extinct long ago and turned into myth. A *syphen* had scales like

rocks covering its entire top half, powerful jaws and a long mouth. It had yellow eyes that would glow like fireflies and it would whisper a *hiss* in the silence of moonlit night.

A syphen hadn't been seen in many years until Judocus' army were unlucky enough to discover they had still existed. First, little islands on the surface of the bog began to move. Some thought it was their own eyes playing tricks. They had not slept in days after all. But that was not to be. It was an ambush in the drenching rain. The syphen must have been just under twenty feet long with razor-edged spears for teeth. In a matter of seconds, the syphen had disappeared with a mouth-full of soldiers. Even with their armour they were swallowed and digested. There was absolute silence as they waited for the syphen to reappear. Everyone had to be still, waiting to see a little ripple appear before the syphen would emerge from beneath. Suddenly everyone could hear their own hearts beating in their ears. It became difficult to concentrate on a single sound. One soldier

moved a foot cautiously forward with a spear at the ready. His nerves were unsteady. But he still moved on.

*'Nothing will happen to me,'* the soldier thought. *'Because I am me . . .'*

The soldier felt these uninvited thoughts enter his mind and made him feel foolish. Besides, that's the worst thing anyone could do in a situation like this. He could jinx himself . . .

The ripples appeared again and another soldier behind the one with the *thoughts* bitten in half. Legs were just left standing there by themselves for just a moment until they seemed to only realise the upper half was gone and collapsed to the ground. The thoughtful soldier froze, but only for a moment. He jabbed his spear into the syphen's right eye completely removing it from its socket. The syphen crashed around and tumbled in agony smacking the thoughtful soldier into the mud but was unharmed. Many other soldiers charged at the beast including Judocus and Rían. The beast

was an ancient one so it knew when to throw in the towel. The syphen was fast. It scurried and disappeared into the bog in retreat. It was half blind but it lived to ambush another day. Rían approached the thoughtful soldier to help him to his feet.

'What is your name, soldier?' Rían asked him as he pulled him up from the mud looking like he had taken a dip in a mud bath; a dangerous mud bath.

'Frederick Muny, Sir,' he said trying to clean himself in vain.

'You've got strength in you, Frederick,' Rían placed his hand onto Frederick's shoulder, not caring for the mud as Frederick had worried that he would. 'We need more like you.'

It made Frederick Muny feel honoured but he just couldn't get one thought out of his mind that kept racing. That was: *My ass is full of this mud! I hope its mud . . .*

The trail was deep into the boglands and Judocus' army were deep in their despair. They had not seen much battle with the army of the dead yet have still seen much tragedy. What would happen when they finally came across the Vulga's sworn soldiers? Although, it was a good sign that they hadn't come across a large amount of the army of the dead just yet. That meant they were struggling, too. It was a major loss for Vulga and his sworn followers.

They came to a narrow trail with deep bog on either side. Judocus' army had to walk in single file like ants. The castle of Griffenhall was in sight but ripples in the bog began to form. They all knew what it was – Frederick Muny knew what it was. The great syphen returned to avenge his right eye. The syphen came crashing, crushing a group of soldiers on the narrow trail. Some fell into the bog never to be seen again. The line of soldiers was split in half. Frederick was too far to poke out the other eye this time, so he decided to throw his weapon in hopes of reaching its

target. He had to be fast as many were dying around him. He slipped in the mud as he tried to launch the spear and fell back. Panicked soldiers trampled on him in retreat. Then he felt a gentle and calm hand on his shoulder. It was Rían Ó Cuinn. He didn't say a thing but Frederick knew what to do. Frederick picked up his spear and was helped to his feet.

*'Let's try this again,'* Frederick thought as he held his footing this time.

When Frederick Muny threw the spear, it was as though you could hear him puncture the air around him with a pin. The spear twisted as it flew from Frederick's hands to its new home in the syphen's one good eye. The syphen saw it coming but it was too late. Everything went dark as if someone had flicked a painful switch.

The syphen was blinded and confused. It seemed to cry a high-pitched squeal as it backed itself into the bog once more in retreat. No one bothered to attack it as it left. They were too tired and it would not attack them a third time after going blind. It whined like a

toddler not getting was he wants as it sunk below under the surface.

Everyone was busy watching the syphen disappear that only Judocus saw a lone figure up ahead. It was unclear at that distance who or what it was. His eyes could not focus. A soldier called to Judocus and he reluctantly turned, immediately regretting it as he quickly looked back to find the figure had gone.

#### 4

Griffenhall was a gigantic castle with turret machines on every tower with a surrounding moat. The turrets would fire spears two metres long at an alarming rate. They were fast and they were a new form of weapon. There was no better place to be in all of Tyminus . . . or so they had thought.

By the time the sun started to set Judocus had brought his worn-out army through the gates of Griffenhall where King Lýón Gráll and Queen Lúl Gráll would greet



them. They were a sight no one could forget. Judocus looked exhausted with the rest of his remaining soldiers. They didn't look like the rescue team they were expecting at all, covered in mud and blood. Lúl Gráll offered food and water and a warm bath to their rescuers who would gladly accept. Most of them hadn't eaten in days. Their stomachs sounded as though they were trying to literally tell them they were starving.

Judocus hadn't felt the gentle warmth of the water in a bath tub since before he left Septus. It reminded him of home so he found a tear fall down from his eye and get lost in his thick beard which began to grow out of control. It was about time he cut it. He called for a servant to shave his beard but first none came. Just as he was about to leave the tub to search for a servant someone entered the room. It startled him only a little.

'Apologies,' the old lady said as she shut the door behind her. She may have been old and her face wrinkled with time but she was in fact beautiful. Her crystal blue eyes glowed

like stars in an unknown sky.

Judocus was lost for words.

'You must be needing a shave?' the old lady said.

'Eh . . . yes . . .' he repositioned himself in the bath, covering his private area from the old lady.

'Never mind that,' she giggled. 'I've seen many horrifying things in my lifetime.'

Judocus didn't know what to say. That sentence was strange in a few ways for him to hear. But he couldn't help but let a little laugh out.

'That's good,' she said as she smiled. 'You need to relax.'

'What is your name?' He finally asked the old lady.

'You can call me Juliath.'

'I'm—'

'I know who you are, Judocus Cullen,' Juliath said. 'I know all about you.'

'What d'you mean by that?'

'Your father will not live to see you return.'

Judocus grabbed her wrist (but not too tight) and stared into Juliath's wonderful eyes. 'You know of my father!? Who are you, really?'

'I really am Juliath, but many know me as the Oracle.'

Judocus immediately released his grip and only looked back apologetically, his jaw wide with wonder, but his eyes glared with doubt.

'You need proof?' Juliath seemed to read his mind. No, she only read his eyes. Suddenly she has great and overwhelming strength as she forced Judocus under the water in the bath as if she was going to drown him. He waved his arms around but found himself in a field naked as the day he was born. He was completely vulnerable.

The field was only grass as far as the eye could see in all directions. Something was on the horizon, something Judocus did not know. It looked like a castle but was covered in mirrors from top to bottom.

A hand landed on his shoulder and he

jumped back with fright.

'What is this place?' he shouted. 'Are you a witch!?'

'This place is only a *vision* of another world for we're not really here,' she said. 'And of course, I'm not a witch; I told you who I was.'

'Then why am *I* here?'

'There is something you must do, Judocus,' she almost seemed to beg.

'What's that?'

'You must assemble a small group of warriors –in fact, just you, Rían Ó Cuinn and Frederick Muny– and make your way to Lake Lóran.'

'What's at Lake Lóran?'

'The most important thing of all, more important than a king or queen.'

'Why so few of us when I've an army?' Judocus almost gloated but rediscovered himself completely naked and suddenly became shy again.

'You can move faster and an army can be seen coming for miles. That would make it

difficult to sneak into Vulgaron, wouldn't it?' She turned her back to look at the glass castle on the horizon.

'To Vulgaron!?'

She only nodded.

'That's a death sentence . . .'

'Maybe for some of you but it's the only way Vulga will be defeated, for that I'm certain.'

'Who's at Lóran?'

'Sara Turgan's living in Lóran and you must protect and trust her with all your heart,' she looked over at the glass castle once again.

'What's that on the horizon?' He finally asked Juliath. 'I've never saw anything like it before.'

'It's of another world, The home of Will Marson. He's just as important as Sara but you need not worry about him just yet.'

'If you're so powerful then why don't you stop Vulga, instead of leaving it to someone like Sara or this Will you mentioned?' Judocus asked out of frustration which Juliath could understand.

'But I am doing something, Judocus,' she said. 'But I'm an Oracle, a messenger, and I grow weaker in these lands because an ancient demon has fooled Vulga into thinking he is the one in control, he is only their puppet – but a powerful one at that and he is their doorway to this world. These demons are great tricksters. To become a doorway or a puppet one needs to invite the demons with a welcoming embrace. Vulga did so as he believed their words.'

'Am . . . I your puppet?' Judocus found himself asking the question but it seemed to just fall out by mistake.

'No,' Juliath said. 'I am simply your guide, you're in complete control of your choices,' she was automatic in her reply as if it was *store policy*.

'This Sara Tangan?' Judocus said, 'Who is she?'

'Sara *Turgan* is the daughter of the deceased king of Túll. She is of great importance – you must see that!' Juliath seemed to not be able to go into much detail,

but was desperate in making Judocus see just how important this quest was. Judocus could see it; he could see it in her familiar eyes. He realised only then that he had met her once before, a long time ago.

Judocus blinked and was under water in the bathtub again. He splashed about and gasped for air as soon as he could. He looked around but Juliath was nowhere to be seen.

*'Was she ever really here?'* Judocus thought to himself as water dripped from his few strands of hair he had left on his head and down to his chin.

Of course, she was really there and he knew it; he could still feel her hand on his head when she pushed him under.

He knew what he had to do now (besides getting out of the bathtub) and he could only bring Rían and Frederick. Judocus was unsure why Frederick was picked. He could see why Rían was picked (he was his right-hand-man) but Frederick was just a soldier and one of many under Judocus' command. Who was Judocus to question the

Oracle?

One thing would prove it all true and that was what had been said about Judocus' father. Judocus got dried and dressed and requested a raven be sent with a letter asking of his father health. Ravens are highly intelligent birds and this particular raven understood the haste of his quest. It only took this raven two and a half days to return with an answer. Judocus was delicate when unrolling the small scroll. The raven seemed to wait to see Judocus' reaction out of interest. The scroll said: KING JORDICUS CULLEN HAS PASSED. Judocus didn't cry (yet anyway) as it didn't seem real to him. The raven cawed in a tone too human-like as if he was consoling Judocus and then flew away sending a trail of dust behind him.

Judocus informed King Lyón Gráll and Queen Lúl Gráll of his unexpected leave but they didn't care as long as they were keeping the army he had brought. Rían thought it was a foolish quest but he would not say it to Judocus in the presence of others. Frederick



was as confused as Judocus was about picking him for the third party on their journey but he was eager to please the future king of Septus. He swore in his own mind that Judocus had made the right decision – yet he didn't know that it wasn't actually Judocus' *choice*. There was higher power.

## 5

Three men on an unexpected and unknown quest, riding their horses south, probably towards some of Vulga's soldiers and would certainly be slain but it was Judocus' command (The Oracle's command for Judocus).

Judocus was in the front with his back to the others in silence until he stopped his horse.

'Is there something wrong, Judocus?' Rían called out.

Judocus didn't answer.

'Jude?' Rían brought his horse next to *Jude*. 'Are you okay?'

'My father has passed . . .' His eyes were red as if he had been crying for a while and he may well have been as he kept his back to them all this time.

Rían, as Jude's close friend, knew there was nothing he could say – no matter how much he wanted – that could fix his pain, his grief. He only placed his hand gently on Jude's shoulder. It was the best anyone could have done.

## 6

The mist grew thick in the evening as they trailed along the muddy path in the opposite direction of Griffenhall. Frederick Muny couldn't help but think about all the fresh food, warm and dry sheets and warm and dry clothes and warm and dry and warm and dry and warm and dry . . . that was left behind in Griffenhall. But they had a new and slightly unknown quest to conquer. Jude wasn't the clearest on his explanations but he didn't have to be, he's a king now.

The mist was becoming more and more heavy as they moved along. They had to be careful. In a world like this one, if you can't see your hand in front of your face then you most certainly won't spot the syphen stalk you from the right. And not just any normal syphen (as normal as one can be) but one seeking revenge for the loss of its sight. The syphen new their numbers were less so maybe this time it stood a chance, no matter how blind.

'I can't see shit!' Frederick said. 'I mean, sir . . . King Judocus, I cannot see through this mist,' he almost forgot he was speaking with royalty at first but he was right and Judocus and Rían could also not see *shit*. Judocus grinned at the side of his mouth at Frederick's comment. He was allowed as no one could see him anyway.

'You're right, Sir Muny,' Jude said. 'We better stop an' wait for the mist to clear as we could lose ourselves out in this.'

They weren't glad to stop at all. They weren't tired and wanted to be out of this bog

which stretched for miles around Griffenhall as a form of natural defence. Perfect defence, they all thought *now*.

Frederick began to go away in his thoughts as always. He probably wasn't going to get much conversation out of Jude or Rían anyway. But his thoughts took him somewhere he didn't expect. All he could think about was being *watched*. But who could even see in this mist to ever watch at all? Someone without vision, that's who. A blind beast born to kill and to die killing.

'We're not safe!' Frederick jumped to his feet and the horses winced.

'What is it, Frederick?' Rían asked him with his sword out already.

'The beast's near . . .' he said as he tried to focus his eyes through the mist but it was no use, the problem was not in his eyes, the mist was simply too thick.

'*Close your eyes,*' Frederick thought but it wasn't the voice of his own thoughts. It felt familiar yet he did not know this voice. '*Close your eyes and listen,*' the voice said again.

He listened. He shut his eyes tight so that he wouldn't peek out of temptation or habit. He found himself hearing more than he had before. The toad dropping into the bog, the dragonfly gliding its way to its destination, Rían breathing heavily with his sword waiting to feed, and the sound of a creature sneaking up from behind.

The syphen could smell them and sensed them stopping in their tracks. It was time to go in for the kill. Born to kill and die killing.

'It's behind us!' Frederick shouted still with his eyes closed tight.

The syphen was fast like a spear with daggers for teeth but Rían was faster especially with Frederick's warning. The syphen was dead before it even knew it. Rían's hungry sword impaled it through the heart as it came charging at them. With one foot to hold the syphen down Rían pulled his sword out and put it back in its sheath to rest after its feed. King Judocus didn't even have to use his famous sword, Rahzúr, as it stayed

in its sheath the whole time.

'How'd you see it, Fred?' Rían said as he rested his hands on the handle of his sword so casual as if he hadn't just killed another living creature.

'I didn't see it.'

'But you knew . . . somehow?'

'I heard it.' He almost felt embarrassed about the truth. It was never really a good sign when you started hearing voices other than your own in your head.

'However, you did it,' Rían said, 'you did a good job.'

## 7

Judocus began to realise why Frederick Muny was chosen to join them on their unknown quest. So, he felt it was time to explain the quest in more detail. He told them of Sara Turgan. He told them of the Oracle and of Lake Lóran. They might or might not have believed him yet they followed in his leadership. On they went on their dangerous

quest.

## *The Crow*

### 1

Sara Turgan sat alone on a fence looking up to the night sky as the stars winked back as if they knew she was watching them. She so longed to fly to one of those stars away from this wild world, as far from Dómain as possible. But to her knowledge that couldn't be done. Not in these times. She was stuck in Dómain; she was stuck in Lake Lóran.

'There yar!' Jon Rook said as he took in a breath of air as if he'd been running. 'Been lookin' all over for ya!'

'I'm here . . .' she said with a hint of boredom, 'I'm always here.'

'We've got somethin' cookin',' Jon said.

'I'm not hungry . . . I'm sorry,' and she was sorry. She didn't feel like eating but she didn't mean to give Jon a hard time and always seemed to. Sara knew that he liked her more than she had wanted but she didn't feel the same. This may have been her way of



letting him know. She really was sorry . . .

Jon stood in the same spot as if he was trying to think of something else to say. His blonde hair shined in the moonlight like a reflection on a pond and his eyes looked side to side searching for an answer.

'Oh,' was all he could find to say.

'I just want to be alone,' she said while looking out at the horizon where there could be a battle between Vulga's army and soldiers of Tyminus raging in the night.

'Tólas is makin' food,' Jon immediately felt stupid after saying this and he quickly took it back with: 'Actually! Never mind. I'll just tell him you'd have it later,' he began to walk away without turning his head from Sara. He looked like a strange, confused owl.

'Thank you, Jon,' Sara said and this made Jon feel warm. Maybe *this* was the way to her heart. But Jon had no idea that Sara was in no way interested in him romantically.

Then Tólas began calling for Sara.

'I'm not hungry, Tólas,' she sighed.

'It's not that,' he said as he came into her

view. 'There's someone here.'

Sara could see that he was worried but there was no danger. His eyes said it all.

## 2

Sitting at their dining table were three armoured men who looked like they had been at battle . . . and lost. They had come a long way. Sara thought they were most likely deserters from the battles with Vulga's army of the dead. She was wrong.

'You must be Sara,' one of the armoured men said and it wasn't a question. 'I am King Judocus Cullen, of Septus. This is Rían Ó Cuinn and that's Frederick Muny.'

'What's goin' on?' she asked, as if she didn't hear him say he was a king. She heard him, alright.

'We're here for you . . . We were sent to protect you,' Judocus said as he looked to his followers in surprise. Sara was physically small but she was feisty.

'Who sent you?' She had so many

questions.

'A higher power . . .' Judocus said. 'You're extremely important in our quest and we're to protect you along the way.'

'Hold on now!' Tólas intervened. 'Sara isn't goin' anywhere and what's this about a "higher power"?''

'Calm yourself!' Rían stood forward.

'I'm calm,' Tólas said. 'But no way in hell are we leavin' this place on an insane, suicidal quest.'

'Don't push me, Tólas.'

'I'll do whatever I want, Rían!'

'Please!' Judocus called out. 'Haven't we enough enemies in the world? I wouldn't be here if I didn't think it be important.'

'Why Sara?' Tólas asked.

'The . . . Oracle came to me and told me of Sara Turgan, and that we're to go to Vulgaron to defeat Vulga once and for all.'

'That's impossible and suicidal,' Tólas said. 'You do know about the curse, right? He cannot be killed. The life of Vulga was unending unless he was slain by a great

warrior blah blah blah . . .'

'I'll go . . .' a voice said. 'I'll do it.'

They all slowly turned to the source of the voice and had strangely forgot that Sara was in the room with them with all their arguing.

Tólas's mouth hung open in shock. His argument was no longer valid. He couldn't talk. It was as if someone had taken his voice box from him just then.

'We have to discuss some things,' Judocus said. 'First, we must rest and eat; we've come a long way.'

'Fair enough . . .' Tólas found his voice again.

### 3

They ate and then rested. Sara slept in her bed but at first only lied there in her waking thoughts. She could not remember when she drifted off to sleep.

In her dream there was a boy. He was a similar age, maybe older by a year or two, but

still a boy. The boy was strange looking (not in his physical appearance as he was actually quite handsome) with the clothes he wore and the style of his dark-brown hair matching with his dark-brown eyes.

*How could I dream such a thing?* She heard her thought in her own dream.

The strange boy was looking out a window, the window was looking out from a large glass building surrounded by flat stone roads. And there were lights; like flames trapped in glass. It had to be a far, far land as it almost seemed of another world to Sara or at least from a world where magic was so powerful, it changed the land and made castles out of glass. Didn't seem like much of a defence . . .

The boy looked sad and alone, and there was no one to fix that. Sara noticed an unusual gold, round object the boy held in his trembling hands. There was something important about that golden object; at least important to the boy.

Sara could feel what he felt and more

importantly she felt as though she knew this strange boy. There was something familiar about him but she didn't even know his name . . . if it was real.

Sara woke up as the strange boy's eyes met hers and he was gone. She was back in her bed and searching for familiar surrounds. Dreams that deep can make one forget themselves.

Sara needed a walk to calm her mind. It was deep in the night and everyone else seemed to sleep soundly. But someone called to her. It was the man, Judocus Cullen, who called himself a king.

'Can't sleep either?' Judocus said with a sympathetic smile at the corner of his mouth.

'No,' Sara said.

'No, you *can't* sleep or no, you *can* sleep?' Judocus tried to make her laugh but it was like a father to a teenage daughter.

'I wanted to take a walk . . .'

'Alright, I'll take the hint, girly,' Judocus said, 'Please forgive me . . . just I'm curious.'

'My name isn't "*girly*" and curious,

how?'

'Pardon me!' Judocus said but couldn't help but smile with his amazement at Sara's attitude towards *royalty*. 'I'm only curious about you and the Oracle's prophecy. Don't take this the wrong way but—'

'But what's so significant 'bout me?' Sara seemed to ask herself the question.

'No, no, I was going to say: you're *stronger* than you look and I see how some could take offence to that, sure I'm bald and ugly,' Judocus grinned, but it was a pleasant grin like that from an uncle you always hoped to see at the family reunion. 'And I know a lot, I'm sort of a king.'

'My father was a king,' Sara said now seeming to like Judocus's company.

'That's right,' Judocus said. 'I was never honoured with meeting your father in person but I've heard amazing tales of his adventures. You should know that he'd be proud of you, coming so far.'

'Yeah . . . coming so far to hide . . .'

'We should try get some rest then,

wouldn't you say?'

#### 4

The morning brought breakfast and more discussions of travel to Vulgaron. Sara could only think of her dream the night before. When she had returned to bed after walking with Judocus, she had another dream of the strange boy. But this time there was more; the boy was opening a door and on the other side was herself telling him to come and help her. Who was this boy who suddenly grew strong in Sara's thoughts? She did not believe he was evil and she somehow felt it wasn't *her* dream, but also the boys dream, the boy's mind. They shared a dream.

The men (Tólas, Rían, Judocus and Frederick) couldn't come to an agreement on how to begin their travels until Sara quietened them once again with her ability to surprise. Sara had suggested they head for Bardor and take a ship from the quay over Caíirth Sea towards Vulgaron. It may be longer but it



would be safer than walking through Túll which had been flooded by the army of the dead. It was their best and only plan.

They had come to an agreement as reluctant as Tólas seemed. The adventures of Sara Turgan were truly only beginning.

Horses were saddled and supplies were packed. Even Jon Rook had a bag on his back and sat on a small but strong donkey. Others looked at Jon with question. Jon seemed to know what they were all thinking.

'I'm not gettin' left all by myself here again,' Jon said. 'I'm comin' and ya can't stop me.'

'Fair enough,' Tólas said.

Rían stared up to the leafless trees and the branches looked like an old man's fingers riddled with arthritis bending this way and that way and pointing to the sky. On one of these branches sat a crow. It was silent as it watched them begin their journey. Rían knew what this meant, he knew it as a *kamen* but in another world it is known as an *omen*. The crow was the sign of Death or the Grim

Reaper and this crow told Rían (not in words) that this journey will lead to Death for at least one of them, maybe all of them. Rían looked to Judocus but he was looking straight ahead, but somehow Rían knew that Judocus also saw the crow. The king seemed to ignore it. But no one can ignore Death; not even the noblest of kings. The crow only watched on, not making a sound, as if only to observe . . . for the time being.

## 5

Instead of taking the road South (which would have been a quicker road to Vulgaron) they took the road east through Telús and toward Bardor. Since the rise of Vulga all of Dómain hadn't really been particularly safe, but the road they were taking was definitely *safer* than going through Túll.

As they came to a bridge over the River Mór they were greeted by a toll of sorts. Since the loss of Túll and the invasion of Tyminus, other lands such as Telús were more cautious

of who was entering their country. Unfortunately, those who suffered this *caution* were those who fled from the invasion.

Judocus Cullen led their small battalion as they approached the bridge.

'I shall handle this, folks,' Judocus said as he brought his horse to the Tollman.

The Tollman could see them coming which wasn't difficult as it was a straight road for a couple of miles at least. He was a large man with an axe to match. His beard looked like it could nest a family of birds and looked like it actually had. He waited patiently for Judocus's small battalion to approach; his leg up on a rock with his over-hanging belly (most likely from beer) resting on his upper leg above his knee. The Tollman squinted his old eyes to focus on the strangers approaching. He had to be a patient man in that kind of job.

'Good day, sir,' Judocus called. 'I am King Judocus Cullen, of Septus and these are my foll--'

'Don't care,' the Tollman said quite

abruptly. Judocus didn't know what to say. 'What dya want? Cross me bridge, is it? There's a cost.'

'To the point,' Judocus could only admire the Tollman. No time to waste. 'We'd like to cross, what's the cost?'

The Tollman took a moment, then something caught his eye. 'I'd 'cept that there sword,' he said.

Judocus put his hand on Rahzúr as if to check it was still there. He could feel the tollman's lusty eyes all over it.

'You can't have the king's sword, Tollman,' Rían said.

'Then ye can't cross me bridge,' he smiled unpleasantly, yet there seemed to be something – deep down – pleasant about the Tollman. What was it? They've come a long way and–

'I'm only messin',' he laughed.

It was humour! They haven't seen a man of humour in what probably felt like a lifetime. And this Tollman probably hasn't seen *anyone* in the same amount of time so he was

allowed to be a little strange.

The Tollman let them cross but had already begun to miss their company. He smiled and nodded to each one that had crossed the bridge, Sara being the last. And he felt something inside his mind. Like the snapping of a twig. There was something about that girl . . .

The Tollman left his post with his horse and axe, and began to follow Judocus's small battalion. Something was pulling him. He felt it was more important than that "damn bridge".

## 6

Rían and Frederick were on a corner to meet the Tollman. They knew they were being followed but weren't sure who it was.

'You!?' Rían called out with surprise.

'I've changed me mind 'bout the payment,' he tossed a bag of coin back to Rían. It was the payment for crossing the bridge. 'I want to join ye on your quest.'

'What?' Rían said. 'Your requested payment is to join us?'

'I know how it sounds, but I think you'll need me . . .'

'Let the man join us,' Judocus hollered from out of sight. Then he came into view. 'What is your name? We can't keep calling you *Tollman* forever.'

'Names Finlay Watters,' he said. 'I don't normally do things like this . . .'

'That's exactly why I'm allowing you to join us,' Judocus said. These days, he was a man of fate . . . and even faith.

## 7

They weren't far from The Great Hall of the Gathering which still stood so high and mighty after all this time. They could see on just on the horizon against the pale blue sky as the sun seemed to tire. It was still the middle of the month of Sumral, so the sun stayed up late.

A man searched and searched the land,

waiting for someone to cross his path; someone in particular, or a sign of that particular someone. This man was searching for a vampire, and not just any vampire; he was looking . . . hunting for a host named Val Dragól. Merthill DeWisengrae sat in a dark corner of a tavern in a very familiar village. The town was called Fogmór. Merthill hadn't been back to this village since the slaying of Tolrog the giant. It felt so long ago to him now, all his friends (though he only knew them a brief moment in his life) from that quest have long since passed. Everyone knows that magic folk live for quite a long time; Merthill may live even longer now that he got his youth (and hair) back.

Merthill was hunting for Val Dragól ever since the vampires tried to kill Sara Turgan using her own mother as bait. Merthill knew he must put an end to Val Dragól before he tried to trap Sara yet again.

Merthill had tracked the vampire scum to his old companion's (Tóman Bermor's) birthplace, or his deathplace . . .

The tavern was dark, which wasn't a good sign for the town of Fogmór. Being the month of Sumral, someone had made sure that no sunlight would find its way into the tavern. So Merthill thought that maybe someone who worked in the tavern was a vampire; infected by Val Dragól so that he had somewhere to hide after his humiliation when Sara escaped his grips.

Merthill waited for the right moment as he judged those around him; which of them was or was not a vampire. It can be almost impossible to tell, especially when an infected is so fresh. But Merthill had plenty experience.

There were five others in the tavern. Merthill had suspected the bartender to be infected, along with two so-called customers sitting at a table together by the door who had never touched their drinks (clearly wasn't to their taste). The two he believed were not vampires at all were a drunk that had passed out with his head over the counter (Merthill noticed the bartender sweat over the sight of



the drunk's neck) and a woman that had just entered the tavern from outside; she was clearly not vampire as she would have been toasted outside in a matter of seconds. The woman came to collect her drunk of a father as he lied passed out on the counter. The bartender hated to see him (easy pickings) go.

The woman struggled out with her father and she opened the door. The three suspected vampires flinched from the light entering the tavern, and Merthill found his moment. With a flash and a stomp, Merthill came out from his dark corner and sent a powerful force in all directions, opening all windows and doors within the tavern. Light burst inside so fast it even temporarily blinded Merthill. That was nothing compared to what it had done to the others in the tavern. Merthill's eyes adjusted as fast as they possibly could and he saw that the tavern had been filled with three piles of dust. His suspicions were spot on. And another one bites the dust . . .

And so Merthill made his way to the

cellar of the tavern where Val Dragól had been sleeping. Val was still sleeping when Merthill found him in his coffin, looking so content in his dreams . . . if vampires can dream.

Val Dragól had been around for centuries; was thought to have known much history, but what fool would be stupid enough to quiz him on his knowledge. Now, Val was about to be exterminated, Merthill drove his dagger straight into the vampire's heart. Val Dragól let out a horrific screeching sound, his fangs pointed outward, and his eyes wide with . . . fright. He only had a brief moment to look Merthill in the eyes; to look at the one who defeated him after all this time. How could he let this happen? And then he crumbled away, feeling the pain, feeling the fear, as he fell back into Hell where he belonged. All those that had been infected by Val Dragól, no matter how far, also turned to dust.

The Great Hall of the Gathering was not in the best condition these days with the war raging in the neighbouring realms. The Great Hall stood abandoned, but not entirely for something now lived in its magnificent structure. This creature wasn't of Vulga's darkness but it was certainly of no good. It was known as a titanoboa; a giant constrictor snake, and it was getting hungry. This particular titanoboa was roughly forty-five feet long; one of the largest of its kind. Usually, they lived in the deep swamps of Tyminus, but maybe since the war that rocked those lands, this one fled for a new home. The Great Hall was the perfect new home for this titanoboa. Feeding was easy! Who would ever suspect a giant snake to ambush you while taking a look at the historic ruins of Telús?

The last time Sara had passed The Great Hall was when she had escaped the invasion of Túll with her dear friend Jacob.

It was getting late, and so it was getting to that time for rest. Where better to rest than in The Great Hall of the Gathering?

The sky was painted with large strokes of red and orange as the sun finally fell. The first stars showed themselves in the failing light, and Judocus Cullen was first to step down from his horse.

'Let us rest for the night,' Judocus said.

No one protested as it was a long journey ahead.

No one felt the hungry eyes on them.

The Great Hall was long passed its prime inside as well as the outside. It was dark and damp, but they were only planning on staying one night. It would have to do for now.

Tólas Leigh left with Frederick Muny to gather wood for burning. They needed to keep warm in this clear, cold night. Judocus found something strange inside. He called Rían over to show what he had discovered. It was a rather large snake skin.

'That cannot be what I think it is,' Rían said.

'We need to leave.' Judocus was final in his decision. They could not risk fighting a

monstrous snake when they had more important things to be doing.

As they returned to the others, they could now feel eyes on them. Sara, Jon and Finlay the tollman were nowhere to be seen. Then Rían could hear something. Finlay was making a psst sound to catch their attention.

'Get out of here!' Finlay whispered sharply. 'It's right there!'

Rían knew he had to move but he couldn't; neither could Judocus. The titanoboa moved like an arrow shot from a crossbow. It was on them in a split second. Rían found his movement again and was nearly just as fast as he pushed his king out of the way. The gigantic snake took Rían from where he stood and began to take hold of him with a mighty grip. Rían remembered the crow that he had seen stare its beady eyes down upon him back at Lake Lóran.

The snake hissed and glared at the others while it squeezed the life from Rían O' Cuinn. Judocus couldn't let the titanoboa, no matter how large, take the life of his oldest

friend. He was quick on his feet and even quicker with the sword of Rahzúr. With a single swipe, he gashed a terrible scar over the snake's eye, and another on its belly. It enraged the snake and so it tumbled and twisted in The Great Hall, letting Rían go in the process. The titanoboa was furious and so it came for king Judocus. Finlay's axe came down on the snake from behind, splitting a nasty wound in the snake's head. Sara used her old crossbow, that was once Jacob's, and fired it true. Her arrow blinded the snake as it punctured one of its monstrous eyes. Judocus brought his great sword down yet again while Finlay also joined with his axe. Together they put an end to the predator who meant to have Rían for dinner.

Judocus rushed to Rían's aid. Luckily, he was just fine.

'I thought I was done for, Jude,' Rían said.

'Not today,' Judocus replied. He then nodded to Finlay Watters to thank him for his bravery. The brave tollman who had left his

post for the first time to join a crew on an unknown quest.

Finlay nodded back with pleasure and blood on his face.

Stood at the doorway were two shocked men who had gone to gather wood for a fire. Tólas Leigh and Frederick Muny had their hands full of logs and their mouths wide open with the shock of the sight of the snake, now dead.

'I think it's safe to stay now,' Judocus said.

And so, they spent the night and rested till the sun rose to bring the next day.

## 9

The next day birds sang and deer flocked. With the death of the mighty titanoboa life could live freely without fear; until the next dangerous beast would happen along. Chances were high in the land of Dómain to come across something dangerous.

'How're ye feelin' today, Rían?' Finlay

asked him while he cleaned his axe.

'Sore,' was all he could say. He was in pain, but he was more afraid of his thoughts. He thought about the crow and what he knew it to mean. The snake didn't kill him this time but death always finds a way. Rían has been marked by the touch of the Reaper. It was only a matter of time.

Rían hadn't known it yet, but he was gifted with the knowledge of his death as he would know to spend his time wisely.

## 10

Jon Rook wasn't far from the group yet he was still out of the way. He gathered flowers for Sara. He thought that he could still win her love. He recalled a story of two young lovers who had been forbidden to be together by their hateful parents. Philomena and Ash were their names. Every day they'd meet in secret, Ash would bring Philomena a flower and proclaim his love for her. They swore to always love each other and planned on



running away together. It was young love. One day, Philomena did not show for one of their secret meetings, so Ash went to investigate. Her father had discovered what they had been doing and so he locked her away. Ash climbed to the girl's window so that he could leave her a flower. Instead, her father was there waiting. He grabbed Ash inside and gave him a trashing he would never forget. And he would certainly never forget, for when he got a little older and stronger, he returned to challenge Philomena's father to a duel all for her love. Her father gladly excepted for Ash was still as young as nineteen. What the older man didn't know was how handy Ash had become at throwing small daggers. The terrible father was dead within the blink of an eye, and probably doesn't even know he's dead with that speed. Ash's dagger hit the centre of his forehead and he dropped to the dirt with a thud, still smiling at his chances of beating a young boy like before. Philomena did not mourn for her father for he was foul and

never showed her love. Together, Ash and Philomena ran away so that they could live their lives at last. Ash brought Philomena flowers every day.

While Jon Rook was lost in his clouded thoughts, picking flowers, he never noticed the man on horseback pull up next to him.

'Boy,' he called giving Jon a fright, causing him to drop all his flowers. 'What're ye doin' out here alone?'

'I'm not alone, sir,' Jon said. 'Why are *you* out here all alone?'

'I'm on my way to Tyminus, doubt many would join me on my journey there these days!' The man laughed.

'We just left there, from Lake Lóran, and now we're headin' east!'

'Lake Lóran?' The man showed great interest.

## 11

Jon came back to The Great Hall with the

man who Tólas and Sara knew as Merthill DeWisengrae. Tólas greeted Merthill (but not like an old friend, more like an old colleague) and introduced him to the others. King Judocus wasn't fazed by the fact that Merthill was a man of magic, in fact he seemed delighted to have him joining their crew.

'Where is Sara?' Merthill asked.

'She's visiting the burial of her friend, Jacob, to pay respects of course,' Tólas said. 'I actually forgot that we buried him here.'

'We were lucky not to bury another after that snake showed up!' Finlay interjected. 'But my axe made sure we dug no graves today!'

'That's good,' Merthill said. 'And I have also eliminated another obstacle called Val Dragól, so our journey has been simplified dramatically!'

'Here-here!' Finlay cheered. 'The terrible Val Dragól is no more!'

'Yes, but we must keep our wits about us for a war rages behind us and who knows what traps lay in front,' Merthill said, almost sorry to spoil the cheer.

## 12

As Sara returned, she was glad to see Merthill, and she greeted him like an old friend, unlike Tólas.

They continued on the road east which Merthill agreed with. He wanted to make a stop in Ryevale along the way.

As they walked, Sara asked Judocus about his sword and why he called it Rahzúr.

Judocus said: 'Well, it once belonged to someone named Rahzúr. It is famous!'

'I don't know this one, tell me,' Sara said. She loved stories, even still.

## 13

*There was once another kind, a more holy and wise kind of being; long before the Gathering of the Seven Kings. These beings were called the Sekär and they were known to have abilities like no other. Some were known to read minds; some were known to move unmoveable objects; some could speak directly to the Guardians of Anima.*

*They were gifted with knowledge absolute power. Then there were mortal men, they had their flaws . . . and wars over pretty much anything.*

*But one Sekär named Fahnúl Mendelur had fallen in love with a mortal woman named Elisa Turwell from the land of Brigeer that would very soon be called Septus (once king Tyrell Septus took his throne there).*

*The time of the Sekär was coming to an end for they knew of the wars to come that mortal man would bring. Those in the highest order of the Sekär prayed for their departure of this world and so it was granted. But many chose to stay, and that, too, was granted. Fahnúl was one of those to stay behind for he was in love. Elisa was going to be the mother of his child. They would name their child Rahzúr. He would be half Sekär and half mortal; that would make him a wizard. This is the true origin of magic folk. Sekär + mortal = witch or wizard.*

*When years passed and Elisa grew older and ill, Fahnúl chose to pass with her. As Rahzúr was older now, he understood. The passing of Fahnúl and Elisa was bittersweet for Rahzúr, but it was*

*meant to be. He would move onward and live his life for his dearly departed.*

*And so, fate had brought Rahzúr to his mother's homeland; only now it had been called Septus.*

*Rahzúr lived a quiet life in peace until he came across a group of bandits attempting to rob an old man on the road. Even though he was greatly outnumbered and without a weapon, he beat each dirty bandit to the ground, and sent them running for their lives. The old man turned out to be king Tyrell Septus' most trusted advisor, Denvar Sarazhin. Rahzúr escorted Denvar back to Domum castle where king Tyrell heard of his heroics, and so they offered him a job of sorts. He was asked to become the king's bodyguard. King Tyrell was a good king, and so Rahzúr accepted the offer.*

*Rahzúr forged himself a great sword of magnificent power. The sword remembers and can adjust itself to suit its current master. As this sword was created by a wizard, it was also a weapon that would be fatal to anyone of magic. And anyone who would wield this sword, but not*

*to have taken it by force, would suddenly find themselves gifted in battle.*

*With the passing years and violent wars Rahzúr had proved himself time and time again. But all it took – as always – was a great betrayal. Denvar Sarazhin was bought by king Maximus Tyminus. He helped them sneak a way into Septus an attack from within.*

*Denvar stole Rahzúr's sword while he slept, but he could not wield its power. He tried to cut Rahzúr's throat in the night but the hilt of the sword started to burn his hands. He dropped it to the floor and screamed in pain. Rahzúr was up with a jolt, and Denvar begged for mercy. But Rahzúr found something in himself he never knew he had. He did let Denvar live, but he cursed him to never be able to tell a lie, for when he tried the truth would come out instead.*

*Rahzúr single-handedly fought the invaders with his mighty sword. Blinded by their rage, the invaders chased Rahzúr as he led them away from Domum and high up into the mountains. Rahzúr didn't even notice the wound on his leg from a poisonous arrow because of the adrenaline*

*pumping through his blood. Still, he continued on in the snow and steep slopes, and many of the invaders fell to their death. Those who remained were slain by Rahzúr's blade.*

*Rahzúr was a hero and heroes usually die. The poison was strong and Rahzúr then knew it. He had thought that he had found a good spot to see out the rest of his life. He heard the voices of his mother and father telling not to worry, and so he did not. No one ever found Rahzúr's body (until a young boy found his fate many years later). The mountain became his tomb.*

*Soon after the failed invasion, the seven kings of the realms organised a meeting so that they could organise a truce for many lives had been spent. The meeting was held in Telús in The Great Hall, and from there they decided to start a new; to forgive and forget, and to live in peace. It worked for a while.*

*Denvar Sarazhin could no longer tell a lie, so when asked about the invasion he told king Tyrell everything. Denvar told him of his greed and betrayal, and so he was locked away for his crimes, but was let live for his . . . honesty.*



## 14

'And how do you have Rahzúr's sword?' Sara asked Judocus with great interest.

'Well, I was that *boy* who happened to be joined by fate to the sword,' he replied, and Rían smiled as he listened to the tale, for he knew it too well.

## 15

Judocus was only a young prince at the age of twelve. He was being prepared to be the next in line to become king of Septus. His father, Jordicus, was a good father and king which can be difficult to be both at times. There were times Judocus would sneak off, dressed as poorly as he could, so that he could pretend to be a normal child and play games with other kids. It can be lonely being a prince or a princess, and so little Jude found a way not to be. He kept his birth right a secret, even from his best friend, Rían O' Cuinn, for a time. It was with Rían who he would play with the

most. And when Jude finally told Rían of his father being king, he was quite surprised of his reaction. Rían did not care for his riches, and understood why he kept it a secret. Rían swore that no matter what he'd always be Jude's friend, and that he would stand by his side to protect him whether he was a king or a jester.

Young Jude and Rían found a small cave to make as their hideout. There they played games and told each other tales. They wanted an adventure of their own someday. Little did they know, their first of many adventures would come very soon.

While they sat together in their cave on an early morning, a white raven appeared to them. This white raven could speak.

'Judocus Cullen, son of Jordicus,' the white raven said. The young boys were startled by the talking bird.

'Is this a trick?' Judocus asked. He scanned the area for a type of puppeteer.

'No trick,' the white raven said. 'I am Zalteer, the white raven of messages. I have

come to give you a message.'

'What is that?'

'You must find the sword of Rahzúr, and your journey must start within the Natus Mountains. Look for the marked stone on the foot of the mountain to reveal the path to Rahzúr's lost tomb.'

'If you're a messenger bird, Zalteer, then who sent you?' Rían stood in to ask.

'The lady named Juliath sent me. She knows of your importance, Judocus Cullen.'

'I don't know who that is,' Judocus said as he looked to Rían. Rían also confirmed his confusion with a shrug of his shoulders. He then turned back to Zalteer. 'Where's the marked stone?'

'Only Septus knows,' Zalteer said just before he flew away.

'Why do ravens speak in riddles, damn!' Rían waved his hands in the air with light frustration. Then he laughed and so did Judocus.

Their adventure was here, but it came with a riddle as Rían had said. There was a

marked stone at the foot of the Natus Mountains, but only Septus knew the whereabouts of that stone. They thought on it for hours and hours but came to no conclusion.

'Why did this *Juliath* have to send a stupid bird?' Rían rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands.

Then Judocus came to a sudden realisation and said: 'Maybe we're the stupid ones! *ONLY SEPTUS KNOWS!*'

'I still don't get it . . .'

'Septus, as in my ancestor, Tyrell Septus,' Judocus said. 'Not the place.'

'Oh . . . but he's dead, Jude.'

'I know, but maybe he left somethin' behind. We'll go to Tyrell's burial ground. There's tones of his old things kept there.'

'But that's inside the castle . . .'

'Then I'll sneak you in just like I snuck out!' Judocus smiled and placed his hand on Rían's shoulder to reassure him. They were in this together. They would see this through together.

They weren't the only ones in search for the great Sword of Rahzúr. There was a villain to this tale and his name was Gullymer Wentworth. Gullymer was not told by a white raven sent by Juliath; he was told by the trickster demon named Kah'Li. Gullymer was visited by the demon in his dreams and fooled into believing his lies. The strange thing is that Gullymer is an unfortunate tricked into becoming the villain of this tale. Kah'Li came to Gullymer's dreams in the form of a loved one who had passed on. In these recurring dreams, Kah'Li told Gullymer that he was meant to find the sword; kill Vulga with it; become a hero. But Gullymer had to find a young prince of Septus to lead him to the sword. Kah'Li twisted Gullymer's foolish mind and told him that the young prince must be sacrificed; a small price to play to become a hero. Gullymer believed Kah'Li's lies. He was too far gone to heed the warning from an old woman he had met along his trail.

The old woman simply didn't feed his ego like Kah'Li had done.

17

It was easy for Judocus to sneak his friend into the castle (or the guards simply didn't care as children played all sorts of games and Rían wasn't actually forbidden to come to the castle; they may have just wanted to make it more of an adventure).

Tyrell's tomb was a shrine to him, and also a kind of museum. They weren't exactly sure what to look for in the tomb. That was true until Judocus saw the personal journal left on display for all to admire (but not touch).

'Only Septus knows,' Judocus said as he pointed to the journal.

Rían looked around to see if they were being watched, but they were not. Why would they? Why would anyone (not just *anyone* but the future king of Septus) steal the ancient journal? They were planning on returning it

after they had finished with it anyway . . .

So, they weren't being watched, and taking the journal was easy. They took the journal to their hideout. There they would glance through it, searching for some connection to the Sword of Rahzúr.

The dusty pages flicked and cracked as they turned for the first time in forever. They had no idea the history that they were holding so carelessly in their hands, but they were only young.

Judocus found what they had been looking for. The journal told them of the time Septus had been invaded from the inside because of a great betrayal and that Rahzúr sacrificed himself to save all others. It also told them that King Tyrell Septus went off alone, in secret, to find Rahzúr, and when he found him, he had decided to keep his burial hidden as many graverobbers would love to get their greedy hands on the sword for it was a magic sword (not that it would work for them, Rahzúr had made sure of that). But there was nothing mentioned about the

location of the hidden burial or a marked stone. They read it twice over just in case they had missed something, but it wasn't till the third time that they had spotted something. Tyrell mentioned something about the foot of the mountain. All he said was: 'The foot of the mountain, the largest of its kind, is visible from the castle's eye.'

'Is that it, d'you think?' Rían puzzled.

'I think so,' Judocus said.

'What does it mean?'

'Well, I'm not sure . . . maybe the castle's eye is the lookout tower?'

'That makes sense! So, let's go. What're we waiting for?' Rían was having too much fun to slow down now.

And so, they ran with excitement from the cave once again back toward the castle. They didn't notice the stranger stalking them from a distance.

Once they reached the tallest tower of the castle, they scanned the magnificent landscape before their young eyes. It never looked so clear before.



*'The largest of its kind,'* Judocus said as he pointed to Mount Gorge, and at the bottom of the mountain was a large boulder shaped slightly like a foot.

'I can't believe it!' Rían cheered. 'We did it!'

'So now we must go to the foot of the mountain,' Judocus said while they climbed down the staircase of the tall tower.

## 18

It really wasn't a difficult task for Gullymer to find Judocus, and as Judocus was famous among the guards for wandering off to play with the poor kids in the village none stopped to wonder on his whereabouts.

So Gullymer kept his distance so that he wouldn't spook the boys while he followed them to the foot of the mountain. This was the easy part. The difficult part was coming soon.

## 19

Judocus and Rían walked down the road until it turned into a dirt-track. They spotted the white raven above them, gliding with the soft breeze. That confirmed to them both that they were heading the right direction.

Then they saw it. They found a stone with the marking of a sword carved into it. Beside the marked stone was a hidden trail, covered by over-grown bushes and trees.

'Wow,' Rían said. 'Can't believe no one found this place before.'

'We're the first,' Judocus said.

'I'm afraid not,' Gullymer said as he made himself known from the shadows. He held a dagger in one of his hands, pointing the sharp tip at the boys.

Both Judocus and Rían jumped with fright.

'What are you doing?' Judocus exclaimed. He could not believe someone was holding a dagger to him, the son of the king of Septus. This was a new situation for him, though he knew it would happen in the future. He was well loved and protected in the

castle, and because of his sneaking habits the guards had become used to him disappearing.

'I have to do this . . .'

 Gullymer said, his eyes reddened with tears.

Rían threw a lump of dirt into Gullymer's face causing him to flinch, but then the white raven also swooped down and pecked at his head. He screamed and waved his hand in the air. The boys took this chance to run on down the hidden path.

The narrow path was thorny and dark for only a moment. It quickly cleared up into an opening. The sun beamed through a skylight in the trees above, and up ahead was shallow cave with an altar. On the alter was a stone coffin. In front of the coffin was a tablet that said, *"Here lies a friend, a saviour, a great wizard named Rahzúr Mendelur. Above his resting place you will find his sword. Only the worthy shall receive its true powers, and no thief is worthy."*

They each had to step up on the tips of their toes so that they could see the sword as it lay on top of the coffin. It was magnificent;

more than they could have imagined. The sword was long and looked heavy, with its bronze hilt and writhen wooden grips, and a strong, slender blade. It looked too mighty for a boy of Judocus' size.

Then Gullymer came bursting through the bushes with scratches covering his face. Now he was furious.

'That sword is mine!' Gullymer yelled as he wiped blood from his face. 'I have to do this!' He cried as if he was exhausted.

Then the white raven came back at him and pecked while the boys watched. He fell to the ground and began to cry more. Judocus was just out of reach but he crawled no more. The white raven stayed back for now as Gullymer seemed to give up.

'You don't understand,' Gullymer said to Judocus. 'I don't *want* to hurt you . . . but I've no choice. I was tricked, and now I must kill you to save my soul . . .' Gullymer hung his head in shame. 'I must take your life in order to save mine.' Gullymer held his dagger up and looked into Judocus' young eyes.

Gullymer turned his dagger in on his own chest and pushed it in with a quick jolt. Both Judocus and Rían stood in shock at what had happened. Gullymer redeemed himself in his self-sacrifice. What poor gullible Gullymer didn't know was that he was always being tricked by Kah'Li. Only those who truly swore loyalty to evil, no matter what, lost their souls to the darkness beyond. But if someone was tricked, they could not be true evil as they had to be *tricked*. Gullymer may have been punished for his choices, but his soul never would have been condemned to an eternity of darkness. That's only for true evil.

Gullymer was dead (his soul was in no danger no matter what he thought) and he chose to die instead of killing Judocus. He saved Judocus from himself.

A woman stood out from the shadows and the white raven flew to rest on her shoulder.

'Who are you?' Judocus questioned, not knowing what to expect next.

'I am Juliath,' she said.

'You sent the raven!?' Rían said louder than he had intended.

'That's right.'

'What's goin' on?' Judocus asked Juliath.

'You are meant to be the new owner of the Sword of Rahzúr, Judocus,' she said. 'That man tried to stop you, until he changed his mind, thankfully. I thought he was a lost cause.'

'How can I be the new owner of this sword?' Judocus thought about the writing on the tablet. 'If I was to take it now, I'd be a thief; it needs to be given to me by the previous owner.'

Juliath smiled and said, 'You're right!'

'But Rahzúr is dead . . .' Rían said.

'His body lies in that tomb, but his soul visits us in another.'

And then the white raven flew straight up to the blinding light shining through the skylight in the trees. The white raven came beaming back down and began to change. With a burst of light, the bird became a spirit. It was the spirit of Rahzúr.

'You've done well, Judocus and Rían,' Rahzúr said.

They were both speechless; caught in the wonder.

'I was waiting for you, Judocus,' Rahzúr said. 'You're meant to carry this sword until you find the next worthy enough to carry it after.'

'Why me?'

'Because we know the true *you*,' Juliath said as she smiled. Her eyes wrinkled at the sides to show an honest smile and she was beautiful.

'I give you this sword, and hope that you know not only when to use it, but when not to use it,' Rahzúr said.

'Well, go on,' Rían said as he laughed and pushed Judocus towards the alter.

Judocus took his nervous steps forward and climbed onto the alter. He went on his toes again and slowly grabbed the hilt of the sword. It wasn't heavy like he thought it would be. Then something else started to happen: the sword began to shrink. Judocus'

eyes widened as he witnessed the sword suit its master. The sword adjusted itself for the comfort of Judocus. It was magic.

## 20

And just like that, Juliath and Rahzúr were gone. Both Judocus and Rían returned home, and told king Jordicus of their quest. Jordicus thought of it as just a silly game until he saw the Sword of Rahzúr with his very eyes. At first, his father wanted to take it from Judocus and give it back once he became old enough. What was such a young boy going to do with such a weapon? But he could not. Even the current king of Septus wasn't worthy; that didn't make him a bad person. He loved his son, and so he understood that Judocus must keep the sword for himself. And so, he did for many years, and brought it with him on many more quests, with Rían by his side.

## 21



'A magic sword?' Tólas interjected. 'That's cheating.' He grinned and both Judocus and Sara laughed.

'I suppose so,' Judocus said.

They continued their journey east; stopping in the town of Fallith as they wouldn't be stopping in a town until they reached Bardor, which was quite some distance. They would have to avoid Serín castle as the king of Telús had grown extremely paranoid with the war raging the lands west and south. This was King Roman Dunn. He was a good king in his prime, and wasn't as cruel or paranoid as other kings. But as the war continued on, he became fearful.

So, they had to make the most of this break while they could. They stayed at the Fall Inn and they feasted while they were there. All eight of them sat together and ate a large turkey that King Judocus had paid for himself, and they would drink and sing the night through.

The owner of the Fall Inn was delighted to get the custom. It had been very quiet lately

with the war, but once he knew about this group looking for a feast, he killed his biggest turkey and prepared them a meal to fill their bellies. There were candles lighting up the table and the owner called his best servers to help for the night. They all sat at a long table and plates were given to all. Even Sara and Jon had one pint each! They thought if Sara was old enough to go on a quest to slay the darkest wizard of all time, then she can certainly have a drink. And if she can have a drink then Jon might as well, too. Jon threw up after the first few gulps, but they all found it hilarious, Jon, too, actually.

Finlay Watters, a Telús man, held up his pint and made a toast. He made it to their quest and to the slaying of Vulga. Then he started to sing an old song:

*Falling of the night, bringing dawning of the  
day  
The soldiers of the king who fell and the king  
who falls today  
Remember all the countless wars and battles*

*so they say  
But I will carry on my fight till dawning of  
the day*

*Crying of the birds, bringing dawning of the  
day*

*The howling of the wolves who hunt and the  
hunter who they slay*

*Remember all the countless dreams and  
nightmares so they say*

*But I will carry on my fight till dawning of  
the day*

The others cheered and gulped there pints down just to make room for yet another. Finlay wasn't the only one to step up for a song, as Frederick Muny, Merthill and even Jon Rook stood up for theirs, too. It was a good night, though it was unplanned till they reached the town of Fallith and thought of the road ahead. They felt this would be their last chance for a long time, probably forever for some of them, to have a feast like this. They were right.

They didn't get up too early the next day – as if they could after that celebration – and they were sorry to see the town of Fallith grow more distant on the horizon behind them.

The group felt concerned together as though in synchronization when they moved further from Fallith and closer to Bardor. They all knew things were going to get difficult as they came closer and closer to Vulgaron.

Sara Turgan was glad to be on the move again, away from Lake Lóran. She wasn't the kind to hide. She was also glad to not be alone. She had the support from seven others who had sworn to protect her; and even Jon Rook was included in that. But Jon had sworn for all the wrong reasons. Sara didn't feel the same love for him as he had for her, but that wasn't her fault. Jon didn't realise that.

They could relax a little more at night than they would have if Merthill hadn't hunted down Val Dragól for slaying. That was

good thinking on Merthill's part. So, instead of half of the group awake at night, there was only need for one to keep watch. Those who would take turns on watch would be Merthill, Tólas, Judocus, Rían, Frederick and Finlay. None of them expected the younger ones to be able for watch so they weren't asked. They also felt enough was asked of Sara Turgan already. Her job was to slay Vulga, their job was to get her there. And Jon was just . . . Jon.

## 23

Vampires or not; they should never have let their guard down. There was a pack of hungry wolves hunting for their next lunch. They had been feeding on people fleeing from war; people who were scared, alone, and exhausted from their travels. These people were so scared of the war behind them that they had forgotten about the dangers all around them. The hungry pack spotted their next victims travelling in a group of eight (if wolves could count; maybe they could, as

they could tell eight were too much to handle so they stalked their pray). The wolves would have to wait for the right opportunity. That opportunity came surprisingly fast.

## 24

It was as dark as the night could be under the starry sky, and the trees whispered their soft secrets in the gentle wind. Everyone, but Judocus, slept the night through as a fire danced in the centre of their camp. Judocus marvelled at the stars above. He remembered his father who he missed dearly and hoped he could see him now; he remembered a distant adventure about a sword and a boy (himself); he remembered the Oracle.

An old friend tapped Judocus on his right shoulder.

'Rían,' Judocus said. 'I thought you were sleeping.'

'Why don't you get rest? I'll take over.'

'I think you need it more than me,' Judocus said. 'That snake . . .'

'I'm fine, Jude.'

'It'll be some story to tell.' He let out a quiet laugh.

'Hmm . . .'

'What's the matter, Rían?'

*I won't live to tell those stories, Jude* was what Rían thought and wanted to say but didn't. 'Nothing,' he said instead.

The wolves picked their opportunity.

Rían saw a dark shadow move in the corner of his eye and the flames danced from a gust of wind. He was quick to react and so he beheaded the wolf who meant to bite Judocus, but he forgot to protect himself. Just as he killed one wolf, another came from the side and took him down.

'Wolves!' Judocus shouted to his sleeping crew. Everyone jolted up as fast as they could. The fright woke them up pretty well.

There must have been six other wolves at the least. Judocus pulled the wolf from Rían with his bare hands and threw it into the fire. The wolf yelped in pain and lit up the night as it ran around in bright and burning flames.

Finlay and Tólas guarded Sara and Jon, even though Sara was shooting her crossbow, not missing a single shot. One of her bolts pierced a wolf's throat who was about to pounce on Judocus from behind. The fire began to grow larger and larger till flaming tentacles burst out and impaled every single wolf, and then there was utter silence. Merthill then lowered his staff and the fire retreated back to a withered flame.

Judocus came to his oldest friend as fast as he could. Rían was still lying on the ground where the wolf had jumped on him. He was too still. Judocus called to him as he came closer, but everyone else knew something was wrong. Rían's throat had been ripped apart and he was killed within seconds of the wolf jumping at him. Rían Ó Cuinn was dead.

'No . . .' Judocus couldn't say anything else.

'We'll help you bury him,' Merthill said as he came up behind him.

'He . . . saved my life.' That was all Judocus could manage to say before letting



out his tears. Rían was like a brother to him. Even though Rían knew his death would come to him on this quest he did not turn away. He was there for Judocus. Now he was gone.

## 25

The next day no one spoke a word. They all thought of Rían, but it stung Judocus the most.

'I'm sorry about Rían,' Sara said to Judocus, breaking the silence as they walked.

'Me too.'

'I lost people, too,' she said. 'It hurts.'

'It will for a very long time.' His eyes were red and raw. 'Please let me be alone for now, Sara.'

'Okay.' She understood too well and pulled her horse back to give Judocus some space for now. She became pale, taking a deep, pained breath as she closed her eyes. Sara felt guilty for the death of Rían and that guilt started to grow. This was a quest to get

Sara Turgan into Vulgaron, wasn't it? She chose to go when she was told of her involvement in breaking the curse.

'Are you okay?' Jon asked Sara as he came up beside her. He looked so small and young on his horse. They were both fourteen but he aged a lot slower (boys usually did).

'I'm fine, Jon.'

'That's crazy what happened to Rían, isn't it?'

Sara had no reply, but only nodded.

'I'm sorry . . . I talk when I'm nervous and I say stupid things.' He smiled and Sara did, too, a little.

'How do I fix that?' Jon asked. 'How do I stop myself saying stupid things?'

'Stop talking,' she said with a serious expression first, then a smile crept in at the corner of her mouth.

## 26

There was man in their path. He ordered them to halt in the name of King Roman of

Telús. The seven of them halted as commanded, but had no intention of stopping for long.

The man wasn't alone.

'Under orders of King Roman, you all must come to the castle to hide from the war to come,' the man said.

'We appreciate the offer, but we're movin' on,' Finlay said.

'You, why aren't you at your post?' The man recognised Finlay as a soldier of Telús.

'Never mind him,' Judocus interjected. 'I am King Judocus Cullen of Septus—'

'The king of Septus is Jordicus,' the man said. 'Why are you lying?'

'He doesn't lie! Jordicus was his father, and he has since passed,' Frederick said sorrowfully.

'We're going to keep moving,' Judocus said.

'I'm under strict orders!'

Judocus was about to get angry. 'Is it meant to be for our protection or is King Roman a coward?'

'He's trying to protect the people!'

'We're not his people to protect,' Sara said. The man stopped and looked at Sara for a moment.

There was silence for a moment longer till Merthill spoke. He said: 'King Roman is scared, and so are you.'

The man shifted his eyes to Merthill, but also hoped that his men didn't hear that because it was true. They were terrified.

'You should be scared,' Merthill continued. 'There is terrible darkness coming and many will die . . . if you don't let us move on.'

The man's throat was dry as he took in a gulp of air and swallowed. Everyone saw his fear then. It made Finlay feel better about abandoning his post at the bridge.

'Let them pass . . .'

'But—' One of his men called out.

'I said let them pass!'

And so, they would not be taken to Serín Castle to hide out the raging war. They were going to end the war. No cowardly man at a

road block would change that. King Roman could hide out this war as much as he liked, but the war would come nevertheless.

## 27

The rest of their journey out of Telús was a quiet one, thankfully. They crossed no vampires, snakes, wolves or cowards. They simply crossed the border into the land of Bardor, and Merthill brought them to the great Ryevale Castle where a certain beautiful and powerful and good witch lived. Sara was in awe of the sight of the castle. Ryevale was as magnificent as the tales had told. It was a fortress of earth and stone, and life thrived around it. Gwyneth was even more beautiful than the tales could tell and she was there to greet them as if she had known they were arriving on that very day.

'Please get some rest,' Gwyneth said. 'Tomorrow we will discuss what is next.'

'Thank you, Gwyneth,' Merthill said just before he hugged her with a smile.

There was rest, but no sleep, that night for either of the group of travellers. Their beds were comfortable beyond imagination, but it was their thoughts that had kept them awake.

Gwyneth had sent for them all to gather for palaver in a large room with a round table. Sitting at the round table were eleven people: Sara Turgan, Jon Rook, Merthill DeWisengrae, Judocus Cullen, Frederick Muny, Finlay Watters, Tólas Leigh, Vienne Valor, Leon Dégan (in his human form), Salen Serious (the king of Bardor, son of Valen and Gwyneth), and last but not least Gwyneth.

'I hope you were all comfortable last night,' Gwyneth said. 'It'll be a long journey ahead.'

Tólas stood up from his seat. 'Thank you, for your hospitality, Good Witch—'

'Please, called me Gwyneth.' She smiled. Somehow it made her even more beautiful. Tólas froze at the sight of beauty like he was under a spell (but it was no spell). Finlay

pulled Tólas back down to his seat with a grin. Tólas's face reddened.

'Anyway . . .' Merthill wanted to move on from this awkwardness. 'I'm sure you know the details by now, Gwyneth. You got my messages?'

'Of course,' she said, 'but I believe there is something else you do not know.'

'It's simple,' Judocus interjected. 'We need a ship. Can you help?'

'Please, Judocus, you must listen,' Gwyneth pleaded with kindness.

Judocus slumped back into his chair with a sigh, but he knew she was right.

'We're waiting for someone else to join us,' Gwyneth said as she then looked directly to Sara. 'We're waiting for a boy.'

Sara knew who Gwyneth was talking about . . . somehow.

'How do you know?' Sara quizzed Gwyneth.

'The boy you see in your dreams, I also saw. He comes from a very strange land where magic is supressed.'

Jon showed a hint of jealousy at the mention of Sara dreaming about another *boy*.

'Will Marson?' Judocus said. 'Do you mean Will Marson?'

Gwyneth was surprised and baffled by Judocus's knowledge. 'Yes, I believe that is his name.'

Sara had dreamed about this mysterious boy many nights since Lake Lóran, but she had never learned his name till now.

'How do you know his name?' Sara asked Judocus. It was a question everyone wanted to ask.

Judocus was silent for a moment. First, he thought they think he was crazy, but then quickly disregarded that and said: 'The Oracle came to me . . .'

No one replied, but everyone nodded and accepted it as truth. Judocus wasn't the only one that The Oracle had come to at that round table.

'So . . . when is this Will-kid coming?' Tólas broke the silence.

'We have to ask him to come,' Gwyneth



said. 'Or to be clearer, Sara must connect with Will in her dream for it is also Will's dream.'

'Why do I dream of him?' Sara asked.

'Your fate it linked together, though you are worlds apart. I've never seen anything like it before, Sara,' Gwyneth said.

'How do I ask him?'

'Simply . . . ask him . . .'

## *The Travelling Boy*

### 1

There's not much green in this world. No forests, no fields or meadows. They only exist in dreams and distant memories. In this world, there was only concrete. This was a terrible place known as Imperium.

Will Marson was an orphan for as long as he could remember, but now at the age of fifteen he pretty much believed he would always be an orphan. He'd been bouncing round different foster homes – never staying in one place long enough to call home. He was thought to be a trouble-child. And so he became a trouble-child.

Will's current foster parents were Jill and Bob Lane. They weren't the worst Will had ever had to deal with, but still no good. There weren't many good people left in this world . . . or so it looked that way.

Will's social worker, Tom Clegget, was one step away from sending him to the

detention centre for boys. The detention centre was basically a slave camp. The boys would be forced to work for the major companies without pay, and would also be taught how to be *happy* again. These detention centres were well known as a form of punishment, and well feared. There was one for girls, women, and men. No one goes to a detention centre twice; if someone is caught a second time they simply disappear.

Tom had used the detention centre as a threat on a number of occasions. So, Will tried his hardest to keep his head down. He did so by reading books. They were his escape. But the only problem was that there weren't many books left. Everything was becoming digital. And the books that he had read were diluted or changed completely by the government in power. They were all propaganda. Will actually enjoyed writing himself. He made new or re-wrote old stories to stay sane. But that was very dangerous. He had to hide that creativity. That would show that he had a mind of his own.

In this concrete world things were dull, people were controlled, everyone *had to* show their happiness. It seemed that everyone was a model or a celebrity of sorts even though they worked in a factory or a clothing store five days a week. If you didn't show you were happy then you'd be accused of being a terrorist of sorts plotting to bring down the government. The government had to be extreme. In the government's eyes, if you weren't happy you were unhappy, and people who are unhappy with their living situation would protest. To protest was an act of terrorism. There were many ways to show your *happiness* and everyone had to reach a certain monthly quota of documented happiness. The best way to broadcast your happiness was through social media, of course.

Will wasn't very happy which was why Tom Clegget had kept a close eye on him. Jill and Bob were Tom's spies more so than Will's foster parents. Will knew that; he wasn't stupid.

Will was getting ready to go to school. This horrible place was where the young were prepared for the maddening world in which they lived in. They were brainwashed, beaten, tortured, but no one learned. Children were broken here. The government feared children, so they made sure they would be thought correctly.

He double-checked that he had everything that he needed for school. Not because he'd be punished if he forgot his books or homework (which he would); it was because he *felt* like he was forgetting something . . .

Will was new enough to this school, but he wanted to keep his head down as much as possible. He didn't want to be sent to the detention centre, or even be accused as a terrorist. He'd been a witness to many arrests over the years. The latest was a boy – probably a year older than him. The boy broke down in a classroom after the teacher

caught him drawing a picture of a beautiful bird on a notepad. The teacher tore up the masterpiece, the boy tore down the teacher. The authorities were on him so fast it was as if they were waiting right outside the classroom, expecting him to breakdown that day. They must have been watching him; studying him. No one ever saw that boy again. Will didn't want to become *that* boy . . . but he supposed it may be inevitable. He was unhappy.

'Make sure to have a wonderful day,' Jill said before Will left the house. 'Don't forget to post about it!'

'I won't.' Will forced himself to smile. *Keep your head down.*

'To which part, Will?' She smiled with intense eyes that looked ready to pop from her plastic-like head.

'I won't forget to post, of course,' he said, but Jill kept staring with those soulless eyes.

Then a stack of plates crashed to the tiled floor from the counter, smashing into pieces. Jill jumped with fright.

'Oh my!' Jill exclaimed. 'I must've

stacked them too high . . . you go off to school now, Will.'

She didn't have to tell him twice for many reasons. One of them being that Will didn't want to be in her presence; another being that Jill and Bob would smack him across the head anytime he had to be told twice.

Will walked in the tall shadow of the old broken clock tower located in the town centre as he walked to school. He'd never seen that clock working his entire life. Up ahead, there was a strange man – young enough, but still a man – standing on the edge of the kerb. Will only paid half attention to him. Will's attention was grabbed by a poster on the wall beside him. On the poster was a town filled with smiling, happy people, and the writing over the town said: **Remember, Stay Happy!**

The poster next to that one showed a suspicious looking figure in a hood. The writing on that one said: **REPORT HATE CRIMES, it could happen to YOU!**

Something deep in the back of Will's

mind tried to come forward. He couldn't quite grasp it. It felt like he was trying to remember an old dream; maybe he was—

'FREEZE!'

Will jumped with fright. He thought it was for him, but he turned to see that the officer was shouting to the strange man on the kerb just up ahead.

'I . . . I've had enough!' The man on the kerb screamed not only to the officer, but to everyone on the street.

Spectators gawked with their lifeless grins and pointed their recording devices (canons) at the dramatic situation.

'DOWN ON THE GROUND!' The officer took out his taser.

'No,' the man said on the kerb. He had no gun, knife, or any physical weapon in his hands. The reason the officer shouted "Freeze" was because the man no longer looked *happy*. 'What's the point?'

The officer couldn't let this man speak a moment longer. The man on the kerb was tased by the officer. He fell in a terrible fit



with foam oozing from his mouth. The foam turned red as he had bitten his tongue with the uncontrollable clamping of his teeth. No one would ever see that man on the kerb, or anywhere, ever again.

‘Off to school now, son,’ the officer said as he locked eyes with Will.

The officer dragged away the man’s unconscious body, making sure everyone could see him smiling while he did it. People continued to watch and record with their canons – many of them sure to post it later to get some views.

Will wouldn’t hang around to see what happened next. He was too afraid that that would be his future.

He’d make sure not to be late for school. No more distractions from posters or men on the edge of kerbs.

### 3

When Will was in class, they were showed a video about how they could help

the world to stay *happy*. The man with a terrible grin on the video claimed that since everyone was happy there had been no wars. He went on and on and on about a terrible war many years ago. The Ruzi Party was led by the Great Delwin Hun Ruzi. Delwin led his army to victory, and that brought them to the world they lived in to this day. The government was still controlled by the Ruzi Party, of course. And it was a one-world government.

*Those who win the war tell the tales*, Will thought but did not say. That would have been foolish.

Will always wondered if someone else was just like him, *unhappy*. He guessed that there might be, but had to accept that he'd never know unless he simply asked someone. But that was yet another foolish thing to do, so he would not do that. Will Marson was no fool. In fact, he was like no other. He was special.

The video with the smiling man went on – it was giving Will a headache – but to Will's

and everyone else's surprise, the video stopped playing. The teacher was baffled as the projector caught fire. A normal class of children would laugh and scream, but this class was silent – a little startled, yes, but silent. Will felt goosebumps on the back of his neck, and he felt relieved that the video had ended prematurely.

'Right, class,' Mr. Bell, their teacher, said. He scratched the back of his head and pushed his glasses from the tip of his pointed nose. 'We'll have to reschedule this session for another time.'

The class of students stayed silent. Will tried his hardest to hide his relief. He must have done a good job as he surely would have been punished.

#### 4

When school finished at 4pm, students had to go straight home. People didn't like the look of groups of teens hanging around after school for any reason. Teens were an

irritation. The government feared children, but they also feared teens as they were more likely to rebel. So many teens were made an example. There were so much more young people held in detention centres. You didn't grow old in Imperium if you were *unhappy*.

Will Marson was walking home (but he never really called it home) when he found a small corner bookstore. It caught his attention because he'd never seen one quite like this before. He never even noticed it ever existing before either.

Out the front, there was an overhanging sign with the name of the bookstore. It said **THE GUARDIAN BOOKSTORE**. Will looked around to see if anyone was watching him, but there was absolutely no one else in sight. He didn't stop to think whether or not it was some sort of trap to catch those curious or stupid enough to fall for it. The reason Will didn't stop to think was that he felt an undeniable truth that this was good; that it wasn't a trap. He didn't know why he felt that, he just did. He knew he'd be okay once

he opened that door to the bookstore. Will pushed open the door and a small bell rang above his head. It rang again as he shut the door softly behind him. There was an alien feeling of safety in this bookstore that Will was sure he had never felt before.

'Ah! A fellow bookworm!' A gentle voice cheered from the counter. 'Please, come in, come in. Welcome!'

Will did not answer. He only scanned the room full of hundreds of books he was sure should have been burned long ago by the Ruzi Party. He had so many questions, but didn't know where to begin.

The man leaned on the countertop between columns of books and smiled. 'You can call me Joseph, or Joe . . . but please don't call me Joey.' He laughed a little, and it was genuine laughter; something Will had most likely never witnessed before, except maybe when his foster parents beat him; they seemed to genuinely enjoy that.

Will still stayed silent. He was too used to being seen and not heard.

Joseph noticed Will's hesitation and decided to give him a little patience. 'Please, take your time and look through some books. I recommend you read this one.' He held out an old book that Will had never seen before. It was titled **HARRY POTTER AND THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE** by J. K. Rowling. 'This one is *magical*.'

Will took the book and opened it to read the first chapter titled as **The Boy Who Lived**. Will didn't even realise that his tears had fallen onto the pages of the book when he thought about the fact that *he* was the boy who *never* lived. Will had always done well to hide his sadness. Now he found himself crying in front of a complete stranger. It would be considered a terribly dangerous thing to do to cry in front of someone. But there was something strange about this bookstore – strange – but good, and this man who called himself Joseph or Joe but no Joey.

'Thank you, sir,' Will said with a slight crackle in his voice.

'No problem, and please call me Joseph,

or Joe . . . okay, if you really want to, you can call me Joey!' The nice old man let out a burst of one single laugh. It sounded like BAH!

'How is this place here?' Will asked Joseph. 'How do you have all these books?'

'Why don't you read some books first? You'd not believe me when I tell you unless you feed your imagination a little.'

'Can I take some books?'

'I'm afraid not, Will,' Joseph said. 'It's not safe out there, but you're safe to read them here.'

'Okay . . . wait, how do you know my name?'

'You don't miss a trick, Will.' Joseph showed his genuine smile again. 'I let that one slip. I'll explain everything soon, but you need to read some books to get your mind flowing again.'

Will knew Joseph was keeping something from him – it was obvious – but he could tell there was nothing sinister about him.

Will miraculously made it home on time

without making his foster parents suspicious about where he'd been. He could think of nothing else but Joseph in the bookstore.

*Who was that strange man?*

Will would find no answers in his head, so he decided to give the bookstore another visit after school. It would be dangerous, but what other choice had he?

## 5

The next day was almost a repeat of the day before (which was normal in Imperium), only without the man on the kerb. Mr. Bell, Will's teacher, was forced to talk about another subject as their projector was too damaged from the day before.

'Can anyone tell me about Hate Speech?' Mr. Bell quizzed the classroom.

'It's a crime, sir,' a smiling boy named Jamie Wheeler said.

'Correct! Give me some examples?'

'Ehh . . .' Jamie looked a little afraid now.

'Stay happy, Jamie, remember,' Mr. Bell



pointed to a smiley face drawn on the chalkboard. 'One example of Hate Speech would be if I called you a terrible name or cursed at you; another would be if I decided to question our wonderful government. Take out your canons and swipe to page three-hundred and sixty-four so we can go into more details on Hate Speech, and see more examples.'

Will let out a sigh by mistake, the entire class stopped and turned to him with their accusing eyes.

'What was that, Will?' Mr. Bell asked.

Will only smiled. He didn't know what to say. Luckily, his smile did the trick.

'Anyway,' Mr. Bell said. 'Swipe to page three-hundred and sixty-four.'

Will contained his sigh of relief this time. That was a stupid mistake. He had to be more careful or he'd be heading to the detention centre instead of school the next day.

On Will's second visit to the bookstore, there was also another old man who called himself Roland. He, too, seemed to be sweet

and kind like Joseph. He was welcomed and told to read as much as he liked.

Will sat there in a fortress of books. Roland and Joseph didn't seem to mind; after all, Will looked to be their only customer. Will was really beginning to believe that this wasn't like any other store. Not because of the forbidden books, but a feeling among other things. These two men seemed to know Will, and time moved strangely in the store. Will felt that he had been in the store for only a moment, yet he was nearly finished reading Harry Potter. He also remembered that he had made it home in good time the day before even though he had stopped in the mysterious bookstore.

'Sir . . . Joseph,' Will said as he crawled from his fortress of books. 'Is magic real?' He held up the book titled as Harry Potter, which he had just about finished.

'What do you think?' Joseph said this with a smile and a raised eyebrow.

'Are you wizards?'

'No . . . not exactly,' Roland said.

'Why am I here?'

'Because you need to read, Will,' Joseph said as he handed him another book. Will looked outside with a moment of hesitation. He might be late home. 'Don't worry, you've all the time in the world here, Will.'

Will took the book from Joseph's kind hands. This one had a fiery dragon on the cover surrounded by a mountain of gold. It was titled as **THE HOBBIT** by someone named Tolkien.

There in the fantastic bookstore, Will became lost in yet another tale, but time paid no attention.

Will had gotten tired with all the reading (which he wasn't used to) and decided to call it a night – yet it was still daytime when he left the bookstore. In fact, it was as though no time had even passed since he had entered the bookstore earlier. He glanced back only to see both Joseph and Roland wave him goodbye. He planned to head back the next day.

Jill Lane watched Will come through the front door with her lifeless eyes. She looked like an owl watching her prey from above. Her hair looked like yellow plastic and her face was slathered with make-up.

Will locked eyes with her and she threw him a horrid grin, showing her glaring white teeth with smudges of red lipstick on them. It made Will's skin crawl but he hid it well.

'You look tired,' Jill said, still smiling.

'I . . . was working hard.' Will tried his best not to sound as if he was complaining. 'I had a good day!'

'Wow!' Jill exclaimed like someone trying desperately to sound as if they cared, but did not. 'Bob, you hear that?'

'Hmm?' Bob had his face buried in the local paper, **The Imperium Times**. 'What's that, Jill?' He dropped the paper to the table. His black hair looked just as plastic as Jill's. Together, they look like dolls.

'Will said he'd had a good day! Ain't that just *marvellous*?' Jill's eyes nearly popped out of her head on the last word.

'That's gosh-darn ace, son,' Bob said as he then gave the same horrid grin. 'Make sure you post about it before dinner!'

'Of course,' Will said.

'Hey, why not post about it now?' Jill said with excitement. 'Let's all post together as a *family*.'

'That . . . is a brilliant idea, Honey-pie,' Bob searched himself till he found what he was looking for. It was a rectangular device with a screen. He took his index finger and touched the screen, making it light up.

Jill also found her own device.

'Go on, Will,' Bob said. 'Where's your canon?'

Will's heart jumped for just a moment as he had thought that he had forgotten his canon. Canons were small devices which everyone must carry with them at all times. They had every bit of information needed to get by, including their personal information or identification. To lose your canon would lead to punishment or a hefty fine. Luckily, Will was always careful. He had his canon on him

and waved it to Bob. 'Yep, I've got it here,' he said.

'Perfection!' Bob yelled. 'Let's get posting. I'm going to say that I'm so *happy* to have such a wonderful foster-son, and that I'm in love forever with my wife, Jill!' He typed on his canon while he spoke.

'Aww, too sweet!' Jill said with a smile painful to Will's eyes. 'I'm going to say that I'm so *happy* to cook for the two most handsome men in all of Imperium.' Both Jill and Bob laughed from their throats; Will made himself laugh, too. He had to.

'What'll you say, Will?' Bob asked.

Will was on the spot. Bob and Jill waited in anticipation. 'I'm going to say . . . that . . . ' Will was hesitating; he was tired, both physically and mentally, with this bullshit. Then Will was saved by the bell. Or in this case the bell was an exploding glass of orange juice that sat on the table in front of Bob. Orange juice splashed everywhere. Both Jill and Bob screamed with fright.

'Holy Fu-' Bob stopped himself. '-I mean

. . . holy moly, what was that?'

'I'll get that cleaned up,' Jill said, like a robot with a duty. 'My, what a mess!'

'How'd that happen?' Bob looked shaken with fright. It was a strange thing to happen, alright.

Strange, yet Will had a feeling he knew what did it. Will believed that, somehow, he had caused that glass to explode just like Harry Potter had let the snake out of captivity in the zoo. What else could have done it?

## 7

The next day Will made his third visit to the bookstore after the torture of school. He talked to Joseph and Roland with uncontained excitement about what had happened with the glass of orange juice. He then went back to reading *The Hobbit* as he was in no rush, and he read till he finished it. He had all the time in the world . . . somehow.

Will placed the book back on the counter with care. 'Please, tell me what's happening.'

'Do you think you're ready to believe us?' Joseph asked.

'I think so . . . I can't wait any longer. I need to know everything. Who you are, what this place is, how, why me?'

'Good thing we've all the time in the world,' Roland said and then he laughed.

'The stories in these books . . . they're not real?'

'Oh, they're real, alright,' Joseph said. 'All fiction in one world comes from true tales in another world. Mortals are all a little magic themselves and they don't even realise it. They think their creations are *theirs* when that is not so. What they're actually doing when painting, singing, or writing is connecting – channelling – themselves to the Unknown (if they're doing it properly, that is). Those books you read may be fiction here, but they're as real as you are, only somewhere else, altogether.'

'Why are you telling me?'

'Will, you are not a mortal,' Roland said. 'You're something entirely different, and rare



enough these days.'

'So, I did make that glass explode,' Will said with some excitement. 'Am I like Harry Potter? Am I a wizard?'

'No, Will, you're something more magical than a wizard. You're something called Sekär.' Roland pulled up a wooden chair to sit down.

'What's that?'

'It means you're more powerful than any wizard or witch or mortal combined,' Roland said. 'Wizards need a staff or wand of sorts to aim or project their magic; witches are a little more powerful than wizards, so they don't rely on wands whatsoever, but both are still very limited in what they can do, and most have a speciality like fiery tricks for example. They need potions to conjure certain spells. You, however, have an unlimited power.'

'I've never done much tricks before . . .'

Will said.

'You've been suppressed, Will,' Roland said. 'This world is a dreadful one, it's no wonder your gifts have been hidden after all

this time.'

'So . . . what can I do?' Will asked. 'How can I use my powers?'

'You already know that, Will,' Joseph said. 'You've used them before. You need to think it *loud*.'

'What is it you want me to do with my powers?'

'You need to go to Dómain . . . but I'm sure you may already know that, too?'

'I . . . almost forgot,' Will remembered a distant dream. This had been at the back of his mind for days, but he could never quite remember. Until now. It was a reoccurring dream and he'd been putting them to the back of his mind; or at least this supressing world has. In these distant dreams a girl had been asking him to find her. 'I've been having dreams. There's a beauti . . . a girl . . .'

'Sara Turgan is her name,' Roland said.

'And who are you two?' Will pointed to them both.

'I'm Roland the Dreamcatcher.'

'And I'm Joseph the Bookkeeper.'

'I don't really understand what that means ...'

'We're Guardians,' Joseph said. 'There's a bunch of us, but the one you need to know about besides us two, is the Clockmaker. He's a little funny; not as sane as myself or Roland here. He's got a few screws loose over the years. You'll need to find him.'

'Why isn't he here with you?'

'Like I said, he's a bit funny. He hasn't been the same since darkness fell over Dómain. He's unwell. But we know he is here in *this* world. To get to Dómain, you need to find him.'

'How? Where do I begin?'

'All he knows is time (and dimensions) so where do you think he'd be?' This was Roland. He sat forward with his elbows resting on his knees.

Will didn't answer, but he thought he knew. The only place he could think of was the old broken clock tower in the town centre. It had to be.

'Good,' Roland said as he could see the

knowledge in Will's eyes.

'It's . . . dangerous,' Will said with a heavy burden of worry. 'It sounds like an adventure . . . but . . .'

Joseph leaned over the counter of books to get closer to Will as he said: 'The greatest danger in life is *not* to go on that adventure. Wouldn't you agree?' He smiled.

Will also smiled and nodded his head. 'Are you coming with me?'

'I'm afraid we did all we can to help,' Roland said. 'We've certain rules. We can't get too involved, even in the darkest of times, just know that no matter what happens we'll always look after you.'

'You should prepare yourself – be careful – because you'll never come back to this world again, Will,' Joseph said.

'I never want to come back.' Will stood up straight with his chest pushed out. His dark hair swept back over his forehead and his brown eyes glowed like honey in the light.

The next day, Will planned on skipping school this time. This was the point of no return. Either he'd lost his mind, or this was some crazy trap, or it was all real.

*Why not have this adventure? Will had thought. Nothing to lose anyway; but everything to gain.*

Will emptied his school bag of the useless propaganda they had been forcing down his throat for the past fifteen years. He took his notebook which he had stashed behind the loose skirting board in his bedroom. His foster parents never looked there on their weekly inspections.

For a moment Will tried to test his powers on a cola can. He placed it on his desk and stared at it, and even brought his hands up towards he can (as if that would help), but nothing happened. His mind wasn't fully focused or he just wasn't doing it right. He was new to this.

Then he heard Bob call him from downstairs to hurry for school. The can was suddenly crunched as if a tonne of weight

came down on it. It was as flat as paper. Will smiled at the corner of his mouth.

He went back to packing his bag. He found a torch – clicked the on/off switch to make sure it worked – with some batteries to put in his visibly empty bag. He felt like a child planning on running away. But that's what he was, right?

He then packed his clothes and underwear. There was nothing else of value or importance for Will to pack. Then as he zipped up the bag, Bob entered the room with his fake smile slowly disappearing on his plastic face.

'What's goin' on, Will?' Bob asked. His head cocked to the side like a confused dog. 'You gotta go to school.'

'No,' Will said as he stood firmly on the ground. Will glared at Bob wishing for his head to explode. Nothing happened.

'WHAT DID YOU SAY?' Bob showed his teeth with a hateful grin. It was the most genuine emotion Will had ever seen from Bob. 'Come here!' Bob grabbed Will by the neck.

Will screamed out and an unimaginable force sent Bob right back out of the bedroom, crashing against the wall and to the ground. Dust settled and Will threw his bag over his back and stood over Bob's unconscious body.

'You little fuck!' Jill snarled from the end of the hallway. 'What did you do?'

Then Jill started to feel strange. The foster boy walked slowly towards her with an eerie calmness and she could not move. She tried to speak but her mouth stayed shut. She tried to open her mouth with her fingers, in panic, but her mouth vanished. Jill could feel her teeth with her tongue but there was no mouth opening. She wouldn't grin anymore. She tried to scream but she was muffled. Then she fainted.

Will walked out of the house. He took out his canon which started to make all sorts of noises and notifications to remind him to post about his happiness on social media platforms. There were advertisings among many others, covering the screen. He frowned before he launched his canon against the brick

wall and watched it smash into smithereens.

*That felt good.*

There was no going back now. He had to move fast or he'd be caught and sent to the detention centre. But Will thought they might not even bother with the detention centre after this; they might just execute him.

## 9

Bob Lane didn't know how long he had been knocked out. He took a moment to gather his thoughts before he climbed back to his feet. He was lucky he didn't break his back, but he did have a massive bruise. Then he saw Jill. He didn't know what to make of it. She looked at him with terrified eyes . . . and no mouth . . .

Bob began breathing heavily and rubbed his eyes as if that would make her mouth reappear. But her mouth was still gone.

'I must've got a nasty bump on my head, Jill.'

She replied with a muffled scream that



startled Bob enough to make him trip over his own feet. All Bob could think to do was to call Tom Clegget. He'd know what to do.

## 10

The old clock tower wouldn't be hard to find, but to get in without being noticed was a different story. Will was meant to be in school when a frail old woman saw him go through the entrance to the clock tower. She thought it was very unusual. She sat on a bench outside a betting office. *Happy People Gamble!* was on a poster displayed in the window next to the old woman. The thing that baffled the old woman the most was how easy the young boy opened the door to the clock tower, as she had known that to be tightly chained up since she was the boy's age. Very unusual, indeed.

## 11

Will climbed the winding, narrow staircase to the top of the old clock tower. He

startled some pigeons just as he reached the top. He scanned the room where the turret clock was, but could see no Clockmaker. Will went to the window, and below he could see his social worker, Tom Clegget, and some officers talking to an old woman outside the betting office. She pointed to the clock tower with a shaking finger of an evil witch.

'When are you doin' here?' An old man crept from the shadows behind Will.

'I'm sorry?' Will was startled and confused from the word *When*.

'Never mind . . .' The old man scurried over to another window where he glanced down below.

'Are you the Clockmaker?' Will asked and the old man turned to him. Their eyes locked, and the old man seemed to study Will with great care.

'Is this *now*?' The old man's hands were shaking as he brought them to his face.

'I'm sorry,' Will said. 'I don't have much time—'

'Hah!' The old man laughed. 'That's a

good one.'

'I don't understand . . .'

'The earliest clock tower was the Tower of the Winds in Athens.' The old man didn't seem to be talking to Will. He had no idea what an *Athens* was. But Will understood, now, what Joseph and Roland meant when they said the Clockmaker was unwell.

'I don't know what you're talking about, sir.'

'Wrong time? Wrong place?' The old man looked puzzled.

'This is hopeless,' Will said this to himself.

'No, this is Ben,' the old man said. 'I'm Ben. You're Will Marson, the travelling boy!'

'Yes!' Hope came back to Will in a flood. 'Can you help me, Ben?'

'Of course I can! When?'

'Now, Ben.'

'Hmm, everything is *now*, Will.' Ben pointed to his head with his shaking hand.

Will calmed his shaking hand by gently taking it in his. As soon as Will held Ben's

hand, Ben felt in the moment for the first time in such a long one. It was temporary, but it was long enough for Ben to give Will a golden doorknob. It looked like old junk, but somehow Will knew that it wasn't.

'This will get you where you want to go, Will,' Ben said as he placed the doorknob in Will's hands.

'How do I use it?'

'When . . . did I give you that?' Ben pointed to the golden doorknob. He was no longer in the moment.

Will could hear footsteps marching up the narrow staircase. It was Tom Clegget and the few officers coming for him.

'That time already?' Ben said as he vanished in the shadows.

Will started to panic, and then the door swung open in the clock tower.

'What have *you* been up to, Will?' Tom said as he entered the room. 'You know what I'm gonna do with you, don't you?' He said it with a smile.

Suddenly, the old clock tower began to

tick and tock with a painful sound that brought Tom and the officers to their knees.

'What the hell!' Tom shouted. 'This clock should be broken!' He threw his hands to his ears as the ticking and tocking became unbearable. It felt like the sound was coming from inside their own heads. But it didn't seem to affect Will. 'How?' Tom asked Will once more before his ears started to bleed.

Will said nothing in return as he pushed Tom and the officers back down the staircase with amazing force. The door shut violently behind them.

Will walked slowly to the door and thought about where he wanted to go. He placed the golden doorknob on the door and it seemed to stick to it like a magnet. The doorknob twisted in Will's palm and when it opened there was no staircase. It was the bookstore. The doorknob came right off with Will's release and he walked into the bookstore with his heart beating so loud he was sure he could hear it.

'You made it!' Joseph cheered as he stood in his usual spot by the counter. 'I knew you would.' He smiled his usual smile.

'I found Ben,' Will said. 'He gave me this.' Will held up the golden doorknob. It was round and kind of looked like a pawn from a chess board.

'Ah, I'm glad he was able to help.'

'He really isn't well, Joseph,' Will said with real concern. 'What's wrong with him?'

'He's dying. There's darkness growing in the land of Dómain, and it's killing him . . . may kill me, too.'

'Can I save him?'

'Yes,' Roland said as he came into the store from the back room. 'You've got to go to Dómain, to Sara Turgan.'

'With this?' Will held up the doorknob.

'It brought you here, didn't it?' Roland said as he held his arms out to show off the bookstore.

Will looked around for a second then

asked: 'Can I take some with me? Books, I mean.' Will smiled and so did the others.

'Take as much as you can carry, Will,' Joseph said.

Will opened his bag and took as many as Joseph had recommended: as much as he could carry. He took the rest of the Harry Potter collection, along with more works by Tolkien, a book called *Between Heaven and Hell* where a troubled teen (a little older than Will) gets into a bit of a strange situation after a car crash, and other antique looking books he didn't manage to catch the name of as he placed them into his bag.

'You know you're welcome to drop by here whenever or wherever you are,' Joseph said with sentimental kindness. 'This bookstore is for only *you*. As long as you have that doorknob. So, don't worry if you can't carry enough books!' He laughed and they all laughed together as if they'd been friends for years. Will wondered just how long he'd actually spent in this bookstore. For all he knew it could have been years.

'You're a very brave young man, Will,' Roland said as he reached out to put his hand on Will's shoulder. 'Remember to use your imagination when it comes to your powers.'

'That's the reason for all these stories,' Joseph said as he threw his hands at all the books. 'They feed your power by feeding your imagination.'

'If this is all a dream, I don't want to wake.' Will's eyes began to water with the emotion he was finally allowed to show without fear of being sent to a detention centre.

'Take care of yourself, Will,' Joseph said.

'Thank you, Joseph.'

'Just think of where you want to go . . . then use any door you like,' said Roland.

Will nodded his head with a smile and wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt. He was more than ready to leave this supressing world behind. And so, he did.



## PART IV

### *The Red Door*

#### 1

Will Marson walked through the door to a world he would have expected in a book. He found himself in a magnificent castle with walls of stone, trees with bending branches, and flowers with razor thorns. It was as if this castle was protected by nature.

He felt out of place as he walked around in his denim jeans, white shirt and a light jacket with a zipper.

‘You must be Will Marson,’ a woman from behind said.

Will twirled around with a startled look. But he was quickly calmed once he saw the most kind, beautiful woman he’d ever seen. And Will came from a world where beauty (or *happiness*) was the key to success . . .

‘Am I wrong?’

‘Yes . . . I mean NO . . . I am Will

Marson.'

'Nice to meet you, Will. My name is Gwyneth Serious. We've been waiting for you.' She smiled. Will was still getting used to genuine smiles, but this smile was really something special.

## 2

And so, there was another gathering at the round table in Ryevale of the chosen few. Gwyneth had still entered the room with Will by her side. Everyone looked on with bewilderment and amazement.

'Hi everyone, I'm Will,' he said as he took his seat at the round table.

Merthill laughed to himself, while he smoked from a pipe, but not out of the boy's expense. It was kind laughter.

Will scanned all those sitting at the round table. They all looked like characters from the books that he had read.

'I know you,' Will said as he caught eyes with Sara. 'You know me, too?'

‘Yes,’ she said.

Jon Rook shifted his eyes away.

‘You’re Sara Turgan,’ Will continued.

‘Yes, and you’re Will Marson.’

Tólas cleared his throat. ‘This is very wonderful and all that crap, but what’re we doin’ next?’

‘Tólas is right,’ Frederick said. ‘Shouldn’t we think of a plan.’

‘Well, I’m a little confused,’ Will said.

Merthill laughed again. ‘Why don’t I have a little chat with Will, while you all have a discussion.’

‘That’s a good idea,’ Gwyneth said.

While Merthill took Will out of the room with the round table to fill him in on the details of their quest (who better to do that than Merthill DeWisengrae?), the others tried to conjure up a plan.

‘We need a ship,’ Judocus said to Gwyneth.

‘You’ll have one waiting at Bardor Quay.’

‘And who is going?’ Judocus continued.

‘What do you mean?’ Finlay asked.

‘Aren’t we invading Vulgaron?’

‘No, that won’t work,’ Judocus said. ‘It’s never worked. Like we discussed before, we must be quiet about this. Just one ship. Hopefully we’ll get into Vulgaron undetected.’

‘We’ll assumed Merthill and Will are going,’ Gwyneth said. ‘Who else will volunteer?’

Tólas stood up from his seat. ‘I volunteer.’

Finlay stood up from his seat. ‘I volunteer.’

Judocus stood up from his seat.

Frederick stood up from his seat.

Jon stood up from his seat. ‘I will go, too.’

‘I don’t think so, Jon,’ Tólas said. ‘It’s very dangerous.’

‘I volunteer to protect Sara,’ Leon Dégan said. Gwyneth looked saddened, momentarily.

‘What about you, Gwyneth?’ Tólas asked.

'I cannot leave Ryevale,' Gwyneth said. 'There's a war coming from the west. These people must be protected.'

'I understand.' Tólas nodded his head. 'How will you fight when they come?'

'We have sent word to King Bane Harmor of Gredius. We know that they don't think too highly of us here in Ryvale, but we just hope that he understands the importance of this war. All life could fall if Vulga wins . . .'

'So no pressure,' Tólas said.

### 3

'Wait, Leon,' Gwyneth called as they finished up at the round table. 'I need to give you something.'

Leon came to her and she put a talisman in his hand.

'Put that on, Leon,' You won't have me to keep you sane.'

The talisman was a small stone on a necklace. It glowed softly as Leon placed it around his neck. 'How will this help?'

‘Without me, your curse will get bad again. You will forget yourself, like before. You will have no control as a beast. This talisman will stop you from changing, therefore, you will not forget or lose yourself to the illness. Always keep this on you, Leon.’

‘Thank you, Gwyneth.’

‘Be careful, Leon.’ She kissed him on the cheek.

#### 4

The volunteers stood in a row, ready to make their way to Bardor Quay, when the people of Ryevale cheered on their bravery.

‘May the Guardians of Anima be with you all,’ Gwyneth said as they moved off on their horses. Finlay Watters pulled a horse and cart. No one saw Jon Rook sneak into the back of that cart before they moved off.

#### 5

Bardor Quay still looked the same to

Leon Dégan. He found it strangely nostalgic. Finally, he was getting his ship in a sort of way. He would sail out into the Caíirth Sea with this small crew into the dark lands of Vulgaron.

The ship was large, but small enough for sneaking into Vulgaron with a small crew. It rocked on the gentle waves in the evening light. Leon thought about all the time that had passed, with so little change. This was the important quest he was born for; the quest that the Oracle had told him about long ago on a snowy mountain.

So much time had passed since a certain giant raided the village of Fogmór. So much pain and darkness was spread across the land of Dómain. Now, this was their chance to put all that to an end.

## 6

Tólas found the young stow away hiding in a chest as the ship set sail well over an hour ago.

‘You sneaky little shit,’ Tólas grabbed him by the scruff. ‘You’ll give us bad kamen!’

‘Let me go,’ Jon shouted. ‘I had to come! I volunteered.

‘Turn this ship around,’ Tólas called to Leon.

‘Too late for that,’ Merthill came close. ‘The boy wants to be here. He knows the dangers.’

‘He’ll just get himself killed!’

‘Won’t we all?’ Judocus muttered. He’d never been the same since Rían had died.

Frederick suddenly vomited. ‘AH! I’m seasick . . . help me out, Merthill. Have you got some potions for me?’

‘I’m afraid I don’t, Fred,’ Merthill said with truth.

Will came over to Frederick. Everyone watched in silence with curiosity. Will put his hand over Frederick’s stomach and tried to concentrate. But he didn’t know how to fix motion sickness. How could he imagine something he knew nothing about?

‘Sorry,’ Will said. ‘Was worth a try.’



Everyone laughed.

‘Ha ha!’ Frederick jeered. ‘Glad you’re all havin’ so much fun!’ Then he threw up some more.

Merthill called Will over.

‘You’re not exactly a wizard, are you?’ Merthill asked as he sat down on the chest that Jon had been once hiding.

‘This is all new to me,’ Will said. ‘I was told I’m something called Sekär.’

‘That’s certainly different, Will.’ Merthill’s eyebrows raised.

‘Merthill,’ Will said. ‘How is it that I’m connected in all this?’

‘I would be a fool to guess, Will.’

‘That girl . . .’ Will glanced over to Sara.

‘It’s very curious, Will,’ Merthill said. ‘Have you spoken to her?’

‘No . . . funnily enough.’ Will looked to the floor and scratched his head. ‘I’m a little nervous. Where I come from, we’re separated . . . girls and boys.’

‘Sounds horrible.’

‘It was.’

‘Just be yourself, Will,’ Merthill said as he placed his hand on his shoulder. ‘You’ll do just fine.’

Will made his brave way over to Sara on that ship. She could see him coming for a while, so she pretended not to see him just in case she made it awkward.

‘This is . . . strange,’ Will said as he stopped beside Sara.

‘Hmm.’ Sara tried to play it cool. She’d never felt this way about a boy before, and she didn’t really know Will at all.

‘I’ve never been on a boat before.’ Will was running out of things to say. He threw his head back at Merthill for a little help only to see that everyone was watching. How could they not on this small ship?

‘They’re all watching, aren’t they?’ Sara said quietly as she grinned.

‘Yeah.’ He laughed.

‘Why are you doing this?’ Sara asked once the laughing stopped.

‘What?’ Will asked.

‘Why are you putting yourself in

danger?’

‘I could ask you the same thing,’ he said as he pulled his hair back from his eyes. She liked how he did it, but hoped he didn’t notice. ‘But I guess I just have a feeling that this is more important than we could imagine.’

Sara stayed silent.

‘You like to read?’ Will pulled The Hobbit from his bag. ‘This is one of my favourites. You can have it.’

Sara, in fact, loved to read. Once upon a time, she used to hide away and run through fields just so she could read in peace. ‘Thank you, Will.’ She took the book and accidentally held his hand for a moment. Their eyes locked.

Tólas cleared his throat as loud as he could causing them to separate. Tólas felt an undeniable duty to be that girl’s father. He’d known her since she was a baby. Now, she was all grown up and he was the closest thing to family she had left.

The moon glowed on the calm sea as they rowed the small ship in the night. There was no wind to carry their sail, but that was the least of their worries.

What lurked beneath was something to worry about. The calm water stirred and the ship hit something big.

‘What was that?’ Frederick called out. ‘We hit something.’

‘Keep rowing,’ Leon said.

Sara peeked her head over the edge of the ship. All she could see was her own reflection in the water.

‘Don’t get too close to the edge, Sara,’ Tólas warned.

‘Ah, it’s probly jus’ a whale,’ Finlay said with high hopes.

Then the still waters began to crash and burst as a giant sea serpent came splashing out, rocking the ship wildly. Sara fell backwards. Will tripped and actually fell overboard.

‘Will!’ Merthill shouted as he reached for his old staff.

The serpent of unknown size brought his huge head up above the water and glared down below at its dinner.

Finlay threw a spear, hitting his mark, but it did no damage whatsoever. The ship rocked and rocked. Merthill could not reach his staff. Tólas shielded Sara as the giant sea serpent sprung forward for the kill. As it came closer it started to shrink at great speed till it was no bigger than a worm. The shrunken sea serpent landed next to Tólas and Sara. Baffled, Tólas brought his foot down upon the tiny creature, crushing it.

‘What happened?’ Finlay asked anyone who would answer.

Merthill turned to see Will Marson, soaking wet, standing back on the ship where he had fallen from.

‘Will?’ Merthill called.

Everyone else turned to look at Will.

Will said nothing, but he smiled a little. He was really getting to like these powers.

‘So, from what I gather,’ Merthill said to Will. ‘You’re powerful beyond my talents. But your power needs your imagination or knowledge. Amazing.’

‘That’s why Joseph told me to read all those books,’ Will said.

‘Who’s Joseph?’ Frederick asked from the side, but was ignored.

‘Our knowledge of the Sekär has been very little for such a long time. Many people haven’t even heard of them.’ Merthill puffed from his pipe. ‘The Sekär power is only limited to your knowledge . . . your imagination. That’s why you couldn’t fix Fred’s seasickness. You didn’t know that it wasn’t his stomach, but his inner ear.’

‘Huh?’ Frederick was ignored again.

‘You better do more reading, Will,’ Merthill said as he placed the pipe at the corner of his mouth.

‘You can count on that!’ Will couldn’t wait to do more reading. And he’d do a lot of

it, before they reached Vulgaron, by using the doorknob to visit the timeless bookstore. But he'd have the store all to himself. Both Joseph and Roland were nowhere to be seen, though he called for them. That saddened Will a little, but he remembered them say that they couldn't involve themselves too much for reasons he had since forgotten. The great thing about Will's timeless bookstore was that no one ever even noticed he'd gone. It was the greatest gift (most likely the only gift) he'd ever received.

After reading a stack of encyclopaedias (from which dimension, he wasn't sure), along with the pile of books he'd first taken with him in his bag to go to Dómain, he filled his bag with more. There was something called *The Dark Tower* by Stephen King which he found quite interesting. He compared himself to a character named Jake Chambers, but a little older of course.

Will remembered Joseph tell him that all fiction – all stories – came from truth in another world. He couldn't help but think this

while reading pretty much anything in the bookstore.

He finished all the reading he wanted and decided to return through the door to the ship.

## 9

Jon Rook spotted Sara and Will whispering together. It made his skin crawl and his heart ache.

*Why not me?* Jon actually mouthed this though without the words.

He saw Will take Sara, as she laughed through a door in the small ship. Jon decided to follow as much as it pained him to see them together. But when he reached the door, he found the room empty. It was as if they had vanished.

## 10

Will showed Sara more books than she could have ever imagined. Her jaw dropped



and her eyes widened. Will could see that she was impressed.

‘I don’t believe it,’ Sara said. ‘This is amazing!’

‘Reach as much as you like,’ Will said. ‘We’ve all the time in the world.’ He showed a little cheeky grin.

‘What d’ya mean?’

‘Time is still here,’ he said. ‘We could spend a hundred years here and never grow old, and go back to the ship with no time passed.’

‘That’s crazy!’

‘You don’t believe me?’

‘How can you do that?’

‘Actually, I’m not doin’ it . . . that was the Guardians, good friends of mine, too!’

Sara turned away and started to dig through the endless pile of books, some ancient, some new. She marvelled at the sight and touch of the books. It was magnificent.

They read together for an unknown length of time. They stopped once their eyes got too sleepy, and actually fell asleep there in

the bookstore. They weren't sure how long they had slept, but when they woke they had felt well rested.

'Reading'll tire you out,' Will said as he rubbed his eyes awake.

'So will slaying evil sorcerers.' They both laughed together.

It was tempting to spend forever in that bookstore. But there was no food in a bookstore.

'We should bring a packed lunch next time,' Will said.

'We should go back.' Sara pointed to the door.

'You're right.'

## 11

Once Jon Rook had opened the door to find the room empty, he quickly turned around, rushing down the ship.

'They're gone! They're gone!' He yelled as everyone looked at him as if he was crazy.

'Who's gone, Jon?' Merthill asked.

Jon turned to point at the door only to see both Will and Sara standing in the doorway with baffled looks on their faces.

‘They . . . but . . .’

‘You should get some rest, Jon,’ Finlay said as he patted him on the back and laughed from the pit of his stomach.

Merthill came close to Will and Sara. ‘Enjoy yourselves, did you?’ His eyes shifted between them both, knowing very well where they have been. ‘Better be very careful with that.’ Merthill lifted his staff to point it at the doorknob which now hung around a string on Will’s neck – a necklace Sara had fashioned for him during their time in the bookstore.

They smiled to each other, the three of them. Merthill thought that they should be allowed have whatever happiness they could get before they reached Vulgaron. There was quite a lot put on these two kid’s shoulders. They had the weight of the worlds on them. Did they realise that then? Merthill was sure they would later. Just let them be young for now.

Merthill sent them on their way, but his suspicious eyes glanced towards the only other boy of the same age. Jon Rook was getting his rest after Finlay had suggested it, but he did not sleep.

## 12

The land of Vulgaron was in sight. Dark thundery clouds hung over the land, and they seemed to glow red from the fires of the past. Their ship looked to small against the darkness up ahead.

Sara took Will's hand and threw her eyes right up to his. He knew what she wanted without even asking. Will brought her to the bookstore, through the door.

'I can't . . .' Sara paced up and down the bookstore with her hands on her head.

'I know it's scary—'

'No! I can't let you go; you have to stay here.' Sara stood firm.

'What? I have to.'

'Everyone I love . . .' She couldn't bear to

say *dies*.

Will felt his heart pound in his chest. He took Sara's hand and gently pulled her closer. Sara fought the tears in vain. They both had their first kiss, there in that timeless bookstore.

'I'll be with you till the end,' Will said. 'We're nearly there, but we can wait here for as long as you like.' Will was beginning to think that Roland and Joseph had given him this bookstore, not only to get the time to read, but to find the time to be with Sara. So, they waited for a while in the timeless bookstore. But this time they didn't read any books; they just held each other, feeling as if they had known each other for a life time.

Then when moments passed they decided to wait a little longer; read another book together. What would be minutes turned into hours, and hours into days, and days into weeks, and weeks into months, and months into years. They never went hungry because that part was frozen in time, they never felt guilty because the ship was going to be there

waiting for them exactly the same as when they had left. They didn't age and they didn't grow tired of each other. This bookstore was exactly what they needed.

They weren't exactly sure how many years it had been, but they had read thousands of books and countless conversations. It was time that they returned to their burden of prophecy.

### 13

Sara and Will both came back through the door. No one had noticed that they'd been gone for a split second, which was more than a decade for them. They had began their journey to Vulgaron many, many years ago; while it was only just under a day ago for everyone else since they had left Bardor. Now it was coming to an end

'I need to give you something,' Judocus said as he approached Sara. Her eyes were reddened as if she'd been crying. And she had been . . . only many years ago, as she entered

the bookstore with Will. 'I think you should have this.' Judocus held out the Sword of Rahzúr.

'Your sword? I can't take that.' She stood back a little.

'You must,' Judocus said. 'I believe it was meant for you, Sara. It never really seemed to like me if I'm honest; never worked fully.'

'I don't know what to say.'

'Just take it.' Judocus smiled as he placed it in her hand.

They both watched the sword suit itself to its new owner. The sword shrank like it did for Judocus when he was a child.

'Thank you, Judocus.'

Judocus nodded.

## 14

The ship reached land undetected, as they had hoped. It was much darker here in the land of Vulgaron. There was no telling what time it was, but it seemed to be always night.

‘Where do we go from here?’ Tólas Leigh spoke to everyone at once.

‘We go to Vulga’s tower,’ Merthill said as he led them into the woods.

This was the infamous Lírwood forest. The same one that had brought down armies led by King Tulus and King Nórd in the first attempt to bring down Vulga. They failed their mission at great cost. That could not happen this time.

## 15

Jon Rook trailed in the back of the group, wondering why he was here. Especially now that Will was with Sara, killing any chances he once thought he had. No one wanted him there. He was a burden they had to protect. He knew that’s what they thought; why they kept trying to leave him somewhere “safe”.

‘Jon,’ a voice whispered from behind him. Jon thought that everyone else was in front. But he was right. There wasn’t a soul behind him as he turned to look.



'Jon,' the voice called once more. No one else heard it, and no one else noticed Jon wander off by himself. He disappeared into the thick trees only to be greeted by a well-dressed man with combed hair. 'Hello, Jon,' he said. Jon didn't feel afraid, somehow. And wandering off into dark forests wasn't a very *Jon* thing to do.

'Who are you?' Jon asked the well-dressed man.

'I'm Mr. Token, Brill Token.' He said it as if Jon should know.

'How do you know my name?'

'Oh, Jon, I'm a psychic of sorts . . . I can tell you your fortune, I can tell you how old you were when you became an orphan, I can tell you that I know you're in love with . . . a girl.' Brill leaned against a tree quite nonchalantly.

'What girl?'

'Sara Turgan,' Brill said. 'I can help you out, Jon . . . 'cause I like ya.' He winked and grinned.

'You can make her love me?'

‘Don’t be silly, Jon.’ Brill swung around the tree and laughed. ‘I’ll make her *realise* that she loves you!’ He knew how to hook his victims, and to reel them in.

‘What do I have to do?’ Jon came closer to Brill Token and could see how handsome the well-dressed man actually was; he was ageless.

‘You’re a smart kiddo, Jon!’ He swung his arm around Jon’s shoulder. Brill had to resist the temptation of biting the young boy’s neck. He had bigger fish to fry.

As Jon was held in tightly, he had to double-take. He could have sworn that Brill had looked like a rotten corpse for only a second. On his second look, Brill was as handsome as ever.

‘Listen close, Jon,’ Brill said. ‘You need to help me out a little. You see, they trust you. If you stay close to Sara and Will, and you come across an old shack with a red door, get them to go inside. I’ll take care of the rest. Then Sara will love you forever!’

‘Will you kill them?’ Jon looked worried

for a moment.

‘Yes, Jon, I’ll kill them all . . . but Sara will be yours. Trust me.’

Jon couldn’t fight a strong but unusual feeling that forced him to believe every word this strange well-dressed man in the woods said. He also liked the thought of having Sara to himself, finally.

Jon had re-joined his group, and none of them had ever known that he was even gone. That was foolish and careless on their part.

## 16

The ship was discovered by Níthe Stíl and a group of twenty of his loyal soldiers. Níthe had become horribly deformed over the many years. He only had one eye, while the other seemed to have rotted away. His skin was no longer that of a human’s but of a lizard’s; scaly and torn up from bloody battles long ago.

‘We’ll hunt ‘em.’ Níthe had longed for vengeance since his father, Góron, was killed

in the battle at Bardor Quay. This was his chance.

And so, he led his soldiers into Lírwood forest to find those who came to Vulgaron on a small ship. Who would be foolish enough?

## 17

In Ryevale, a large group of refugees, led by the bruised King Roman Dunn of Telús, marched to the gates of the castle. A great fire burned in the distance behind those who fled to Bardor. Gwyneth knew the war was coming to Ryvale, and it would be soon.

## 18

Sara saw no flowers in these woods. The trees looked like bones of giants and the air had a foul stench that was unbearable.

‘I can’t believe we’re here,’ Jon said as he came up next to Sara. ‘I’m with you all along the way, Sara . . . you know that?’

‘Yeah, I know.’

Jon imagined Sara's thoughts in his mind – they weren't really her thoughts, but only what he wanted her to think. He believed that just because he liked a girl and that he was nice to her that he deserved to have her. And to say *have* was correct because she would be a possession. Sara's (or any girl's for that matter) rejection would be a crime in Jon's eyes. Jon did not see that a girl had the right of a choice. He could not respect her decision, or see that a person could not simply be bought by "niceness".

So, Jon imagined thoughts that were not there in Sara's mind. He was building up the courage to take her hand and tell her how much he loved–

Will came over to join them as they made their way through the dark forest of dead trees. Jon could see Sara's face light up at the sight of Will.

*That damned Will. I hope he rots like the trees and land of Vulgaron!* Jon thought.

Then he saw it. The red door stood out in the dark forest like mould on a piece of

bread. Jon didn't take a moment to think about what it was he was doing. He didn't care.

'Over here!' Jon dashed toward the red door, startling the others.

'Get back here!' Merthill bellowed at the top of his lungs.

'Boy!' Tólas called. 'You damn fool.'

Jon showed no signs of stopping. Merthill could see where it was the boy was heading. It was an abandoned shack with a bright red door.

But Merthill could sense that that wasn't all it was. For many, many years Merthill DeWisengrae had seen much in his travels. Long before his adventure with a bounty hunter named Tóman Bermor, Merthill had much experience with the creatures of the dark. He had slain many ever since, including Val Dragól so that their path through Telús would be clear. This was a trap. Not just any trap; but a vampire trap. Merthill could smell the flesh of the host.

'Come on, everyone.' Jon opened the red

door and stood inside.

‘Nobody move!’ Merthill snapped.

‘What’s goin’ on, Merthill?’ Tólas asked.

‘Come back, Jon,’ Sara called.

‘What’re you all waiting for?’ Jon shouted from inside the shack.

‘This is a trap,’ Merthill said. ‘Jon has betrayed us . . .’

‘What!’ Sara was shocked into an expression of surprise.

‘What is it, Merthill?’ Judocus asked with his sword ready. Of course this sword was only a needle compared to his old sword – the one he gave to Sara, the Sword of Rahzúr.

‘Vampire . . .’

And just like that, as if on queue or he got fed up of waiting for them to go through the red door, he came out of the shadows. With no more sunlight in Vulgaron, vampires had all the time in the world.

‘How did I not fool you?’ Brill Token toyed with them as he circled them like a shark in the water. ‘What gave me away? Please, tell me so I can learn from my

mistakes.’ He hissed on the last word like a snake.

What Merthill didn’t know was that Brill Token wasn’t alone. Níthe Stíl and his soldiers were hidden in the trees all around them waiting for orders.

‘This was a silly plan, Merthill,’ Brill said. ‘How careless of you to leave it to a child to kill Vulga. It’s pathetic, really!’

‘Oh shut up, you blood-suckin’ parasite!’ Finlay Watters growled, his axe eager to kill.

Brill actually looked offended by this, and that made Judocus smile.

And then they were joined by Níthe and his soldiers as they came charging from the trees, screaming with rage. They were excited; looking forward to the killing.

## 19

Will Marson was no warrior. He came from a world that was dangerous in a very different way. He may be the most powerful being alive, but he was relatively new to all of



that.

Everything happened so fast. Terrifying, deformed creatures that were once men came crashing out of the trees with swords, axes, and all sorts of weapons blazing. It was all happening too fast for him to think. Both sides scrambled and fought for their lives.

One soldier came for Will while he was frozen as a spectator, but was instantly struck down by Sara's powerful sword. Blood spurted upward, splashing Sara across the face. She was a natural.

Though Judocus no longer had the Sword of Rahzúr, he found himself to be still quite the swordsman. He cut three enemy soldiers down – one after the other – until he came up against the host vampire, Brill Token.

Judocus took a swing and missed, then tried again and missed. He may have been quite the swordsman but he just wasn't good enough. That was when Brill grabbed Judocus's arm and twisted him around with amazing, monstrous strength.

Brill seemed to taunt the others –

especially Merthill – with his captive. He smiled, showing those razor-sharp fangs just before he bit down on Judocus's exposed neck.

'No!' Sara shouted.

Judocus screamed in pain as he was thrown to the ground. Blood spilled from Brill's open mouth, but he somehow looked ten years younger in that moment.

Will had to think; it was already too late for Judocus, but he had to save everyone else. He looked to the red door. Earlier, it was a death door, but now it was their way *out*.

Leon, with his fengarí strength and speed, was quick to help Judocus to his feet after he was thrown to the ground.

'This way!' Will shouted to everyone as he ran to the red door. He swiftly used the golden doorknob on the door and opened up to the bookstore. 'Get in!'

One by one they managed to jump through the red door, without question or hesitation. Brill grabbed hold of Leon and they struggled for a moment. Leon threw

Judocus through the open door so that he could free himself from Brill's deadly grip. It worked and Will quickly shut the door behind him.

Brill Token growled with frustration as he got back to his feet. Níthe rushed through the red door only to find Jon standing alone inside.

Brill had something in his hand. He wasn't sure what it was, but he got it after he had struggled with Leon. He held up his hand to discover it was only a necklace. He threw it to the dirt at his feet and moved to the red door.

'Where did they go?' Brill asked Níthe.

'I don't know. This was all I found.' He held Jon by the back of his neck and pushed him forward.

'I'm s-s-sorry I l-l-let you down . . .' Jon cried as he fell to his knees.

The sight made Brill feel sick. Jon grovelled at his feet and begged for another chance.

'Oh, Jon . . . tut, tut, tut. What use are

you now?’

‘I can lure them again!’

‘How? They know what you did, Jon. *Sara* knows what you did.’ Brill wanted Jon to suffer a little . . . before he would kill him.

Jon cried out and pleaded in words that could not be understood.

‘Can I shut him up?’ Níthe asked Brill. Jon’s cries were an irritant to his – everyone’s – ears.

Brill almost said yes, please, but then he thought for a moment. Maybe he could find some uses out of this dreadful boy after all. He couldn’t think of one right now with all his bellowing, but maybe a loyal servant would do.

‘Brill?’ Níthe called. ‘Want me to kill the boy?’

‘No . . . not just yet. Jon will be my servant. He has a debt to pay.

Jon stopped his crying, taking in deep breaths of relief. But he was still terrified.

There was something Jon didn’t know (there was a lot he didn’t know) about being a

servant to a host vampire. But he would learn over the next few hours, days, and nights as a small lump would grow so large on his back, into a hump.

## 20

In the bookstore that Will Marson had visited many times, and more recently with Sara Turgan, they all came rushing through the doorway.

'I can't believe what Jon did,' Finlay said. 'Why would he try set us up?'

No one answered him.

Merthill glanced around, amazed at the sight of endless books. This was like no magic he had ever seen before.

Judocus moaned in pain as he fell in front of the counter where Will met a man named Joseph (Will wondered where he, and Roland, were now). Frederick Muny ran to Judocus's aid. But what could he do?

'What is this place?' Tólas asked anyone who would answer.

'It's my bookstore,' Will said.

'Is that right?'

'So, what now?' Finlay asked Merthill.

But Merthill wasn't really sure. He could only think that maybe Brill was right when he said it was a silly plan. But they were running out of choices . . . weren't they?

'We have all the time we need here,' Will said. 'Time is no issue here.'

'What do you mean?' Tólas asked, taking cautious glances around the unusual store.

'He's right,' Sara said, then she turned to Will. 'Tell them.'

'This here,' he held out the golden doorknob, 'was given to me by the Guardians. It's how I came to your world. We also used it while on the ship to Vulgaron. We'd spend hours in here, but no time would pass on the ship. No time would pass in here either. We didn't age, though we grew older together . . .'

'So, how do we get back to Vulgaron?' Frederick asked.

'Through the door . . . but . . . I don't know of any places other than the red door. If

we're to go back there it'd be like we never left and mister fancy pants and his deformed merry men would be on top of us in a flash.'

'Anyone understand what this kid is sayin'?' Tólas asked everyone else.

'Quiet, Tólas!' Merthill said. 'So, we must think of another doorway, other than the red door.'

'But what if we all went through the door at different times?' Frederick asked. 'Would we still end up on the other side at the same time?'

'The human mind is not built for this!' Finlay scratched his head with frustration.

'Don't ask me how I know,' Will said to Frederick. 'But I think that this bookstore was made just for me. If I entre this store time stops, but when I leave it time moves again. But time never moves inside the bookstore whether I'm here or not. So, if one of us was to stay behind while the rest of us went back, the rest of us will be older but the one who stayed will still be the same as they are right now . . . does that make sense?'

They all went silent in thought, trying to comprehend what Will had just explained to the best of his abilities. Then they continued to try and think of a way to get back to Vulgaron. Most of them were waiting for Merthill to find the answer, even Will.

Then Sara came to the centre of the bookstore. 'Have you all forgotten the ship?'

And it was a sudden click for them all at once. How could they be so foolish? They were trying to think too hard, they missed the obvious.

Merthill was a little embarrassed, but he was also a little more proud of Sara for thinking so clearly.

They may have to go back a few steps on their journey using the door in the ship, but it was their only way back.

'I don't think . . . I'll be goin' anywhere, folks . . .' Judocus lay on the floor with a cloth to his wound. 'I'll be turnin' pretty soon . . .'

This was the elephant in the room that they didn't want to see. Judocus had been bitten by a vampire – not just any vampire,



but a host.

'There must be something we can do?'  
Tólas wondered out loud.

'Yes . . . kill me . . . before it's too late.'

'But, wait,' Will said. 'He won't turn here.'

Everyone froze.

'What're you talkin' about?' Judocus asked, trying to hide the hope in his eye just in case Will was wrong.

'Well, me and Sara never aged here,' he said. 'We also never went hungry. I believe he won't turn.'

'So, what am I supposed to do?' Judocus asked. 'Wait here and let you all go on without me?' He was more angry that he wouldn't be there for them. He felt like dead weight. Plus, he was saddened to be out of the adventure so soon.

'You'll have to stay, Jude,' Merthill said. 'I'll come back for you once I find a cure.' Merthill wasn't sure he'd ever find one; he never heard of a cure for a vampire in all his many years – other than a slaying. But

Judocus was a special case as he technically hadn't turned yet. So, Merthill believed that there was hope.

'Well . . . I'll have plenty reading to do till then.' Judocus laughed to lighten the situation.

'I'm sorry, Jude,' Merthill said.

'Don't be! I was foolish enough to try take on a host vampire. I'm just sorry I can't join you guys. I'm sorry I let you down.' He looked to Sara.

'You didn't let me down, Jude,' she said. 'You're still helping me, plenty.' She showed him the magical sword that he'd given her on the ship just before they reached Vulgaron.

'You'll be fine all on your own, girly.' He laughed.

'My name isn't *girly*.' She smiled before she came closer and hugged Judocus so tight. It hurt his wound a little but he did not care.

## 21

Darkness fell over Ryvale from the west.

Gwyneth stood at the top of the tower in the green fortress of stone and vines.

'It has been night for far too long,' Vienne said.

'The darkness has come,' Gwyneth said. 'Time has fallen . . .'

An army of the dead marched on the near horizon towards the castle of Ryvale. They finally broke through the terrible swaps of Tyminus and easily battled their way through Telús.

The sky stayed dark though hours would pass. Salen Serious readied his army on the frontline to protect his family and his home. Two-hundred men and women on horseback stood waiting for Salen's orders to charge into battle at the countless dead and forsaken soldiers of darkness.

A tear fell from Gwyneth's eye as both armies came crashing into each other, blood splashing, soldiers screaming, horses falling, her son fighting for their home. She lifted up both of her hands, shut her crying eyes, and made one powerful attempt to hold the dead

army back. Hundreds of the enemy froze and turned their own weapons on themselves. Gwyneth fell to the floor with exhaustion. The darkness had weakened her dramatically.

Vienne came forward and threw her hands to the dark sky. She created a powerful storm that wiped out hundreds more of the hungry dead.

It wasn't enough. Of the two-hundred soldiers, only forty-two remained, including Salen. It was too late to retreat. If they tried that now, they'd only be stabbed in their backs; killed on the run. So, Salen decided that they had to fight until the end.

The end was coming fast. Salen witnessed his soldiers falling around him. He knew this was the end for him.

But something glistened to the north. An army of thousands came crashing through the army of the dead like a mud slide. It was King Bane Harmor of Gredius, finally coming to their aid.

Gredius had a mighty army, especially when the hunters and slayers of The Omega

were called to battle for their king. The hunter of the Omega weren't like any other hunter in Dómain; they were loyal, greatly trained, and sworn to oaths of protection.

Thousands and thousands of King Bane's men moved with ease through the army of the dead. Salen and his remaining soldiers were saved . . . for now.

## *The Talisman*

### 1

Sara, Will, Merthill, Tólas, Leon, Finlay, and Frederick would say their goodbyes to Judocus as they prepared to leave him behind in the bookstore so that he wouldn't turn into a vampire. Merthill had promised Judocus that he'd return with a cure. He wasn't sure if that was true, but he'd try his best.

Everyone left, and Judocus was all alone in the bookstore – wondering how long he will have to wait. He picked up a book and decided to do the only thing he could do: read.

### 2

The ship had been ransacked by Níthe and his soldiers on its discovery earlier.

It was bad that they had to restart from the ship again, but it was good in a way, too, because Brill and Níthe wouldn't expect them

to be behind them again. They had that to their advantage.

And so, they would begin their journey again through Lírwood forest. Watching the shadows and listening to the rustling sounds in the bushes and tall trees. This was the most dangerous forest in all of Dómain, and they had to make their way through it for the second time. The first time did not go so well.

Leon stopped moving. Luckily, Finlay was behind him to see that something was wrong.

'You okay, Leon?' Finlay asked, clicking his fingers to grab the attention of the others ahead.

Leon did not answer. He just stared blanking into the woods.

'What's going on?' Merthill called back.

Finlay gently shook Leon's shoulder, waking him from his deep trance. 'Leon?' He called again.

'What is it?' Leon finally answer, but looked bewildered and a little frightened.

'Where'd you go?'

'What're you talkin' about?' Leon then kept walking as if nothing had happened at all.

### 3

They had made it farther than they had the first time, passing the old shack with the red door, and not coming across Brill Token or Níthe Stíl, thankfully, as they moved deeper into the woods in a direction away from the recently used tracks.

The incident at the shack with the red door felt like a long time ago to them all. They worried for Judocus, although he was much safer than they all were now; with plenty to read.

Sara looked around at her friends – all who swore to protect her on her journey she was willing to take alone – while they took a quick break off their feet. She thought about all those who didn't make it this far: her parents, long dead now – it felt like another lifetime ago. She thought about Jacob Larius,



the old man who had saved her life from the invasion of Túll. So many lives lost along the way.

*Too many died for me, she thought. Then she struck it from her mind. They hadn't died for her. How self-centred of me to think that! They died for everything, not just me. They died for life itself, for the light of the world, for Anima, for existence, for themselves—*

'Are you okay, Sara?' Will asked.

She came back from her thoughts like someone coming out of hypnosis. She then nodded.

'I know an unhappy face when I see one,' he said, remembering where it was he came from.

'Well, can anyone be happy in this place?' She held her hands out to the woods around them.

'Point taken.'

'I'll be fine,' she said. 'Don't worry about me.'

'We've got to keep moving,' Merthill announced to the group as he helped himself

to his feet and leaned on his staff.

No one protested. None of them liked staying in these dreaded woods for a second longer than they should.

'Merthill,' Leon called. 'Can we speak alone?'

'Of course. Everyone else prepare yourselves.' Merthill walked with Leon as he guided him a few steps into privacy. 'What is it, Leon?'

'I'm afraid . . .'

'Aren't we all?'

'You don't understand.'

'What is it, Leon?' He could see the fear in Leon's eyes grow. But it wasn't just fear he was seeing. Merthill had seen that look in his eyes when he'd first met Leon. That wild look.

'I lost my talisman . . .'

Merthill understood, but he felt for pity for his friend that fear.

'I am turning into a beast,' he whispered. 'I'm fine now, but I've had moments of confusion . . . and hunger.'

'We can get you to the bookstore—'

'There's no door here. I'm supposed to continue on . . . just promise me . . .'

Merthill knew what was coming.

'. . . Promise me that you'll do what needs to be done; don't let me hurt anyone, don't let me hurt Sara.'

'I promise.'

#### 4

Níthe Stíl pinched a yellow pimple, growing so large on his face. It burst with a comical sound and oozed yellow puss which then turned orange and then red with his blood.

Jon Rook gagged and vomitted at this horendous sight and Níthe laughed as he wiped some of the puss onto Jon's back, now showing a large hump causing him to hunch forward a little.

'What's wrong with my back?' He reluctantly asked Níthe.

Still laughing, he said: 'Nothin's right with it, boy.'

Jon started to cry.

Níthe slapped him quite hard across his face causing him to bleed out of his mouth.

'Please, don't damage my property,' Brill Token said without any true care for his *property*.

'Am I ugly?' Jon braved yet another question.

'Hideous!' Brill cheered. 'Sara would choke on her own vomit at the very sight of you!'

'Why are you doin' this to me!?'

'Me?' Brill almost looked offended. 'I haven't done anything but spare your worthless little life, child. You've done this to yourself by vowing to my service.'

'I want . . . to . . . go home . . . ' Jon cried.

Níthe went to smack him again, he hated when Jon cried, but Brill gave him a look that stopped him.

'Listen, Jon,' Brill said. 'I promise to fix your back and make you handsome again if you do something for me.'

'I'll do anything!'

'Of course you will!' Brill exclaimed. 'I need to find your old friends. I've no idea how or where they went through that red door. But I would like some explanation that might help us figure this all out.'

Jon thought for a moment and remembered when they were on the ship, and Will and Sara had vanished through a door but were magically there again as if they never left. He had thought he imagined it after no one believed him . . . until now.

'Haven't got all day, Jon,' Brill said, biting his nails.

'They vanish through the doors—'

'Tell us somethin' we don't know!' Níthe snapped.

'It has something to do with Will. He brought Sara somewhere . . . else when they were on the ship. Only by goin' through a door. So they need doors to travel . . .'

'Interesting,' Brill said. He turned to Níthe. 'Where are the nearest doors?'

'Well, the red door.' Níthe deep in thought for a moment. It looked like it hurt.

'And I guess the ship door they already used. I don't know about anywhere else.'

'Nít he, take your men and go back to the red door. They might come back through it. I will continue on just in case they went around us somehow.'

'Will do.' Nít he wasted no time and quickly gathered his remaining men and headed back to the red door.

'What about me?' Jon asked Brill. 'You said you'd fix me.'

'We have to see if you were any help first, Jon, then I promise from the bottom of my heart that I will fix you. Come now, let's keep moving.'

## 5

Leon Dégan collapsed to the dirty ground with a jolt of pain from all over his body. Sara rushed to his aid but Merthill stopped her in her tracks.

'Leave him alone!' Merthill shouted.

Everyone looked to Merthill with

confusion.

'Why, Merthill?' Sara asked. 'He's in pain. Something's wrong with him!'

'What're you not tellin' us, Merthill,' Tólas asked.

'Somethin's wrong with Leon,' Finally said. 'Isn't there?'

'I'm turnin' . . . I'm losin' myself.' Leon struggled back to his feet. 'Pretty soon, I'll become a beast . . .'

'Fengarí,' Tólas said. He stood back as if Leon was the beast right there.

'You won't be safe for much longer,' Leon continued.

'You're still you,' Sara said. 'We can fix you – bring you back to Gwyneth. She'll know what to do.'

'It's too late for that.'

'What can we do, then?' Frederick added.

'Kill me before I turn; before I kill you.'

They all knew that was what they had to do but were all too afraid to be the first to say it. At least Leon said it for them. Merthill

came closer to Leon. Everyone watched on in horror.

But Merthill just placed his hand on Leon's back and brought him closer. Merthill moved him forward, everyone waiting for the quick kill, but it never came.

'You still have time, Leon,' Merthill said. Let us keep moving onward!'

Tólas still stood back with a watchful eye. Leon didn't blame him for he knew too well the damage that he could cause.

## 6

Watching his old group of friends from the dark like an animal was Jon Rook. He didn't even realise he had been holding his breathe until Brill Token placed a cold hand on his shoulder causing him to gasp with fright.

'Calm yourself, child!' Brill snapped with a whisper. 'They might hear you.' Brill turned again to watch his prey from the shadows and smiled. 'You did good this time, Jon.'



If Jon had a tail he would have wagged it as he was happy to please his master.

'We'll wait for our chance,' Brill said. And then Brill put his pale, bony fingers – they looked delicate, but could crush a human skull in a heartbeat – and placed them to the dead dirt.

Jon watched in curiosity.

Something with eight legs moved toward his hand at great speed. It was a spider, but not just any spider. This was what children would see in their nightmares.

The size of the spider seemed to change according to Jon's terrified eyes. It had grown considerably since it had first come to Brill's hand. First, it was the size of clover, then it was close to the size of Brill's hand.

Brill bent down and came close to the spider. Its many red eyes beamed back. 'Hello, Cyril,' Brill whispered. 'I need a favour.'

Jon thought he could hear a voice answer Brill, but he wasn't sure.

'I need to you fetch me Níthe and his

soldiers,' Brill continued. 'We have found them!'

Brill turned to Jon and said: 'We mustn't fight them alone.'

*What does he mean by we,* Jon thought.

'Oh, you'll fight in your *own* way,' Brill said. 'Just do as I say.'

7

These woods gave everyone the creeps, but Frederick Muny was begining to wish he had stayed with his king in the bookstore. King Judocus was who he was meant to really protect . . . but that wasn't true. He vowed to protect Sara on her burdened journey. He pittied Sara, really.

*There's no way she's getting out of this alive,* Frederick thought. *Is there a chance for any of us?*

Will turned to look back with an expression that look bewildered.

*Lord of Anima! Can he hear my thoughts?*

'What is it, Will?' Frederick asked just before he was yanked back and thrown into the thorny bushes.

Will could feel eyes on him from all around. Heartbeat was loud in his ears and everything seemed to move in slow motion. When he looked back and saw Níthe Stíl grab Frederick, who was completely unaware of his surrounding enemies, he jumped into action. He didn't want to make the same mistake as the last time; freezing on the spot.

Will Marson was the most powerful of them all, though he and everyone else was quite unaware of it. Merthill possibly had an idea, but even he didn't have the full knowledge.

As Níthe and his remaining soldiers ambushed their group, Will took deep and steady breaths. He had to remain calm while he concentrated. Two enemy soldiers marched to his position, looking like a vulnerable boy . . . but he was far from it.

The two soldiers froze in their spots like statues. In fact, that was exactly what they

became. They turned to stone, and the look in their horrified eyes showed that they felt every bit of the process; it must have been an unimaginable pain.

Everyone else could sit this one out while Will went through the enemy soldiers with ease. Even Níthe Stíl went down with very little effort from Will. The entire time, Will had been standing in the same spot, only looking to his victims with hardly any expression on his face at all. He was ruthless.

Níthe Stíl was turned to stone with the rest of his soldiers. They were all frozen in battle, never to fight again.

## 8

Then Finlay rushed to the aid of Frederick who had been badly scraped and bruised, but otherwise fine. He helped Frederick to his feet, but then suddenly pointed forward with fear.

'Look out!' Finlay yelled while he pointed to what was once Leon.

Leon was longer himself, but a mangled mess of fur, blood, and wretched skin. He had changed while everyone was distracted by the failed ambush.

Will could have, but could find it in him to destroy Leon. He didn't deserve it.

Leon trashed through, knocking Merthill and Tólas to the ground. He had a target. He wanted to kill the girl.

Sara wasn't afraid – she didn't like what was happening to Leon, of course – so there she stood her ground with her powerful sword in her grip.

Leon crawled forward, foaming from his mouth full of razor-sharp teeth. To Will, Leon's beast form reminded him of a book he read in his bookstore called *Cycle of the Werewolf* by Stephen King. The resemblance to the illustrations in the book was uncanny.

But Will had to act fast. He ran and stood between Sara and the beast, held out his hands in defence, shut his eyes tight, and yelled: 'Stop!'

Will waited to be mauled to death but

nothing happened. He opened his eye to see the face of a beast, panting and only inches away. Will started to think hard. He wanted to help Leon, make him remember who he was.

There was a sudden clarity in the beast's eyes. Then there was fear and regret. Will could see the eyes of Leon again.

Sara lowered her sword. She never faltered.

'Leon?' Will asked the beast before him.

Leon turned his head, gazed into Will's eyes. But then something startled Leon from behind. It was Brill Token.

A blade came out the back of Leon and was flung to the side like he weighed nothing, showing just how strong Brill was.

Brill was unbelievably fast. He grabbed both Sara and Will (making sure to render Will unconscious) and took them away from the others.

Sara was pushed to the ground. All she

could see were trees, not knowing which way to run if she got the chance. She looked to Will but his eyes were closed. She searched for her sword, but couldn't find it—

'Looking for this?' Brill held the Sword of Razúr in his dangerous hands, and he laughed. 'You're just a girl, what would you do with this?' Then he paused as if coming to a realisation, then looked at the sword again. 'Wait . . . there's something about this sword, it's quite powerful.' He lusted for its power . . . but could not yield it. 'Why can't I use it?'

Sara only spat at his feet.

'Never mind,' Brill growled. 'No more distractions. I bet this sword could still do some damage with or without the power it holds.'

'You goin' to talk me to death?' Sara snapped. It wasn't smart to remind Brill on being fast about killing her, but she was full of fight and fire.

Luckily, Brill Token enjoyed toying with his victims. He loved to make them suffer, and he really wanted Sara to suffer.

'You in a hurry to die, Sara?' Brill asked. 'I have an idea! This will be fun. Come here Jon.'

Sara's eyes widened with shock as she saw the deformity that became of Jon Rook.

'Take this, Jon,' Brill said, handing him the sword. 'Why don't you take care of Will with this?'

'Jon, no!' Sara shouted.

Jon took the sword in his hands. He dared not to look Sara in the eyes. He didn't want to see her fear, or the look of disgust for how he looked now.

Jon moved, eyes to the ground, with the sword in his hands.

'Must be quick about it, Jon.' Brill said. 'Don't want Will waking up in time to stop you.'

'Jon!' Sara called, but he could not look.

The sword trembled in Jon's hands as he stood over Will's unconscious body.

'Look at me!' Sara cried.

Jon could no longer fight it. He turned with a sudden jolt toward Sara, his eyes red



with tears. But he saw no disgust in Sara's eyes; he saw only sadness.

'What are doing?' Sara asked. Her voice sounded cracked.

'I'm sorry, Sara,' he said before he dropped the sword to the ground. His eyes flowed with tears and a small smile grew in the corner of his mouth. He kept his eyes on Sara while Brill, who was full of rage, suddenly swung his blade horizontally, decapitating the boy with the hump.

For a moment, Sara couldn't believe her eyes as Jon stood for a second longer, still smiling, until he dropped to the ground and his head rolled away from his lifeless body.

'You monster!' Sara screamed to Brill at the top of her lungs.

'He was utterly useless,' Brill said to himself.

Sara couldn't take her gaze away from the dead boy in front of her, though she tried so very hard not to.

'Well, to be honest, I did kind of enjoy that,' Brill said. 'But now I must do the killing

myself.'

Brill didn't want to waste anymore time as he hastily made his way over to Will with his blade. He looked to Sara, wanting to see the fear in her eyes, before he cut Will's throat and drank his blood like fresh water.

But in the blink of an eye, Brill was pushed back by the powerful force of a beast. Leon, though badly wounded, wrestled Brill to the ground. They tumbled and twistered around the forest floor, claws scraping and bladed stabbing.

Sara watched on in horror as both beasts rolled in and out of view through the thick trees.

She suddenly felt a gentle hand lightly grip her shoulder, and once she turned to see Merthill's face it was a relief.

The commotion caused by the fighting beasts finally came to an end. Merthill helped Sara to her feet and with a little trick, woke Will from his unconsciousness, and they were joined by Tólas, Finlay, and Frederick. They all stood waiting for whichever beast came

crashing towards them from the trees.

They waited, and waited, until a shadow came tumbling to the dirt.

It was Leon, the victor in this battle, but he was no longer in his beast form; that form left him for his was dying.

The other came rushing to side, Tólas was still a little nervous.

'You saved us,' Sara said to Leon.

'Don't . . . mention it. Just . . . tell Gwyneth . . .'

and then he was gone. Leon's eyes stayed open as he stared into oblivion.

'He's gone,' Tólas said.

'Farewell, friend,' Merthill said to Leon as he shut his eyes.

## *Cursed*

### 1

It had been a long journey for them all, and it was always when coming to the end that it would get more difficult. The tall tower was just in their sights. Finlay pointed up as he had spotted it first. None of them realised it was even there – the trees were so thick around them. It really was a hidden fortress.

'I can't believe we made it,' Frederick said. He sounded exhausted, and looked it, too.

'I don't think we did,' Will said this with uncertainty. He looked like he knew something but wasn't quite sure yet. Will had a *feeling*.

And just like that something or someone appeared to them.

'Lower your weapons,' Will shouted.

Finlay ignored and his axe was pulled from his hands by a force so powerful. But this visitor wasn't evil. A woman came

forward, her eyes looked as if they were constantly learning.

'Who are you?' Merthill commanded to know.

'I am Kira,' she said. 'I am The Whisperer. I know all truth . . . and secrets.'

'Why have you come?' Merthill asked.

'For me,' Will said.

'What?' Sara needed Will, above all, by her side. She couldn't bear to lose him.

'I am here for you, Will, yes,' Kira said. 'But that's not all. Sara must go on from here *alone*.'

'You've got to be kiddin' me!' Tólas roared. 'How about you kill Vulga yourself!' He was furious.

'Calm down, Tólas,' Merthill said, fearing the Guardian. But there was no reason to fear Kira. She was good in every way and more.

'I cannot,' Kira said with sadness. 'I am harming myself by coming to this dark place, I cannot stay much longer.' She revealed her right hand as it turned as black as coal. 'We're

running out of time. Please, listen.'

'It's okay, guys,' Will said. 'I'm supposed to go.'

Will came to Merthill and handed him the golden doorknob. 'Take care of this, he said.' Will turned straight to Sara, her tears were halfway down her cheeks when he kissed her. 'I will always love you, Sara.'

'I love you, too,' she replied, holding his hand tight.

'We lived a life time together,' Will said. 'Remember that.'

They held each other one more time, wishing they were back in the bookstore again because they were running out of time.

'There's something else you need,' Kira turned to Merthill. 'Your quest doesn't end here. You must save Judocus.'

'We need a cure,' Frederick said with urgency. 'He was bitten—'

'You will find it with Keller Stein,' Kira said. 'He holds a cure for early stage vampire infections, and technically Judocus has only been bitten moments ago.'

'Where's this Killer Stain?' Finlay asked.

'*Keller Stein* is in the execution and torture chambers for that is what he enjoys most. Sara must continue to the top of the tower alone to face Vulga, while the rest of you go to the chambers, Will must come with me. I am sorry I cannot help more. We must go now, Will.'

Will took one more look back at all his only friends – he certainly had none in the world where he came from; he looked to Sara, the love of his life – and then he disappeared into a light along with Kira, the Whisperer.

It was like they were never there. Sara wiped the tears from her eyes and started toward the tower.

'Wait,' Tólas called, but she kept walking.

'Let her go, Tólas,' Merthill said painfully. 'We must find Keller.'

## 2

Will Marson didn't feel anything when

Kira took him through her own special doorway. He looked back, sad not to find Sara staring back. They were in a black space that seemed to go nowhere, yet endless at the same time.

'Where are we?' Will asked Kira.

'Beyond.'

'Beyond what?'

'You know the answers to these questions, Will, so why ask them?' She said it with a smile.

'I don't think I know . . .'

'I have taken you beyond life, Will. I am going to show you everything.'

'Am I ready for that?'

'You are. Before I ask you to do something very important, I want you to see the full picture.'

And with a sudden change of the blackness around him to a bright flash, he was inside his own mind.

'The answer is always within.' Kira spoke but Will could not see her. She spoke in his mind and showed him everything through



his mind's eye, like he was watching a film on one of those projectors his teacher used to show. Only this wasn't made for brainwashing.

The film played inside his mind. There was once nothing until there was somehow something. A light shone in the blackness of non-existence creating the thought of existence itself. The Light had learned to create, thus creating another entity by taking a part of itself. The Light had become the Creator. From itself, the Creator took more parts to make more entities. They were all lesser, yet part of the Creator. They learned just like the first, and called themselves the Children of the Creator. The youngest of the Children, named Anima, was taken from deep within the light. No other entity was created this way and for that Anima was different.

Anima showed something alien to the rest of the Children. What Anima showed were emotions; the good and the bad.

What Anima longed for the most was love. To be loved by the other Children, but

most of all to be loved by the Creator.

And so, as a gift, Anima travelled deep in the dark to create something. It was something none of the other Children could do.

Then there was a big bang! Lights spread out across the deep, dark space like liquid. Infinite worlds were born to show Anima's infinite love.

Among the created worlds, only one had grown life of it's own. This would be the world of Dómain. Anima had accidentally created not just a show of love, but life. So, from the this world, Anima learned to create again by replication. All other worlds with life were parts of Dómain, just like the Children to the Creator. All worlds were connected to Dómain.

The Creator had discovered what Anima had done, and even though there was just as much good, there was also a darkness in the lives among those planets that had never existed before. It disturbed the Creator immensely.

So, Anima begged for forgiveness, but the Creator thought there was nothing to forgive. Anima was part of the Creator, therefore Anima is the Creator.

All the Creator asked was that Anima took responsibility in what was created in the dark space.

Anima was happy to be asked this by the Creator. So, Anima then decided to invent help. First, the Guardian of Beyond (who would guide those who had died into the light), named Kah'Li, was brought into existence. Second, the Oracle (Juliath, who guides the living). Third, the Clockmaker (Ben), and then the Dreamcatcher (Roland), the Whisperer (Kira), and the Bookkeeper (Joseph).

All were brought into existence by Anima, but Anima was brought by the Creator. Kah'Li, who was questioned for harsh treatment of life, hated the fact that Anima wasn't the original creator.

Kah'Li spat at the feet of Anima, demanding to see the true Creator. When

Anima denied this request, Kah'Li made some creations of his own. They were like no other creation ever witnessed before. They were dark, evil, and only wanted to consume.

Kah'Li decided that he no longer wanted to meet the true Creator, but to become the new one. The things that Kah'Li had created were evil. Anima would call them demons, or shadows, and so he cast them aside into the deep worlds where they would be imprisoned. Anima would also send Kah'Li to the darkness with them, where his hatred and anger would grow stronger. He vowed to break the light of Anima, no matter what it took.

Anima confessed to the Creator what had happened and asked for forgiveness yet again. But to Anima's surprise, the Creator said that there was nothing to forgive again. What was done by Anima was done by the Creator . . .

So, Anima created a new Guardian of the beyond, named Kalós, replacing the hateful Kah'Li.

'Why are you showing me all this?' Will asked Kira, but there was no answer.

Will waited for Kira to reply, but she was gone. He was then repelled into a movement outside his mind, and inside. Stars passed him in trails of white, red, and blue lines. They started to get further and further away from him and the dark was thick. Then there was a flash of light in the distance. It started small, then it grew, engulfing the black around him.

There was endless colours, moving around him with the brightest white at the centre. The colours moved like he was inside a kolidiscscope, and Will started to hear music. The colours changed with the notes, while the symphony played for him. He could have sworn he could hear what he knew from his world as an electric guitar, only it sounded sweeter. It was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard. There was a feeling in the sound. It didn't need words, yet the light spoke to Will, still.

'I am Anima,' the light said.

4

Merthill, Tólas, Frederick, and Finlay finally came to a clearing out of the terrible forest of Lírwood.

They could see the chambers just up ahead, but it was heavily guarded by a number of soldiers, and they were outnumbered dramatically.

But luck would have it that most of the soldiers would suddenly rush to the tower after a bell had been rung.

Merthill and the others knew it had to be something to do with Sara, who they wish they could help right now, but they could not for some reason.

Tólas hated not being there for Sara. He'd been with her for such a long time, and he's the closest thing to family she had left.

'Now's our chance!' Merthill said to all of them, and they moved in towards the chambers where there supposedly was a cure

for Judocus.

Of the few soldiers that remained, one was quite startled at the sight of Merthill coming at him with his wizard's staff and a fire brewing over his head. He was toasted her he stood.

Finlay's axe cut another soldier in half, down the centre of his body, causing it to separate as he fell.

Keller Stein came out from his chambers after hearing all the comotion, but he wasn't alone. Standing by his side was a large spider, with beaming red eyes.

Frederick could have sworn he heard the spider speak before they all charged into combat.

Only few enemy soldiers remained, and Merthill was making sure that there'd be none pretty soon with the flicking of his staff.

Finlay brought his heavy axe down on the spider creature (who Brill had called Cyril) but his axe bounced right off leaving no mark. Cyril knocked Finlay to the ground and moved in for a quick lunch. Luckily for Finlay,

Cyril's only weakness was magic, and that was what Merthill used to cast it aside.

Cyril, dismayed with fear from the magic Merthill, jumped up in a sudden swirl of darkness and vanished with his own magic, teleporting away from here.

'You coward!' Keller shouted with frustration at the retreat of his eight-legged companion.

Then Tólas stood in front of Keller, challenging him to the fight. Keller looked around, all of his soldiers dead or gone. He was alone. He thought it would be nice to at least kill this challenger before the wizard killed him.

Swords locked and swung as Tólas and Keller battled on those grounds. Keller had cause countless screams in those torture chambers, Tólas wanted to make him scream now.

Keller had underestimated his challenger, but it still wasn't too late. He blocked each swing from Tólas just in time; Tólas was so fast. It was only once Keller tried



to take a swing at Tólas this time when he realised he was done for. Keller was used to torturing his victims, they could never fight back as they were chained and tied. This was basically his first proper fight.

The speed of Tólas's movements were almost a blur, and just like that, Keller was cut down to the ground.

Keller screamed in pain so loud, it was just what Tólas had wanted. Then they could see faces look through bars of the chambers. They were sad, lost faces of prisoners, tortured for years by the cruel Keller Stein. Frederick and Finlay rushed over to free all those locked away on Merthill's command.

Keller screamed in pain as he could see that Tólas had taken one of his legs. The severed leg still twitched as if it had a life of its own.

'You fucker!' Keller shouted as he grinded his teeth. 'My leg!'

'You're lucky that's all you lost,' Tólas said, eager to finish the job.

Merthill came closer to Keller, he really

stened of death. 'If you tell us where you keep the cures, then I won't kill you,' he said.

'What cure?'

'We know you have vampire cures,' Tólas said, pointing his sword to Keller's throat. 'Don't lie!'

'If I do,' Keller said, 'you'll let me live?'

'I promise we will not harm you,' Merthill said.

Tólas looked a little confused at Merthill.

'We made the cure to feed the vamps,' Keller explained. 'They'd drink the blood of the prisoners, but I'd cure them so that they'd not turn, and we could use them again until they died—'

'Why you tellin' us this?' Tólas questioned.

'I like to see the fear on your faces!' Keller laughed, but then screamed in pain as Tólas stepped on his wound where his leg once had been.

'All right, all right!' Keller cried. 'The red box in my chambers . . . there's plenty there! Now, will you let me live?'

'I promised we wouldn't harm you – I never spoke for *them*,' Merthill pointed to the hundreds of prisoners now walking out of their cells. Some of them seeing the sky for the first time in decades. Others came straight for Keller Stein as he lied so helplessly on the ground.

'No! Away!' Keller bellowed. 'Help me!'

Merthill, Tólas, Frederick, and Finlay stood by as Keller was pulled apart of his victims of torture with such ease. The combined strength of the prisoners reminded Merthill of Tolrog the giant crashing through the town of Fogmór many years ago.

Keller Stein scream until he could scream no more. And Merthill got what they had come for – a cure for Judocus – and so they came to a door in the chambers. Any door really, it didn't matter. Merthill took out the golden doorknob that Will had given him before he left with Kira, and used it to open the door into the bookstore.

'Why am I here?' Will asked Anima.

'Will, you are an interesting creation. Your kind are what some call angels, or guardians, or in your world they say Sekär. You are one of the chosen ones – but given a choice – to become one of the Guardians of Dómain. Kira showed you the truth, so that you know everything before you decide.

'Unfortunately, Ben, the Clockmaker, has passed for the darkness Kah'Li had brought upon Dómain had become too powerful.'

'Ben's dead?' Will said with a shock. 'How can a Guardian die?'

'All things must pass, Will,' Anima said.

Will could still hear the music in the light and colours. It sounded like an orchestra of violins, cellos, and a piano. It almost sounded familiar, but he couldn't be sure. His world was very restricted when it came to music, unless it was a jingle from an advert or a song by the typical boy band that sang about nothing in particular. In a less restricted world, a composer would channel this sound into a symphony.

'I have to ask you now, Will,' Anima said.  
'Will you become the new Clockmaker?'

Will didn't know what to say.

'It is *your* choice, Will.'

Will could still not give Anima an answer.

'You love Sara,' Anima said.

'Yes.' Will could answer this one very easily.

'I understand,' Anima said and it was true.

'She needs . . . I need her. I cannot become the Clockmaker, for I love Sara with all my heart. I can't leave her.'

'You do not need to explain your love to me, Will.'

'But who will become the next Clockmaker?'

'Don't you worry about that, Will,' Anima said. 'In fact, it is already done. Time should be restored.'

'I'm sorry I let you down, Anima—'

'You could never let me down, Will,' Anima said. The music picked up tempo and

the lights seemed to wink. 'I love you.'

6

Sara Turgan was all alone. Above all, she missed Will the most. She wondered if they'd ever see each other again. It hurt to think not.

The tower was tall, but not as much as she had imagined before. As it rose, it came to a point that looked razor-sharp. The doors were metal and heavy as she pushed them open, letting in a weak light from the outside (which wasn't sunlight, of course).

There were stairs going down to what Sara believed were dungeons, and cages hanging from the ceiling around her to warn of those like her who have come to put an end to Vulga the terrible.

Sara took the winding stairs upwards, and climbed to the very top of the tall tower. The stone steps were steep and dangerous. She had to be careful not to slip and fall right back down. Sara believed these stairs were designed to break necks.

At the very top, the door was already ajar. It was as if Vulga was expecting her.

Sara pushed the door open, her sword at the ready, and she peered inside the large room at the top of the tower.

Vulga stood at the other end, his back to the door, and without any urgency to turn to his visitor.

'So, you've come,' Vulga said, his back still facing Sara.

Sara did not reply as she slowly moved closer.

Vulga turned to face his new challenger, the *one* they said would break the curse. 'A girl?' Vulga said with surprise. 'When I heard they were sending a child to kill me I thought it was quite pathetic; I laughed. But to see you here with my own eyes . . . I don't know what to say.'

'You don't need to say anything, Vulga,' Sara said. 'You can just die!'

She brought her sword up into the air and came down upon Vulga. But she was suddenly frozen in her movement, and her

hand released her sword as a force took control of her entire body. The sword fell to the floor making a loud clanging noise in a see-saw motion until it stopped.

Sara was held in the same position, unable to move no matter how much she tried.

'You poor little girl,' Vulga said. 'How do you think you'd kill me?'

'I was chosen!' Sara shouted.

'*Chosen?* By whom?' Vulga laughed. 'Anima, the false god? Kah'Li is the true god. You have been fooled by your power-hungry, needy little false god!'

'You're wrong!'

'No, I'm not,' he said. 'I have been enlightened by Kah'Li. He showed me all that is true.'

'It doesn't matter,' Sara said, she felt a sudden twitch in her right arm. There was movement coming back. She didn't know how, maybe Vulga was getting distracted. 'It doesn't matter whose god is real or true . . . *You* killed my family!'



Suddenly, Sara could move again. Vulga had lost all control of her. Something had interfered with his magic. She dove to her sword at Vulga's surprise, and she attacked the evil sorcerer.

Vulga was forced to block each swing with his staff. But then something happened, and it frightened Vulga for the first time in possibly all of time. Sara's sword came down in a swipe, slashing Vulga's staff in two. A burst of light and electricity exploded from the staff as it broke in two, causing both Sara and Vulga to fall back to the floor.

Two ridged pieces of Vulga's staff lay in the top of the tower, now as useful as two sticks.

'What have you done?' Vulga asked with a slight gasp. 'Are you truly the one to break the curse?' He stayed sitting on the floor where he had been knocked down, looking defeated.

'I am,' Sara said as she stood up, holding her sword in her hands.

'So, you think this is the end?' Vulga

started to smirk. He clapped his hands over his head, and there was a sudden flash of red light.

Sara shielded her eyes as Vulga transformed into a giant scaly beast. The roof of the tower crumbled and the sky was revealed. Dust and fire swirled around the tower as Vulga transformed, changed into his new body of armoured scales. He was massive – bat-like wings stretched over thirty feet, and fifty feet from head to tail. There were spikes from the tip of his skull, down his spine, and to the tip of his spear-like tail. The Vulga of before was gone, entirely.

Sara stared into Vulga's reptile eyes before he jumped up into the sky and disappeared in the dark clouds, leaving the land of Dómain . . . fleeing in another form.

Sara had never seen such a beast before, but it would be known from then that Vulga had become the first dragon. Kah'Li was perfecting his creations though Vulga.

Sara stood alone at the top of the ruined tower that was once Vulga's hidden lair. Another strange ball of light floated above the floor a few steps away from her. She readied herself for Vulga's return, but when the light opened into an oval doorway she dropped her sword immediately.

Will stepped through the oval door of white light and ran straight into Sara's arms. They kissed as if they hadn't kiss in years. They both thought they'd never see each other again.

Standing on top of that tower as they peered out over the land that had begun to clear of the darkness. Vulga had left the land of Dómain – fled over the vast seas to the unknown lands, and so his dark armies fell. His magic was no longer present in the land of Dómain. Sara Turgan had broken the curse.

Ryvale was saved as the army of the dead dropped and vanished. Gwyneth's full strength had returned, and so she became the sole ruler of all the land of Dómain as one. She did not ask for it, but all the kings and

queens who remained had requested it as they bowed their heads with respect.

'I don't understand,' Sara said to Will as they watched the light return to the land. 'Vulga still lives.'

'You defeated him in battle, destroyed his staff. Only *you* could. You were the only one who could kill Vulga, he knew that, so he surrendered. In a way, Vulga did die.'

'But I wasn't alone,' she said. 'Something helped me when I couldn't move.'

Will thought for a moment, and somehow he could say with certainty: 'It was Anima.'

## 8

Sara and Will climbed down the winding stairs – they were the first to ever come back down those stairs alive. Outside Vulga's lair, the trees didn't look as bony and wicked as before. Sunlight shone through the branches, creating pillars of light beaming to the ground. Sara's and Will's eyes had to

adjust as they saw figures standing around them. They were very familiar faces once they could see clearly.

'You've done it!' Frederick cheered.

Finlay grabbed both Sara and Will in for a hug. He was so large, it was like getting squeeze by a friendly bear.

'I knew you could do it,' Merthill said as he leaned on his staff and stroked his thick, black beard.

'Never any doubt,' Judocus came forward and placed his hand on Sara's shoulder. The top of her head only reached the centre of Judocus's chest. 'Hard to believe someone so small could do something so big!' He smiled.

Sara laughed and jumped in for a hug. She was glad to see that Judocus had been saved. She looked around at those who remained after all this time. So many had been lost and she would miss them dearly. But she still had a family in those that stood around her now. She loved them all.



Sara Turgan, Jon Rook (sneaks on board), Will Marson, Tólas Leigh, Judocus Cullen, Frederick Muny, Finlay Watters, Merthill DeWisengrae, Leon Dégan

War in Bardor, Gwyneth, Vienne, Salen, Roman Dunn (runs from Telús to Bardor for help) King Bane Harmor

Sara Turgan, Jon Rook, Tólas Leigh, Judocus Cullen Rían Ó CuinnX and Frederick Muny, Finlay Watters.

Merthill, Gwyneth, Vienne Valor, Salen, Leon

Val Dragól x, the titanoboa x, pack of wolves x

king Roman Dunn of Telús

Will Marson,  
Jill and Bob Lane

Tom Clegget

The Dreamcatcher (Roland)

The Bookkeeper (Joseph)

The Clockmaker (Ben)

the Dreamcatcher (who knows all dreams and one's worthiness), the Whisperer (who knows all truth and secrets), the Bookkeeper (who knows all tales), the Clockmaker (who knows all time and knows of gateways through to other sides or dimensions)

Sea Monster X

Níthe Stíl X

Brill Token (Host Vampire)

Keller Stein

Vulga



Guardians of Anima. There is the Oracle (who guides), the Dreamcatcher (who knows all dreams and one's worthiness), the Whisperer (who knows all truth and secrets), the Bookkeeper (who knows all tales), the Clockmaker (who knows all time and knows of gateways through to other sides or dimensions), the Grim Reaper (Death), and the Unknown (which speaks for itself) who is thought to be a great and powerful being, without *being*, and it is said to have created creation itself.

The Dreamcatcher (Roland)

The Bookkeeper (Joseph)

The Clockmaker (Ben)

The Oracle (Juliath)

The Whisperer (Kira) Will meets this one  
to show him the light.

The Grim Reaper (Kalós)

The Unknown (Anima) (God)

## The First Creation (Kah'Li)

Ben dies and a new guardian is needed.  
Will Marson becomes the new Clockmaker. ??

